



# Alleys as a Methodology: Urban Space Study in the 1930s Shanghai Leftist Cinema

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**Abstract.** Urban, as a discourse expression in Roland Barthes' Urban Semiology, not only possesses materiality and functionality, but also conveys the emotional relationship with citizens through specific landscapes. The alley, one of the typical landscapes in Shanghai, has witnessed the significant proceeding of modernization and experienced almost all the social changes since it was colonized by the Western and opened to the international market. Cinema, one of the productions of modernization, developed prosperously and was converted into an implement for propaganda during the *Guofang dianying yundong* (Defense Cinema Movement) launched spontaneously by film companies in the 1930s as the national crisis continued intensifying. Among the 1930s leftist cinema, two typical films, *New and Old Shanghai* and *Street Angel* exemplified the spatial characteristics and metaphor of alleys in Shanghai, indicating the influence of modernization on rural areas, traditional culture and human correlations, as well as the directors and writers' realistic concepts of revealing Shanghai civic culture. This study will focus on these two films to discuss about leftist cinema development in the 1930s Shanghai.

**Keywords:** Leftist Cinema · the 1930s · Shanghai Alleys · Spatial Characteristics · Spatial Metaphor

## 1 Introduction

Chinese leftist cinema movement has a deep root in Shanghai. With the direct economic benefits from the First World War in Europe in the early 1920s, Shanghai's film industry began to boom. By the mid-1920s, more than 180 film companies have been established and competed to chase quick capital profits [1]. Although these studios produced a large number of films tailored for the public taste and attracted many audience, their poor quality led some intellectuals to publish critical reviews and to start looking for ways to reform film. In 1931, the Japanese military occupied three provinces in northeast China and next year bombarded Shanghai that provoked national anger. In the same year, the Zhongguo zuoyi xiju lianmeng (Chinese Left-wing Dramatists Association) established and opened the official history of the left-wing cinema movement. Including Lu Xun and Qu Qiubai, several influential leftist critics published essays in newspapers in the 1920-the 1930s and urged films to reveal social problems, imperialism, and class struggle

rather than romantic plots and visual excitement. In 1932, Ming Xing Film company in Shanghai, taking Hong Shen's advice, recruited three Chinese Communist Party (CCP) writers Xia Yan, Qian Xingchun and Zheng Boqi as script consultants and engaged the leftist cultural movement. With this fertile soil for preparation, CCP entered the golden age of cinema in 1932 [2].

Among the leftist cinema, most films were based in Shanghai, such as the fist films of the early Chinese cinema representing the climax of the left-wing cinema movement -- Xinjiu Shanghai (New and Old Shanghai, 1936), Malu Tianshi (Street Angel, 1937), Shizi Jietou (Crossroad, 1937) and Yasuiqian (The New Year's Gift, 1937) [2]. Through the lens of these films, the film writers and directors revealed their preference for the specific space Long Tang (alley). An alley is a spatial symbol of early modern Shanghai, witnessing the city's colonial and modernization history. It was first established in the 1800s to solve the migration problem. To accommodate farmers who lost their fields, unemployed craftsmen and homeless refugees from the Yangtze River Delta region, the structure of residence in the alley imitated European townhouses, usually with a design of two stories and a garret called Shi Kumen. In Shi Kumen, people from the rich to the poor, from the bourgeois to the proletariat, and from the intellectuals to the prostitutes all populated together and formed a community different from the traditional family bonds in a rural area [3]. In general, left-wing cinema presented an image of a rural utopia compared to the corrupted modern Shanghai [4]. However, in the 1930s leftist films, the protagonists moved upstairs and downstairs of a Shi Kumen house, and wandered around the alleys in Shanghai. With these multiple dimensions of the citizens' daily life, a paradox of the old and new, the good and evil constructed the unique Shanghai civic culture.

In the following chapters, two leftist films in the 1930s New and Old Shanghai and Street Angel will be provided as examples to answer the questions below:

Why alleys were the preference of these leftist writers and filmmakers?

What outcomes have been brought with the modernization in 1930s Shanghai?

What were these left-wing directors and writers' intentions for portraying alleys in the films?

## 2 Alleys: Spatial Characterization

### 2.1 The 1930s: Setting a Framework

From 1926 to 1935, the Western world was plunged into the Red Decade, during which an economic crisis was sweeping across the capitalist world. As a result, left-wing movements emerged around the world, which was then introduced to China by Chinese intellectuals studying abroad. Another significant node that stimulated many Chinese intellectuals to turn their thoughts left was the disappointment of the inactive response of the Guomindang government to the Japanese invasion. Therefore, in the 1930s left-wing films, writers paid more attention to manifesting realism and revolution in their scripts, which gained general appreciation [5].

Before the climax of leftist cinema, Mandarin Duck & Butterfly School films dominated most of the domestic film market. Inheriting Chinese traditional sentiment (qing),

these films merged the traditional narrative technique of the talented young men and the beauties (caizijaren) and the consumer culture in modern Shanghai, obtaining big success [6]. The film *Yulihun* (The Soul of Jade Pear), adapted from one of the Mandarin Duck & Butterfly School novels, set a record win of over \$10,000 in 1924. Resembling the touching and moving plots about sentiment in Mandarin Duck & Butterfly School films that satisfied the mass appetite, the 1930s leftist cinema also created a discourse for its popularity. In order to appeal to the public sentiment encountering a national crisis, leftist films set a revolutionary and heroic narrative framework [7].

Revolution, the core topic of left-wing cinema, has been welcome among modern Shanghai film consumers, because “revolution brought the stimulation of adventure and identification of heroism, meeting the spectators’ expectations” (Zheng 2005: 209) [8]. Utilizing this narrative technique, leftist cinema displayed realist issues, such as class struggle and the poor living condition, urging for a new image of the nation.

The writers and directors of these 1930s Shanghai leftist cinema were in their twenties on average [9], being in their prime and having a strong passion for artistic production and ideal pursuit. Wandering in the city like Baudelaire’s eccentrics and living in the crowded pavilion rooms (tingzijian) in the alley with the poor, this community extracted themselves from the civic life on top of the inclined roof.

As a result, alleys played an important role in the 1930s leftist cinema, embedding the metaphor of the cinematic space through the spatial characteristics of daily life transformations.

## 2.2 Cinematic Alley: Spatial Mobility

In New and Old Shanghai, the shooting focused on a two-stair Shikumen house in an alley called Shunde Li (Shunde Alley) with six families squeezing inside. Some members of the six families came from the nearby rural areas to look for opportunities to make their fortune, whereas at the end of the film, some families went back to their rural hometowns or other cities such as Nanjing due to marriage or vacation transferring. The alley is one of the most significant historical symbols witnessing the spatial mobility and the migration of modernization. Modernization brought not only the opportunity for a living but also the destruction of the traditional economy and the relationships that the Chinese have lived on before.

Mechanized mass production accelerated the bankruptcy of handicraft workshop owners and generated a large demand for workers, stimulating farmers from the surrounding areas to flock to Shanghai and seek a position. Many rural migrants from the northern Su Zhou, a city adjacent to Shanghai, boated through the canal to Shanghai, gathered alongside the Suzhou River (Suzhou He) and dragged their boats to the river bank as dwellings [3]. Based on these wooden boat houses, they built sheds made of bamboo and straw mats; as a result, a new community was instituted and obtained the name Yaoshui Long (Potion Alley), one of the most well-known shed areas established in the early 20th century which once was an uncultivated land near a pharmaceutical factory. In other words, an alley had experienced the process of starting from nothing by these rural migrants. It was estimated that in 1936 about 100,000 rural migrants lived in the shed areas in Shanghai [3]. They left their hometowns and came to Shanghai with

hope; however, Shanghai was like a fragile dream, in which alleys displayed profound spatial vulnerability and instability.

With the advent of modernization and globalization, a new type of economic crisis arrived. Protagonists in the New and Old Shanghai repeated the line “The market is sluggish currently.” Mr. Yuan lost his decent job as a cashier in the silk factory; in addition, the dancing hall hadn’t paid for the two female dancers for several days. What’s worse, the carpenter family lost their income so they couldn’t afford the rental fee and even the medical expense for their sick children.

Back in the mid-1930s, an economic crisis expanded worldwide, and the United States government enacted and enforced a silver policy acquiring silver at high prices to pass on the crisis, which caused a large outflow of silver from China, triggering inflation in China known as Silver Wave (Baiyin Fengchao). Shanghai dwellers experienced a deterioration in their daily lives as a result of the financial crisis.

Economic problems bred moral corruption. In the New and Old Shanghai, Mrs. Fan intended to send her daughters to learn dancing and hoped they become dancers or even prostitutes in the future to rescue their family from financial distress. The existential crisis forced the poor mother to subvert her morality and lingered around the border of ethics. Her anxiety and insecurity elaborated the downfall of the alley space, where the poor were struggling in dire straits.

To conclude, the spatial mobility of alleys in the 1930s Shanghai leftist cinema showcased the conflicting elements of modernization. Along with colonization, modernization had the potential to nurture the colonial power itself, forcing rural populations to migrate to urban spaces and become urban vagabonds, shaking the foundations of tradition and unveiling the evils of humanity [10].

### **2.3 Humanistic Alley: Isolated Island or New Bonds?**

Before the traditional social connections haven’t been impacted by modern enlightenment thoughts, it should be taken into consideration that the “concentric circle model” of Chinese personal relationships, a pattern that resembled “ripple effect” proposed by sociologist Fei Xiaotong. Standing in the center of the circle, Chinese people in the past cataloged their relatives, friends and neighbors by intimacy, obtaining not only the association of spatial relationships on which they depended but also strengthening stable kinship ties. Therefore, Chinese people have shaped a society structure that is sensitive to changes in human relationships [11].

However, as more and more rural migrants left behind the elderly and young children to make a living in Shanghai, the traditional connections have become weaker and weaker and were cut down eventually. In the alley, families with different surnames gathered under the same roof. As a result, the society’s interpersonal structure has been reconstructed, and the nuclear family, a new form of Western kinship has appeared. People living in the city became strangers to each other, invaded by a sense of rootlessness and wanderlust, especially in a turbulent situation in the 1930s in Shanghai. Shanghai also has been considered as an isolated island, not only for the concessions occupied by Japanese invaders from the 1930s to 1940s but also for the ties to tradition that ran relentlessly all the way to modernity [4].

To avoid the feeling of insecurity, people in the alley re-established new bonds with others, their neighbors. In *Street Angel*, the lens swept over the two garrets on either side of a narrow aisle in the alley. On one side, a young lad named Chen Shaoping played the trumpet in a folkloric ceremonial procession; on the other side, a young girl named Xiao Hong tricked into singing for the customers in a teahouse. These two young people at the bottom of the social structure have fallen in love with each other. Several significant objects serving as tokens of their love appeared in the film, constituting their secret code and linking their relationships. Xiao Hong often utilized a tiny vanity mirror to reflect the sunlight on the wall of Shaoping's garret when greeting; Shaoping delighted Xiao Hong with a magic trick and then threw the prop, an apple to her. The reflected sunlight and the apple both crossed over the narrow aisle of the alley, encouraging spectators to imagine two different cinematic spaces hitched closer to each other, indicating the two hearts of these young people linked together beyond the screen. In addition to those physical objects, the invisible sound in the film also played a role in the establishment of new relationships. As their relationship heated up, Shaoping played the erhu while Xiao Hong sang love songs across the alley. To represent the intense emotion of the couple, the director used a cinematic language called sound montage, which allowed the sound of erhu in the former scene to exist as a voice-over in the latter one. In this way, spectators would gain a psychological implication that the space of these two scenes had linked with each other. The sound of erhu was like an invisible embrace of Shaoping around Xiao Hong. When watching the movie, spectators were able to experience the connections and sincere love between these young people.

Compared to the traditional concept of marriage, the union of the couple didn't conform to a Chinese proverb "the young's marriage must be decided by their parents and introduced by a matchmaker" (Fumuzhiming, Meishuozhiyan); on the contrary, their union was based on free love. Looking back at the vast rural areas of traditional China, the spatial relationships were established by the powerful and wealthy families in a neighborhood usually colluding with politics. However, the modern alleys faced an entirely different circumstance, i.e., economic factors turned out to be the core foundation of the modern human relationships in Shanghai. The new type of economic neighborhood relationship was the rental liaison between mesne landlords and tenants in the alleys. "With hundreds of yuan of investments, mesne landlords transformed the alley house into a 'white pigeon box' and rented it out separately, most of whom could make full profits" (Shanghai Municipal Committee 1990:43) [12].

Modern neighborhoods based on rental connections were more loosely structured than the ancient vernacular relationships of large families, with tenants coming and going, the mobility of which increased the flexibility of the social structure. Therefore, the obligations among the traditional families were inclined to loosen, providing a chance for the modern couples to escape from the traditional moral condemnation and pursue free association based on genuine sentiment. As a symbol of the freedom of love, the alley proved the new bonds established in the process of modernization, indicating the further intention of the leftist cinema.

### 3 The Metaphor of the Alley

As directors and writers of leftist cinema, these young and middle-aged people committed themselves to the pavilion rooms of the alleys, and played a decisive role in filmmaking in the 1930s. They dominated how the plots developed, which shots were captured by the camera, how the protagonists showed their body gestures and subtle expressions, and what kind of thematic ideas would be integrated into the storyline.

The directors and writers of the two films discussed above exemplified the intimate correlation with the left-wing intellectuals. With realism as their theoretical approach, their film works focused on realistic issues, highlighting cinema's educational and enlightening significance from the other side.

Both the writer and director of the *Street Angel*, an adaption of a blockbuster Hollywood movie in the United States of the same name, Yuan Muzhi also made a big success in 1930s Shanghai. Combining the ambivalent elements of Hollywood cabaret and comedy with Soviet montage cinematic technique, Yuan Muzhi has created a new cross-cultural practice and extremely cleverly incorporated the on-the-ground experience of daily life in Shanghai alleys into this film [13]. Similar to the Hollywood cabaret, Xiao Hong sang the Chinese folk love song many times. In addition, at the beginning of the film, Yuan skillfully used the montage technique, allowing the camera to switch perspectives from the poor class living in alleys to the skyscrapers to demonstrate the class struggle. Apart from the obvious influence of foreign films, Yuan developed his narrative rooted in the modern alley. With a full understanding of the loose rental neighborhood association, he smoothly proposed an idea that the alley could be converted into a perfect shelter for the couple to escape from being separated by Mr. Gu, a rich hoodlum bullying the lower-class people with his fortune. Alleys emerged as a solution to address class oppression, one of the current social problems in the 1930s, referring to the contradiction between the proletariat and the bourgeois.

Alleys in the *New and Old Shanghai* written by Hong Shen and directed by Cheng Bugao additionally evolved into a small community due to the new bonds in the modernization. Although each of the six families living in different "white pigeon boxes" of an alley house who swept the snow from its own doorstep, when confronting external threats such as the financial crisis, six families reunited and especially the Yuan couple who had the most decent job generously reached out to help neighbors without considering their own difficult situation. This alley has been transformed into a Habermas' Public Space. Stripped of the blood ties, these six families built a friendship amid common hardships which was similar to the comrades among the leftists.

However, *New and Old Shanghai* has been criticized by some left-wing film critics that the film failed to reveal the underlying economic factors for social problems [14]. Beyond the class struggle based on the financial elements, Hong Shen endeavored to look at the mental state and emotional connection of the poor surviving at the bottom of society from a more secular perspective.

As a turbulent, fragile, geographic space of a new social structure, the alley in the 1930s Shanghai leftist cinema had a strong semiotic metaphor. It characterized the most vivid Shanghai citizen culture and the idealized realism space for the left-wing film directors and writers, something that was seldom appreciated by the following leftist cinema in the Maoist period.

## 4 Conclusion

Admittedly, cinema as a product in the financial world naturally possessed a quality of the pursuit of commercial interests. To attract more Shanghai spectators from the market of popular foreign imported Hollywood films in 1930s, the leftist cinema consciously adopted the strategy of localization, and performed the familiar daily life scene for residents living in Shanghai alleys.

Being criticized for the excessive commodification and secularization to pander to the masses, the reality reflected in the leftist cinema of the time was once regarded as a kind of self-indulgence and compromise of bourgeois intellectuals. However, without a distinctive ideological intention, the 1930s leftist cinema meticulously focused on the personal but ordinary feelings, as well as shrewd, sly, and sincere attitudes of survival with their own characteristics. Barely did the 1930s leftist cinema enter the center of the political power vortex, which made it completely different from the political propaganda conveyed by the left-wing films and model plays of the Cultural Revolution movement afterward in the Maoist period. As a significant symbol of the spatial culture, the imagery of the alley still exists in today's left-wing films. It is worth noting that the amplification of ideological propaganda will severely compress the space for films to express secular daily life and accelerate the rate of losing their core and vitality eventually.

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