

Mediated Transitions and Aesthetic Consciousness: A Study on the Scenographic Evolution of Early Chinese Cinema

Hongzhong Liu

Communication University of China, Nanjing Nanjing, Jiangsu 211100

Abstract: The stylistic evolution of early Chinese cinematic scenography constitutes not merely a temporal succession of visual paradigms, but a profound trajectory of articulating local aesthetic ethos within a modern medium. Spanning from the early 20th century to the late 1940s, this paper systematically interrogates the development of Chinese film art—transitioning from the heuristic replication of Western models to the sophisticated integration of indigenous narrative topoi, and ultimately culminating in a synthesis of nationalized "Xieyi" (lyrical abstraction) and rigorous realist depiction. The research posits that while this aesthetic construction was ostensibly constrained by technological limitations and transcultural frictions, it fundamentally mirrored the resurgence of national subjectivity amidst tectonic social shifts and the deliberate pursuit of artistic agency. By elucidating the internal logic and phase-specific characteristics of this evolution, this study demonstrates how these practices laid the ontological foundation for a unique visual language system in Chinese cinema, thereby offering a revised historiographical perspective on the origins of Chinese film aesthetics.

Keywords: Early Chinese Cinema; Cinematic Scenography; Mise-en-scène; Stylistic Evolution

DOI:10.12417/3029-2344.25.10.009

As a pivotal vehicle for cinematic narrative and signification, film art undergoes stylistic shifts that directly mirror the cultural selections and aesthetic inclinations of specific historical periods ^[1]. Within existing scholarship, the scenography of early Chinese cinema is frequently relegated to a subordinate component of industrial development or stylistic historiography, with its evolutionary trajectory often oversimplified as a linear progression from "Western imitation" to "nationalized expression." However, while this generalization provides a macro-overview, it simultaneously diminishes the active constructive agency exercised by scenography during this formative era.

In fact, Chinese cinematic scenography was never a passive adjunct to narrative or technological imperatives. Instead, within a historical context defined by the collision of Western and Eastern visual systems, radical social restructuring, and the continuous reshaping of national identity, it progressively participated in and molded the spatial imagination, emotional structures, and modes of cultural expression in Chinese cinema.

1. Mimicry, Integration, and Exploration: The Scenographic Evolution of Early Chinese Cinema

The evolution of early Chinese film scenography was deeply embedded in the heterogeneous cultural and historical milieu of the early-to-mid 20th century, a period marked by profound social upheaval and the influx of Western modernity. As an imported technology, the initial visual manifestations of cinema inevitably mimicked the formal conventions of European and American films as well as domestic stage dramas ^[2]. During this phase, film art had yet to develop an autonomous aesthetic character; its visual presence was primarily realized through a strategy of "dual mimicry" and direct transplantation ^[3]. On one hand, influenced by Western cinema, early practitioners engaged in the literal replication of exotic set designs and character aesthetics, often resulting in a semiotic rupture between visual elements and narrative contexts—a phenomenon that produced an incongruous, "Westernized" landscape. On the other hand, the pervasive influence of the locally popular "Civilized Drama" (Wenmingxi) rendered film sets mere replicas of theatrical stages. Scenes were dominated by flat, painted backdrops that emphasized decorative symbolism over the spatial depth and haptic realism inherent to the medium. Costumes and props were borrowed directly from theatrical repertoires, resulting in a style that was both formulaic and hyperbolic.

By the 1930s, the indigenization of Chinese film art transcended mere technical adjustments toward realism; it signified a fundamental reconfiguration of cinema's engagement with social reality. Against the backdrop of the

rising Left-wing Film Movement and the widespread dissemination of realist thought, cinema was increasingly perceived as a modern medium capable of articulating social contradictions and exposing the underlying structures of reality. This conceptual shift directly catalyzed the functional reconstruction of scenography. During this period, production design began to proactively dismantle its reliance on theatrical artifice, opting instead for the meticulous construction of urban topographies and vernacular spaces. By organizing fragmented, mundane social experiences into directed spatial forms, film art sought to reveal class relations and existential conditions through a visual rhetoric.

In *Street Angel* (1937), the recurring motifs of "pavilion rooms" (Tingzijian), cramped interiors, and congested alleyways serve as more than neutral backdrops; they are highly typified representations of subaltern living spaces. Structurally characterized by restricted depth, singular points of access, and insufficient lighting, these spaces externalize the characters' fates through a visual rhetoric of "entrapment." Consequently, social class is made visible through the claustrophobia and enclosure of space. A similar spatial mechanism is evident in *The Goddess* (1934), where the austerity of domestic interiors, the oppressive interplay of light and shadow, and spatial confinement coalesce into a form of visual discipline imposed upon the characters. Thus, realist scenography did not merely enhance the authenticity of everyday detail; it utilized spatial organization to continuously confirm and intensify the precarity of gender and class.

In this sense, the realist turn in 1930s film art was essentially a process of making social space visible. By emphasizing architectural structures, interior furnishings, spatial scales, and the traces of lived experience, cinema not only restored the material form of the environment but also constructed a tense relationship between the individual and the space. The cramped, enclosed living quarters squeezed the characters' agency, allowing the nexus between individual destiny and social structure to manifest visually; space itself thus became an active participant in the narrative. Simultaneously, this transformation was closely linked to the internal development of cinematic language. The popularization of three-dimensional set construction and the enrichment of camera movement allowed film space to gradually acquire depth and layering. The set was no longer a flat plane for performance but a three-dimensional structure for entry, occlusion, and movement. This allowed scenography to form a synergistic relationship with cinematography and editing, strengthening realist tension at the visual level.

Entering the 1940s, the overall style of film art became increasingly condensed and introspective. While this shift is often characterized as the maturation of a "national aesthetic consciousness," interpreting it outside of its specific historical conditions risks misreading it as an organically completed aesthetic result. In fact, the scenographic turn during this period was primarily a strategic reorganization of visual language necessitated by the constraints of wartime environments and production limitations.

In *The River Flows Eastward* (1947), scenography eschews the comprehensive reproduction of realistic space in favor of a highly selective visual composition that compresses complex social trauma into emotionally charged spatial structures. The frequent use of architectural framing—doorframes, window lattices, and shadow divisions—segments the interior into multiple layers, often positioning characters in cramped, restricted areas. Space here is no longer a simple restoration of the living environment but a symbolic structure carrying emotional and moral judgment, reinforcing the sense of existential rupture and epochal pressure through visual enclosure and contrast. This condensed and symbolic spatial strategy is most exemplified in *Crows and Sparrows* (1949). The film transforms an apartment building into a highly abstracted social model, where the distribution of floors and living spaces constitutes a clear allegory for power and class. The "National Style" thus emerged not through overt traditional decoration, but through the symbolic treatment of real-world spaces.

Consequently, the introspective, symbolic, and "Xieyi" (lyrical/expressive) tendencies in 1940s film art were not solely the result of elevated aesthetic ideals. Rather, they represented a viable mode of expression formed through the compression and reorganization of visual elements under the weight of realistic pressure and historical constraints.

2.From "Scene" to "Setting" (Yi Jing): Aesthetic Characteristics of Early Scenographic Styles

The functional trajectory of early Chinese film art evolved from providing a mere performative "backdrop" to the sophisticated creation of a narrative "mood" or "setting" (Yi Jing). In the embryonic stage, stage sets were often vacuous, decorative arrangements. However, as film art matured, production design increasingly integrated into narrative construction, character development, and thematic expression. Environmental space was transformed into an element with narrative agency—capable of foreshadowing characters' destinies, externalizing psychological states, and symbolizing broader social conditions. Lighting and color transcended their roles in basic illumination and mimetic reproduction, becoming pivotal instruments for orchestrating cinematic affect, intensifying dramatic conflict, and defining the stylistic tonality of a film. This transition from physical to psychological space, and from objective representation to subjective expression, signaled the arrival of aesthetic self-consciousness in Chinese film art.

The central thread of this development was the creative synthesis of Western realist systems and traditional Chinese aesthetics. The animated feature *Havoc in Heaven* (1961) serves as a paradigmatic example of this fusion. Its production design was not a mere accumulation of disparate elements but an organic transformation tailored to the medium of animation. In terms of spatial construction, it appropriated Western perspectival techniques and three-dimensionality to create a monumental and expansive spatial hierarchy for the "Heavenly Palace." Simultaneously, the architectural motifs of the palaces and the depiction of auspicious cloud patterns were deeply rooted in traditional Chinese architecture and mural arts. More significantly, at the level of character movement and performance, the film systematically translated the stylized and choreographed vocabulary of Peking Opera martial arts into an animated language. The combat between Sun Wukong and the celestial army eschewed literal violence in favor of a Xieyi (expressive/lyrical) and fluid choreography, imbuing movements with a sense of performativity and rhythm. This achieved a poetic deconstruction and sublimation of "violence," successfully molding a unique aesthetic style that was both visually striking and imbued with profound national aesthetic sensibility.

The creative orientation toward real-life experience and national culture, alongside the aesthetic synthesis of realism and Xieyi, became an invaluable legacy for the subsequent development of Chinese film art. The scenographic achievements of the "Seventeen Years" cinema (1950s–1960s) and even the flourishing visual pluralism of the 1980s can trace their conceptual roots back to these early explorations.

The evolution of early Chinese film scenography did not follow a clear or stable teleological path from the imitation of foreign forms toward a "matured" national style. Instead, it was the result of continuous recalibrations and responses to technological constraints, production mechanisms, social realities, and cultural resources across different historical epochs. Whether it was the early appropriation of theatrical visuals and Western forms, the realist-oriented construction of social space in the 1930s, or the condensed and symbolic visual expressions during the wartime context of the 1940s, each should be understood as a strategic choice necessitated by specific historical conditions, rather than a unidirectional aesthetic upgrade.

As this analysis of the evolutionary process demonstrates, film art was never a passive adjunct to narrative service. Rather, at various stages, it participated in the organization and articulation of real-world experience through diverse modalities. The establishment of realist aesthetics in the 1930s enabled social space and class structures to be rendered visible and intelligible through the lens; conversely, the symbolic and Xieyi tendencies emerging under the duress and creative constraints of the 1940s responded to the zeitgeist and cultural exigencies of the war era through the compression and translation of visual language. These seemingly disparate practices, in essence, collectively constitute a process of continuous self-adjustment within the historical contingencies of Chinese film art.

Therefore, rather than viewing the development of early Chinese film art as a linear progression toward a "completed national aesthetic," it is more productive to frame it as a continuously evolving visual practice. Within this practice, "nationality" is not a predetermined essence, but a quality that manifests incrementally through the visual organization of reality at distinct historical junctures. It is precisely through this non-linear and tension-filled

exploration that Chinese film art accumulated the expertise required to transmute social reality, cultural memory, and emotional structures into cinematic expression, thereby providing the indispensable historical foundation for the subsequent diversification of Chinese cinematic visual language.

References:

- [1] Da Zhixiang. Comparative study on China movie posters in the two periods before and after the founding of the People's Republic of China[J]. Journal of Huaibei Normal University: Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition, 2015, 36(2):4.
- [2] Yu Xiaofan. "The Construction of Seventeen Years' China Animation Films: On the Industry and Aesthetics of Shanghai Animation Film Studio[J]." Animation Research, 2023:49-54.
- [3] Wang Wei, Li Wenyao. Research on Artistic Innovation in Chinese Animated Films[J]. Journal of Yunnan Arts University, 2024(3).