

Multiplicities of Socialist Spaces: Subjectivity Construction and Spatial Configuration in 1950s Shanghai Urban Films

Fanghao Chen

To cite this article: Fanghao Chen (19 Aug 2024): Multiplicities of Socialist Spaces: Subjectivity Construction and Spatial Configuration in 1950s Shanghai Urban Films, Critical Arts, DOI: [10.1080/02560046.2024.2383850](https://doi.org/10.1080/02560046.2024.2383850)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02560046.2024.2383850>



Published online: 19 Aug 2024.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 67




View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Multiplicities of Socialist Spaces: Subjectivity Construction and Spatial Configuration in 1950s Shanghai Urban Films

Fanghao Chen 

Institute for Global City, Shanghai Normal University, Shanghai, People's Republic of China

ABSTRACT

Drawing from Henri Lefebvre's influential theory, the triad of space production, this article analyzes three urban films released during the early years of the People's Republic of China: *Husband and Wife on the March* (1951), *Spring is Splendid Color* (1959), and *Today, I Rest* (1959). These films explore the daily lives of Shanghai residents in changing everyday living spaces, from single-room apartments to traditional alleyway neighbourhoods and the expansive community system of Workers' New Village. The changing spatial configurations serve as the backdrop for the unfolding cinematic narratives, fostering new forms of socialist relationships and interactions. Moreover, a new type of socialist communal life, seamlessly integrated with socialist production, emerged, catalysing the revolutionary reshaping of women's identities and roles. A socialist community founded on mutual assistance and collective cooperation emerged as a model for social development and bureaucratic governance in the 1950s. This article argues that these three films provide compelling examples of Shanghai's socialist urban transformation, exploring changes in the daily living spaces of socialist individuals in Shanghai and reflecting the dynamic shaping of socialist subjectivity in the new era.

KEYWORDS

Socialist city; urban
Shanghai; 1950s China;
urban space; everyday life

Introduction

The "spatial turn" trend in the 1990s has inspired various academic disciplinary practitioners to explore the relationship between people, space, and place more. Scholars specialising in spatial studies have concluded that physical spaces play a crucial role in fostering human interactions and generating new forms of social, economic, and political relations (Lefebvre 1974). It is important to view urban spaces not merely as passive vessels or containers to dwell in but as active agents capable of generating and shaping individual identities and interdependent relationships. This article examines urban space's spatial transformations and configurations during China's early socialist period. Understanding film's spatial configurations from a spatial theory perspective is crucial for comprehending the early history of socialist China's governmental strategies and practices. It helps to capture the social mentalities of Chinese people in coping

CONTACT Fanghao Chen  chenfanghao@hotmail.com  Institute for Global City, Shanghai Normal University, No.100 Guilin Road, Xuhui District, Shanghai, People's Republic of China

with political and ideological shifts. This article focuses on three films that depict the daily lives of Shanghai residents in the early years of the construction of New China: *Husband and Wife on the March* (1951), *Spring is Splendid Color* (1959), and *Today, I Rest* (1959). How do these films depict, construct, and even plan the spatial practices of socialist Shanghai's daily life? What are the dialectical relationships between Shanghai residents and their dwelling spaces? What has the relationship between the familial realm and neighbourhood community changed as China progressed with its socialist revolution? As a pioneering scholar in urban cultural studies, Yingjin Zhang pays attention to the representation of Beijing and Shanghai in Chinese modern urban literature and films, arguing these art forms transcended their purely geographical designations and acquired distinct cultural values" (Zhang 1996, 21). This article argues that the collaboration among diverse agents and participants involved in the process of urban space reform has resulted in the construction of a socialist utopia and the successful transformation of relationships among urban residents, community cadres, and government officials.

While Henri Lefebvre's influential spatial theory primarily addresses space utilisation and social relations within a capitalist context, it is equally applicable to the configuration and transformation of spaces in socialist countries. For Lefebvre, space is not just an inert container or backdrop for human and non-human activities; instead, he argues that space is socially constructed and can generate new social relations. Social activities continuously shape and reshape space, influencing social relationships: "The active—the operational or instrumental—role of space, as knowledge and action, in the existing mode of production" (Lefebvre 1991, 11). Lefebvre's spatial triad, or three dialectically interconnected dimensions of space, comprising spatial practice (perceived space), representations of space (conceived space), and representational spaces (lived space), provides a comprehensive framework for understanding space and spatial practices (Lefebvre 1991, 38–39). According to Lefebvre, perceived space refers to how we perceive the world through our senses and emphasises the materiality of spaces. The second dimension, conceived space, refers to conceptualising space and understanding spaces through our knowledge. The third dimension, lived space, refers to the everyday practice of space, where humans use and mold space for their own purposes.

Lefebvre's spatial triad can be effectively applied to analyze films. As a medium that structures characters and their behavioural spaces through visual logic, films employ space as one of its most fundamental elements. The arrangement, transformation, and even deformation of spatial scenes play crucial roles in the progression and development of film narratives. Integrating Henri Lefebvre's spatial triad into film studies can, on the one hand, help us better understand how filmic space mirrors reality and undergoes an aesthetic transformation. On the other hand, it demonstrates how film, as a visual medium, constructs, deconstructs, and imagines space. According to Lefebvre's spatial triad, the production of cinematic space encompasses three dimensions. In the first dimension, the spatial presentations in films are recognised by the audience in material or geographical forms, where space, scenes, and story settings exhibit distinct regional and temporal characteristics. In the second dimension, the film acts as a medium that organises space through visual and auditory representations, incorporating the narrative into its constructed time and space. These settings, conceptualised by the filmmakers, require the audience to engage in participatory thinking and understanding to re-experience and interpret the space. Film, as an artistic product of knowledge and

conceptualisation, can either serve as a realistic representation of society by filmmakers or as an imaginative construction of an ideal world. In the third dimension, the symbolic significance of the space presented in films, as well as its expression as a cultural, psychological, or emotional element, reflects the everyday practices of the characters.

In the three films considered in this article, the first dimension—urban space as a material entity (including apartments, alleys, or workers' villages)—constitutes the tangible living spaces of city residents. In the third film discussed, the depiction of spatial landscapes extends far beyond those in the first two films. For the second dimension, films representing everyday spaces crucially construct spatial scenes and arrangements, reflecting the director's spatial understanding and imbuing these scenes with meaning that depends on viewers' imaginative participation. These three films reveal that directors' visions of socialist everyday life are implicitly embedded in the representation of socialist spaces. In the third dimension, films portray everyday urban spaces through the protagonists' continuous movement and daily interactions, showcasing the social nature of space. These portrayals reflect revolutionary transformations in family and community relationships during the socialist period.

Shanghai has held a significant position as both a production and consumption hub for urban films since Republican China, playing an important role in the history of the Chinese film industry (Des Forges 2007). From the eclectic semi-colonial cityscape of the 1930s to the socialist landscape after 1949, and later the nostalgic imagery of the "*Haipai*" (Shanghai style, or more closely, costal-style) in the post-1980s era, Shanghai films have shown the city's cultural richness and historical diversity over time. In the past, considerable attention has been paid to film studies and cultural studies on films produced in the 1930s (Zhang 1996; Zhang 1999; Lee 2001; Zhang 2005; Sun 2009). The focus on Shanghai films primarily centres around the consumer allure and commodification presented in Shanghai (Lee 2005), paying less attention to political governance and living conditions in socialist Shanghai. Representative works regarding films from the seventeen-year period between 1949 and 1966 emerged since the beginning of the twenty-first century. Hong Hong's research indicates that films produced during this period were strongly influenced by the Soviet film tradition but still constructed as national films with Chinese characteristics (Hong 2008). Zhang Shuoguo's book focuses on the self-transformation process of Shanghai filmmakers during this period, arguing practitioners in the film industry successfully became socialist workers (Zhang 2014). Xiaoning Lu points out the significant role that different types of films (anti-spy films, propaganda films, and minority films) played in shaping active socialist subjects. At the same time, film practitioners also participated in the process of transformation and self-transformation (Lu 2020). However, when reviewing the previous scholarship on the achievements of films during the seventeen-year period, few scholars have provided a comprehensive or in-depth exploration of the spatial aspects of urban films produced from 1949 to 1966. Amidst the prevailing grand narratives within the field, academic investigations into films from the early period following the establishment of the People's Republic of China predominantly concentrated on themes such as industrial and economic transformation, political systems and policy changes, cultural and ideological reform, and the construction of national images and relationships. There was a notable paucity of attention directed towards the micro, quotidian, and private lives of the populace during the early socialist era. Particularly, there was a limited exploration of relationships beyond

work, such as family and neighbourhood relations and even among the people. In this sense, it is necessary to discuss how these relationships are produced, transformed, and varied in film narratives from the perspective of everyday spatial configurations, tracing the revolutionary transformations experienced from the old society to the new China.

Scholars have extensively analyzed the historical evolution and development of Shanghai's alleyways from the late Qing to Republican China. For instance, Hanchao Lu argues that residents of Shanghai in Republican China enjoyed considerable convenience, which resulted in the boom of Shanghai's consumer culture. Inhabitants could procure daily groceries and household supplies at small stores within typical Shanghainese urban alleys. Furthermore, guilds, government administrative systems, and local toughs played a crucial role in maintaining community order, fostering a vibrant and flourishing everyday life, and enhancing community interactions (Lu 1995). Alexander Des Forges highlights the emergence of alley spaces as scenes of theatrical performance in pictorial representations in late Qing China. In these spatial arrangements, alleys were depicted as sites of "constant exchange" and "theatrical interaction." In the 1930s, leftist films, the performances of actors and actresses in urban spaces served as a call to action for viewers. These leftist urban films explicitly promoted mass mobilisation and political participation. In addition, Des Forges explores the reasons behind the absence of Shanghai scenes in films directed by fifth-generation directors in the 1980s (Des Forges 2010). Unlike the 1930s urban films, which featured fixed theatrical scenes for political mobilisation, socialist-era films increasingly emphasised diversified scenes and the movement of characters across varied spaces. This diversification in the cinematic spatial organisation is not only a narrative necessity but also plays a crucial role in depicting socialist urban spaces and interactive relationships.

This article aims to explore the spatial changes and developments in the early years of the People's Republic of China in the 1950s, focusing on the transformation of living spaces from single-room apartments to traditional alleyway residential areas (*lilong*) and eventually to large-scale neighbourhood systems known as "Workers' New Village" (*gongren xincun*). The analysis revolves around three main themes: the revolutionary transformation of socialist family dynamics, the ideological shift and self-reform of individual identities, and the shaping of socialist interpersonal relationships. These spatial transformations in these three urban films not only serve as settings for the unfolding narrative but also carry significant symbolic meanings. How did private and public spaces change during the early stage of socialist China? How was the communal lifestyle in the new type of neighbourhood integrated with socialist production? How was a socialist community based on mutual assistance and cooperation established? In addressing these questions, the three films examined in this article serve as exemplary cases for tracing the transformation and evolution of everyday living spaces of socialist people in Shanghai and understanding the construction and cultivation of the socialist subject in the new era.

Reforming thought through labour: a revolution of apartment life

There is a scarcity of existing films that provide tangible insight into the mindset of Shanghai urban residents during the transition from the Republic of China to the establishment of New China. However, one notable cinematic work that effectively captures the

evolution of urban residents' lifestyles and attitudes before and after the founding of New China is *Husband and Wife on the March* (hereafter referred to as *Husband and Wife*). Directed by Hong Mo (1913-2014), this film stands as a representative piece released in the early years of socialist China. It narrates the story of Chen Qiyuan and Ge Lina, a petty bourgeois couple who successfully undergo self-transformation in response to the changing socio-political climate. The film's transitional nature is evident through its depictions of the process of converting their family space into a gathering place for workers. It bears a clear imprint of transforming from petit bourgeois life to the era of socialist life in terms of the couple's occupational and identity change. *Husband and Wife* vividly portrays how urban residents adapt and redefine their roles and identities in light of China's regime change.

In the film, the cinematic narrative utilises stage-like settings to construct the spatial experiences of the audience, effectively recreating the living scenes of the middle class and the transformation and transition of domestic spaces from the Republican era to the socialist era. From Lefebvre's perspective of spatial triad, the living room, as a material site, undergoes functional changes from Republican China to Socialist China. Regarding "representations of space," the Shanghai urban apartment depicted in the film epitomises the living spaces of Shanghai city life. As an artistic work conceptualising and representing space, the film constructs expressions of space that transition from pleasure-oriented venues emblematic of hedonism to shared spaces where citizens collectively enact socialist transformations and realise revolutionary ideals. The third dimension of urban space in this film refers to the lived experience of Shanghai residents in the apartment. As a space of daily living altered by Shanghai residents, the apartment's living room shifts from a bourgeois ballroom to a collective space embodying a socialist spirit, perfectly illustrating how spaces and their relational dynamics with characters evolve with the times. Additionally, the film portrays class characteristics of spaces and the social transformation of characters. The inhabitants of the apartment space successfully transform from the petite bourgeoisie into participants in socialist construction. In this film, the Shanghai residents living in the apartment successfully undergo a socialist transformation. In conclusion, the film serves as a compelling illustration of the potential for urban dwellers to attain comprehensive ideological transformation in socialist China. The film's narrative and character development underscores the dynamic interplay between individual agency and broader socio-political forces, highlighting how urban environments can catalyse profound ideological shifts.

The narrative scenes throughout the film effectively portray significant milestones in the nation's founding, highlighting the dichotomy between personal life and work. Spaces associated with pre-revolutionary life are depicted as morally decadent sites. For example, the dance hall where the Shanghai middle class hosts the party symbolises a corrupted place of Western capitalism. During the liberation of Shanghai, apartment residents continue to celebrate children's birthdays, dance in the living room, and discuss strategies for leaving Shanghai and escaping to Hong Kong within the confines of their rooms. The petit bourgeois residents harbour doubts and mistrust toward the Chinese Communist Party's arrival to assume authority. In subsequent scenes, the apartment space repeatedly becomes a site of contradictions. Discussions about whether to stay or leave on the eve of liberation, the destination of savings and investments, and participation in factory labour trigger conflicts in neighbourly and marital relationships.

However, in the film's final moments, the apartment space ultimately undergoes a revolutionary transformation. In the final scene, factory workers gather in the living room of the couple's home to celebrate the birthday of a fellow worker's child. The film concludes with a unity, fulfillment, and inspirational tone. Amidst the resounding song "The East is Red" (*Dongfang hong*), which carries distinct characteristics of the era and later became the de facto national anthem of the country during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the birthday party becomes a grand ceremony to celebrate the completion of personal transformation in perfect harmony. In contrast to these private living spaces, the factory scenes that appear extensively in the film become positive settings that praise the construction of a production-oriented society. In the socialist factory, individual talents are maximised, comradely emotions among workers are strengthened, model employees are commended, and communist productivity is significantly enhanced. The collective mentality within the factory reflects a society in the process of becoming harmonised and prosperous.

The film not only employs cinematic techniques to highlight spatial dichotomy but also delves into the theme of individual transformation within the realms of domestic life and work units. In the domestic sphere, the film portrays the couple's transition from living a privileged American middle-class lifestyle to facing the necessity of self-reliance, symbolised by their dismissal of the housemaid. Scenes depict the couple engaging in domestic tasks such as cooking and even slaughtering a chicken together, signifying their shift from capitalist exploiters to socialist workers in the realm of household activities. Regarding their professional lives, the protagonist, Chen Qiyuan, undergoes a significant transformation of social and political identities. He transitioned from being an office employee at the American Far East Trading Company to becoming a professional technician in a socialist factory. This shift represents a transition from being an ordinary employee exploited by imperialism to being recognised as a labour role model within the socialist system. The film vividly portrays how a socialist society provides an environment where individual talents can be maximally utilised. Individuals with engineering and technical backgrounds no longer need to engage in unrelated activities in industries serving imperialism and colonialism. Instead, they can utilise their true talents and abilities to contribute to the socialist cause. Similarly, women also found fulfillment and a sense of accomplishment by employing their genuine knowledge and skills within their work. They have the opportunity to utilise their own power to help others and contribute to society. The female protagonist, Ge Lina, forsakes speculative and exploitative business ventures and becomes a teacher in the literacy classes organised by the Women's Federation. This transformation can be understood as a shift from a self-centred profit-seeking mentality to that of a selfless educator. The film reflects the multifaceted transformations experienced by its characters, showcasing how individuals can find fulfillment and realise their potential within the framework of a socialist society.

As Zhang Jishun points out, "In June 1952, when 80% of the residential alleys established neighborhood committees, more than 9,000 residents' daily lives were influenced by various political education organizations such as reading groups, study classes for youth, women and children's literacy classes, and night schools. These organizations were used to promote the Party and the state's policies, explain domestic and international current affairs and politics, and stimulate residents' political enthusiasm. Wall newspapers and blackboard news were common in the alleys, with slogans and cartoons

posted everywhere, creating a political atmosphere in the neighborhoods” (Zhang 2015, 48). Shanghai alleyway residential compound turned from dwellings of migrant strangers for making a living in a metropolis to congenial and connected communities of familiar residents for sharing a communal socialist belief or ideology. Although the film appears to focus on the family life of a married couple, its core mechanism revolves around the issue of individual transformation. Thus, the story portrays the journey of the couple entering a new era together. The film’s title, *Husband and Wife on the March*, conveys the significant theme of unity in progress and consistent pace, which is inherent to a “march.” The film effectively exemplifies the thematic essence suggested by its title through a meticulously crafted and narratively satisfying conclusion.

Women’s liberation movement: from courtyard families to production cooperatives

Like *Husband and Wife*, the transformation of women’s roles during the socialist era is more detailed and reflected in the film *Spring is Splendid Color* (directed by Shen Fu, 1905–1994). Released amidst the heightened time of the Great Leap Forward, the film assumes a progressively audacious stance in its exploration of the construction of gendered identities, implicitly referencing the concept and aspiration of socialist transformation towards a resolute and sanguine trajectory. The film delves into the transformations occurring in women’s roles within a socialist society, with a particular emphasis on the protagonist’s heightened consciousness and active engagement in the process of societal change. It narrates a tale centred around two conflicting families. In one family, the mother-in-law, Madam Liu, disapproves of her daughter-in-law Wang Caifeng joining the courtyard mutual aid group, believing that household affairs are not properly managed. At the same time, her son Liu Genfa fully supports his wife’s actions. The other family’s male head, Zheng Baoqing, also disagrees with his wife, Cai Guizhen, who is joining the production team. However, the character Cai successfully navigates her transition from being a housewife to becoming a working woman, effectively balancing her family responsibilities with her professional pursuits.

In the film, the spatial relationships portrayed are notably complex and dynamic. According to the conceptualisation of the first dimension of Lefevre’s trialectics, the depiction of Shanghai’s cramped yet intimate residential spaces not only reflects the challenging housing conditions faced by urban residents in the early years of socialist China but also vividly illustrates the daily domestic labour and social interactions of urban dwellers, particularly women, within these confines. For the “conceived space,” the director intentionally redefines these singularly functional living spaces, transforming them into socialist arenas conducive to the transformation of women. This transformation of women into labourers in New China is vividly depicted in the film. From the perspective of the third dimension of social space, the film adeptly captures the personal transformation of women within the alleyway living spaces. Through their daily lives and work, women in New China are portrayed as active participants in socialist economic development, moving beyond their traditional roles primarily centred around caregiving and household chores within gendered, biologically defined living spaces. These spaces evolve into productive arenas where women are re-educated and engaged in production labour, signalling a significant shift in their social and economic roles.

As a work documenting women's liberation, the film symbolically references the "spatial dilemma" women initially faced. The opening scene of selecting cooking ingredients in the market transitions to households in the courtyard washing clothes outside their doors and then to housewives tidying and cleaning rooms at home. This series of activities reinforces women's roles in domestic life. The family chores became the greatest obstacle for Chinese women in socialist society. The film pays significant attention to the domestic labour performed by women. Women are expected to fulfill the roles of responsible mothers, obedient daughters-in-law, and wives to meet the traditional standards of a virtuous wife and mother.

This film highlights the significant role of gender roles within space configuration. It demonstrates that gender identities not only undergo changes due to shifts in spatial characteristics but also experience transformations through negotiations with different community members. In the aspect of the spatial division of labour, women have achieved liberation, breaking free from the burdensome household chores and the constraints of traditional gender roles. The film portrays the production team as an important space for improving the status of women. It explores the challenges women face in breaking free from the confines of the family and shedding the burdens. As the director of the mutual aid group laments, "Though we have removed the mountains, there are still many small hills ahead that need to be cleared." Similarly, as Mother Dai from the neighbourhood committee suggests, women's participation in the mutual aid group and their engagement in crafting toy cars and warm winter clothing are all part of socialist production: "Who would dare to oppose participating in socialist construction?" The family becomes the site of conflict, symbolising the imprisonment of Chinese women in old China. Women's involvement in work is not only for the betterment of society but also for ensuring a good life for their families. As Cai Xiang points out, the emergence of the courtyard production group has significant implications for empowering women's labour and liberating women (Cai 2016). The participation of women in socialist production not only serves as strong evidence of achieving gender equality in post-revolutionary China but also challenges traditional notions that confine women to domestic roles and limit their mobility.

Furthermore, in the context of learning and mutual assistance, technological revolution becomes an important aspect of socialist production. Technological learning is a crucial element in the construction of socialist production. The increased value of women's labour lies in continuously enhancing its technological content. Finally, during the early stages of socialism, women's labour within the household often went unrewarded and without any income. Income becomes another indicator of women's contributions. In the formalised scene where the mutual aid group announces the distribution of wages, the film proclaims to the audience that wages represent remuneration for contributions to socialist endeavours, emphasising that women's labour has value and can be rewarded through remuneration based on work performed. The process of shaping socialist individuals often requires organisational support, collective collaboration, and assistance from the masses, as depicted in the film through cooperative and organised efforts. The emergence of mutual aid groups becomes an opportunity to liberate women from the confines of the family. The multifaceted system of socialist communities provides comprehensive services and support in daily life and production. The

socialist space depicted in the film is not merely a container for human activities but also carries a significant symbolic meaning.

Another innovation in socialist neighbourhood life is the establishment of nurseries and mutual aid groups. The establishment of nurseries not only became a sufficient condition for women to break free from the family and alleviate childcare concerns but also contributed significantly to raising children in the socialist era. The film documents the transformation of two children from mischievous troublemakers in the family to polite, hygienic, and well-behaved individuals, highlighting the important role played by community nurseries in this process. This moral and behavioural cultivation challenges the public's perception of nurseries as collective childcare institutions and, to some extent, praises the effectiveness and functionality of nurseries as community support mechanisms.

The urban landscape also plays a significant role in the film. With warm-toned visual effects, the city of Shanghai undergoes continuous changes. It is no longer a city of neon lights and dazzling spectacles but one bathed in sunlight, exuding the aura of tranquility and stability. The cityscape under the camera indicates Shanghai has experienced a successful socialist transformation and political transition. This symbolically rich imagery signifies the success of shaping socialist individuals and collective socialist living. In the film, the portrayal of the socialist city transitions from one characterised by stark disparities in wealth and consumerism to a harmonious and supportive community imbued with warmth and human kindness.

As a film set against the backdrop of neighbourhood life in Shanghai, *Spring is Splendid Color* portrays how women participated in socialist construction during the Great Leap Forward (1958–1960). Through the interweaving scenes of family life, neighbourhood life, and workshop life, the film explores how women in households face family pressures, transform into socialist producers and builders, and embark on the path to women's liberation. Although the film primarily focuses on the challenges of balancing family and work in the new era, it also provides valuable insights into the portrayal of neighbourhood scenes, neighbourhood life, and the shaping of community spaces. Within the dramatic conflicts arising from changing scenes, the socialist transformation of individuals and families tends toward a state of completion. As the title suggests, the theoretical presentation of socialist transformation in the new era should embody the thriving state of "spring in bloom." Serving as a representative work on neighbourhood life in the early stages of socialism, *Spring is Splendid Color* bears the imprint of a rich transitional period, exploring the crucial issue of transforming women's identities, particularly those of Chinese women, following the establishment of New China. It depicts the journey of women transitioning from being confined to domestic life to becoming female workers participating in a socialist economy of production. Yomi Braester wisely points out that *Spring is Splendid Color* showcases the successful collectivisation process of an urban community (Braester 2010). In this regard, a novel manifestation of a socialist community is emerging and evolving.

Serve the people: workers' new village as socialist new space

In 1950, less than a year after the establishment of socialist China, many cities, including Shanghai, were undergoing challenging post-war adjustments and renovations. As the

largest and most developed city in eastern China, Shanghai urgently needed socialist reforms and changes to become a model and exemplary city for the new China. Despite the city's unstable state, the Shanghai Municipal Government coordinated arrangements, strengthened government governance, improved urban public services, and constructed a series of residential communities known as workers' new villages, including Caoyang New Village, Tianshan New Village, Pengpu New Village, and Changshou New Village, to name a few. In 1951, Shanghai put forward the slogan, "Municipal construction serves production and serves the working people." It began the construction of Caoyang New Village to accommodate local workers and experiment with building a new form of socialist community. In 1952, 1,002 households moved into the 48 buildings of Caoyang New Village, making it the first workers' new village built in the new China. These condominiums not only serve as residential areas aimed at improving living conditions but also function as tangible rewards that acknowledge and recognise the contributions made by socialist workers. Subsequently, other districts in Shanghai followed suit, and the "Caoyang New Village experience" gradually spread to various regions across the country. Cities in northeastern and southwestern China started to adopt this format to build apartments for socialist workers. Many workers' new villages specifically designed for labourers emerged nationwide. Luo wisely points out that the building of the New Workers' Village "signaled the arrival of a new working-class spatial regime, a production of a new space in the social imaginary" (Luo 2012).

Today, I Rest, directed by Lu Ren (1912-2002), was filmed against the backdrop of building model Workers' New Village and served as a tribute film for the tenth-anniversary celebration of the founding of the People's Republic of China. It compresses all the protagonist's daily interactions into a single day. As a film documenting life in the "new village," it is a realistic representation of the socialist new community, exemplifying the practical implementation of the ideas and ideals of a socialist new village in the big city. The film's protagonist, Ma Tianmin, a police officer working at the local police station, repeatedly engages in public life and serves the community by sacrificing private time for resting and dating. The film portrays the protagonist's constant movement in various public spaces (also his workspace) during his day off, assisting others in solving problems and difficulties. This selfless dedication shapes a perfect image of a socialist public servant. Scholars have proved that socialist China's local governance had its own features. Wing Chung Ho examines the development of community-based collectivism and discusses the significant role of local cadres and public officials in grass-roots-level governance. This indicates that the efforts of these individuals were crucial in shaping local governance structures (Ho 2006). Jake Werner also highlights the significance of popular involvement as a means of public mobilisation and participation in local factories and communities during the early period of socialist China. This suggests that the active engagement of the public played a notable role in shaping the social and political landscape at that time (Werner 2015). The film effectively portrays the ideal socialist community and serves as a paradigm for constructing new socialist neighbourhood relationships. Additionally, the community plays a significant role as a carrier of collective social life. The harmonious vision of socialist new China is perfectly captured through the film's portrayal of the joyful atmosphere within the community.

From the perspective of Lefebvre's spatial theory, the first dimension, the perceived space, features scenes that are more expansive than those in the previous two films.

Unlike the apartment space in *Husband and Wife on the March* and the alley space in *Spring is Splendid Color*, Today, I Rest encompasses a variety of urban landscapes such as Workers' New Villages, cinemas, hospitals, factories, and streets, portraying the early socialist Shanghai cityscape. For the second dimension, the film's representation of urban space effectively reflects the director's vision of harmonious relationships among urban residents and the utopian socialist society of Maoist socialism. For the third dimension, as the protagonist, Ma Tianming, moves through different urban scenes and transitions between spaces of daily labour and life, these various spaces have been attached to complex social relations and meanings. Different moviegoers may attribute various meanings to the spaces depicted in the film. However, as analyzed below, regardless of the difficulties or conflicts urban residents encounter, they ultimately reconcile and live together harmoniously, contributing to the construction of a socialist society. This is the main message the film aims to convey.

The film's depiction of everyday living spaces imparts a deeper significance to socialist residential areas. Amenities in the Workers' New Village, such as hospitals and kindergartens—present or absent—constitute these everyday spaces. From another perspective, the director's portrayal of emerging social relationships among urban residents emanating from the workers' village represents the village as a vision, an imagination, and a goal of a socialist utopia. From another analytical perspective, the film depicts everyday life in socialist China—ranging from child rearing and labour to medical treatment—through the dynamic viewpoint of the character Ma Tianming, who frequently changes scenes. The film notably conveys a spirit of joyful, mutual assistance within the socialist community, exemplifying socialist mass relationships and advocating for widespread participation in socialism. Through the routine patrols of the police, the film maintains the order of urban spaces and illustrates the production and social relationships among various urban characters. The maintenance of the socialist urban order is not reliant solely on a punitive management system—as the police in the film are off-duty and not government officials—but rather on a system of mass participatory supervision that fosters the ideal image of a perfect socialist society. Moreover, the film depicts everyday life in early New China—ranging from child rearing and labour to medical treatment—through the dynamic viewpoint of the character Ma Tianming, who frequently changes scenes. The film notably conveys a spirit of joyful, mutual assistance within the socialist community, exemplifying socialist mass relationships and advocating for widespread participation in the newly-born socialist regime. Through the routine patrols of the police, the film maintains the order of urban spaces and illustrates the production and social relationships among various urban characters. The maintenance of the socialist urban order is not reliant solely on a punitive management system—as the police in the film are off-duty and not government officials—but rather on a system of mass participatory supervision that fosters the ideal image of a perfect socialist society.

The film portrays the shaping of a socialist self-constructed community. During the transitions between scenes, the process of constructing a socialist mutual-aid community is depicted. Scholars, such as Edward Soja, have pointed out that the concept of "Third-space" relates to the way people live in socially produced spaces. According to Soja, most of our lived spaces are socially constructed, and these spaces significantly impact our lives (Soja 1996). In this sense, the Workers' New Villages can be considered one kind of "Third-spaces." The film demonstrates a series of ideals advocated by socialist public life,

including mutual assistance, dedication to work, collaborative decision-making, and the strengths of collective efforts. Ma Tianming helps everyone knead dough and prepare food in the community canteen on Leap Forward Road. During the community sanitation campaign, he persuades others to rest while participating in the community cleaning work. In the cooperative group, he assists elderly farmers in solving issues related to pig feeding. In the community, he takes a sick child named Hua Hua to the children's hospital for medical treatment. At the guesthouse, he makes every effort to find the owner of a lost wallet. These successive incidents coalesce as compelling evidence, illustrating the emergence of a novel socialist space characterised by diverse spatial contexts. In the process of such formation, a society of strangers transforms into a society of acquaintances, where mutual understanding and familiarity exist among community members in a vibrant community. The film also highlights that Ma Tianming excels in his job and acts as a social glue, contributing to forming a contemporary socialist community. The formation process of this type of community provides us with a perfect model. The spatial configuration under socialism has fostered the evolution of the socialist third space and promoted public welfare and the improvement of people's lives.

During a symposium discussing film production and its artistic value, the participants explicitly expressed a conceptualised and standardised socialist living arrangement offered by the film: "touching stories and new people and events in the new society" (Cai et al., 1960). In other words, constructing a harmonious socialist community of friendly neighbours in the Workers' New Villages provides a version of community governance practices. The scenes featuring canteens, factories, cinemas, hospitals, police stations, restaurants, and hotels demonstrate the gradual formation of an organic community. The comprehensive public service facilities covering the entire life cycle, from birth to death, not only provide a place for the builders of New China to live and work in peace but also contribute to forming a sense of belonging and identity among the workers. As Yang Chen points out, "The construction process of the Worker's New Village contributes to our understanding of the spatial production logic of socialist cities through history. The new village is not only a housing model but also, in a broader sense, an institution deeply rooted in the history of China's modern and contemporary social development. It is a residential system influenced by various factors such as ideology, economic policies, political movements, and technological advancements, all interacting with each other" (Yang 2009). The institutionalization of everyday space became an important socialist experiment in new China.

The film also explores the delicate balance between work and personal life and the interplay between the individual and the collective. Through the depiction of various conflicts and contradictions, the film portrays instances in which Ma Tianming, the protagonist, sacrifices his personal leisure time to engage in public service and serve the community. Despite repeatedly missing arranged dates set up by the wife of a police officer to introduce him to a potential partner, Ma Tianming's unwavering dedication to assisting others in solving their problems is evident. However, in the end, he gains the understanding of his blind date, Liu Ping, and they form a romantic relationship. While Zhang Zhen notes, "There is little romance of the old-fashioned kind in *It's My Day Off*" (Zhang, 2007, 322), the story still includes traditional Chinese elements of romantic affairs, such as matchmaking and arranged dating. The film's satisfying conclusion conveys that socialist service does not require sacrificing personal happiness. Ma Tianming, as a devoted

servant of the people, not only realises his own self-worth but also experiences the joy of romantic love because of his integrity and kindness.

Conclusion: from separate apartments to new villages—becoming a socialist new individual

Urban cinema in China did not originate with 1950s directors. As early as the 1930s, Shanghai's left-wing cinema had already sparked a wave of urban films. Films such as *The Goddess* (1934), *New Women* (1935), *Crossroads* (1937), and *Street Angel* (1937) depicted the hardships and struggles of Shanghai's lower class, especially urban women. In contrast to the dazzling consumer spaces of dance halls and shops, cramped apartments and bustling factories powerfully evoked sentiments of rebellion and nationalism. Unlike the left-wing films of the 1930s, which sharply divided Shanghai's urban spaces into class antagonisms to underscore social conflicts, the socialist films of the 1950s portrayed urban spaces and relationships among city dwellers as having undergone a revolutionary transformation.

From single-room apartments to traditional alleyway neighbourhoods and to the expansive neighbourhood community system of Workers' New Village, this article examines three everyday spatial configurations depicted in Shanghai's urban films of the 1950s. While it is not appropriate to ascribe a hierarchical or staged evolution of socialist everyday spatial configurations—from apartments to alleyways to Workers' New Villages—we can still observe continuous changes and variations in socialist collective relationships portrayed in 1950s Shanghai urban films.

Urban films can potentially shape our perceptions of the urban environment (Hallam 2010). Most of these films are set against the backdrop of Shanghai during its semi-colonial war period, continually replicating and reinforcing popular impressions and imaginations of Shanghai's urban lifestyle, with an emphasis on symbols such as cheongsams and *Shikumen* gateways associated with old Shanghai. The representation of modern life experiences is notably absent in contemporary artistic works. How should we define the "new Shanghai style" as the successor to the "Haipai style"? How can the "new Haipai" emerge as a defining characteristic of Shanghai's spirit and style? Crafting a compelling "Shanghai Story" presents a significant challenge for film industry practitioners. If neighbourhood family conflicts become repetitive and clichéd, if the struggles of new Shanghai residents are portrayed as mere survival, and if extravagant desires dominate daily life, what alternative themes and content remain to be explored? How can films oscillating between commercialism/consumerism and art meet the audience's increasingly demanding aesthetic needs and requirements?

Through contextual and cinematic analysis, this article demonstrates that the films of the 1950s reveal relational tension, multifaceted character configurations, and the integration of socialist production and construction concepts in their narratives about everyday life in urban Shanghai. These films capture various moments of socialist urbanisation and modernisation, depicting the challenges and efforts faced by the masses in becoming new socialist individuals and constructing a vision of a new socialist life. As unique visual representations, these films provide a distinctive view of the early stages of socialist construction in the 1950s and serve as testimonial accounts

of collective memory. The socialist “reconstruction” process of Shanghai’s urban space, obscured in the dust of history, perhaps awaits further exploration by researchers in film and cultural studies.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The research for this article was funded by the Shanghai Pujiang Talent Program [grant number 2022PJC088] and Shanghai’s high-level local university key innovation team program “Cultural Transformation and Modern China”.

ORCID

Fanghao Chen  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0135-8827>

References

- Braester, Yomi. 2010. *Painting the City Red: Chinese Cinema and the Urban Contract*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Cai, Chusheng; Ma, Shaobo, Tian Han, Li Jianwu, Feng Mu, Bing Xin, Chen Mo, Ge Qin, Zhao Ziyue, and Yuan Wenshu. 1960. “Jintian wo xiuxi zuotanhui” [A symposium on *Today, I Rest*]. *Dianying yishu* [Film Art] 6: 34–46.
- Cai, Xiang. 2016. *Revolution and Its Narratives*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Des Forges, Alexander. 2007. *Mediasphere Shanghai: The Aesthetics of Cultural Production*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Des Forges, Alexander. 2010. “Shanghai Alleys, Theatrical Practice, and Cinematic Spectatorship: From Street Angel (1937) to Fifth Generation Film.” *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 39 (4): 29–51. doi:10.1177/1868102610039004.
- Hallam, Julia. 2010. “Film, Space and Place: Researching a City in Film.” *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 8 (3): 277–296. doi:10.1080/17400309.2010.499768.
- Ho, Wing Chung. 2006. “From Resistance to Collective Action in a Shanghai Socialist ‘Model Community’: From the Late 1940s to Early 1970s.” *Journal of Social History* 40 (1): 85–117. doi:10.1353/jsh.2006.0083.
- Hong, Hong. 2008. *Sulian yingxiang yu zhongguo “shiqinian” dianying* [Soviet influence and “seventeen-year” films]. Beijing: Zhongguo dianyin.
- Lee, Leo Ou-fan, 2001. *Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930–1945*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Lee, V. P. Y. 2005. “The City as Seductress: Reimagining Shanghai in Contemporary Chinese Film and Fiction.” *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 17 (2): 133–166. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41490945>.
- Lefebvre, Henri. (1974) 1991. *The Production of Space*. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Lu, Hanchao. 1995. “Away from Nanking Road: Small Stores and Neighborhood Life in Modern Shanghai.” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 54 (1): 93–123. doi:10.2307/2058952.
- Lu, Xiaoning. 2020. *Moulding the Socialist Subject: Cinema and Chinese Modernity (1949–1966)*. Leiden: Brill.

- Luo, Gang. 2012. "Socialist Shanghai, the Struggle for Space, and the Production of Space: A Reading of the Urban Text and the Media Text." *Postcolonial Studies* 15 (4): 467–484. doi:[10.1080/13688790.2013.788467](https://doi.org/10.1080/13688790.2013.788467).
- Soja, Edward. 1996. *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and other Real-and-Imagined Places*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.
- Sun, Shaoyi. 2009. *Xiangxiang de chengshi: Wenxue, dianying he shijue shanghai (1927–1937)* [The imagined city: Shanghai in literature, film, and visual arts]. Shanghai: Fudan daxue chubanshe, 2009.
- Werner, Jake. 2015. "The Making of Mass Society in Shanghai: The Socialist Transformation of Everyday Life, 1949-1958." Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago.
- Yang, Chen. 2009. "The Institutionalization of Everyday Living Spaces: A Spatial Analysis Framework of The Worker's New Village in 1950s Shanghai." *Journal of Tongji University (Social Science Edition)* 6: 38–45.
- Zhang, Jishun. 2015. *Yuanqu de dushi: 1950 niandai de Shanghai* [A city displaced: Shanghai in the 1950s], 48. Beijing: shehui kexue wenxian.
- Zhang, Shuoguo. 2014. "Shiqinian" *Shanghai dianying wenhua yanjiu* [Cultural studies of "seventeen-year" Shanghai films]. Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian.
- Zhang, Yingjin. 1996. *The city in Modern Chinese Literature & Film: Configurations of Space, Time, and Gender*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Zhang, Yingjin, ed. 1999. *Cinema and Urban Culture in Shanghai, 1922–1943*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Zhang, Zhen. 2005. *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema, 1896–1937*. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press.
- Zhang, Zhen. 2007. *The Urban Generation Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*. Durham: Duke University Press.