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# **A study On The Space Of Youth Film in Mainland China**

Ruogu Xu<sup>1</sup>

Advisor: Dr. Pitipong Pimpiset<sup>2</sup>

Co-Advisor: Asst.prof Dr.Nattapong Yamcharoen<sup>3</sup>

## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to explore the role of space in shaping the image of youth groups in youth films in mainland China. With the help of spatial narrative theory, this study selects 12 youth films produced by famous directors in mainland China since the 1990s, which have won awards or nominations from well-known film festivals, and studies the types of space and the means of space creation in these films. The results show that the choice of space type in the youth films of mainland China fully expresses the close relationship between youth groups and society.

In terms of space, there are mainly four types: 1) Family space; 2) Campus space; 3) Public space; 4) Living space. At the same time, through the deployment of color, lighting and props, we can better create a space atmosphere. Through the process of exploring the purpose of this research project, new benefits can be obtained. It also helps to expand the creative path of youth films in mainland China.

**Keyword:** Space; Youth films; Mainland China.

## **Background and Significance**

As an important cultural form and mass media, film conveys information and ideas through the combination of picture and sound, time and space, plot, role, visual and sound elements, which arouses the audience's resonance and thinking, thus promoting social change and progress. In the late 1970s, the mainland of China officially launched the reform and opening up, the closed door was reopened, the tide of market economy poured in, and the western literary and artistic ideas and theories gradually entered the mainland of China, which had a wide impact, including the cultural field, which was facing profound adjustment and change. Film creation has also entered a new period of exploration, which has had a profound impact on the creative thinking of youth films in mainland China.

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<sup>1</sup>Author: Ruogu Xu, Ph.D Student from the Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Department of Culture Fine Arts and Design, Khon Kaen University

<sup>2</sup>Advisor: Dr. Pitipong Pimpiset, Lecturer from the International college, Khon Kaen University, Program Director of B.Com.Arts. and Coordinator of Creative Media Technology Major (CMT)

<sup>3</sup>Co-Advisor: Asst.prof.Dr.Nattapong Yamcharoen, Vice Dean of Research at Kasem Bundit University

By the 1990s, a large number of classical works emerged, as well as excellent creators such as Jia Zhangke, Zhang Yuan, Wang Xiaoshuai and Lou Ye. There is an upsurge in the creation of youth films in mainland China. At the beginning of the 21st century, after China's entry into WTO, facing the impact of Hollywood films, Chinese films once fell into a downturn. With this situation, youth films in mainland China have fallen into the dilemma of creation. Subsequently, in the second decade, a large number of young film directors appeared, and the localization of Chinese films was obvious. In this context, the process of typification of Chinese films has accelerated, with youth-themed films such as *Eternal Moment* (2011), *So Young* (2013), *American Dreams in China* (2013), *Young Style* (2013), *Tiny Times 1.0* (2013), *My Old Classmate* (2014), *Angels Wear White* (2017), *The Crossing* (2018), In particular, *Better Days* (2019) was nominated for the Oscar for Best International Film, making "Youth" and "Youth film" a hot topic at the moment.

At the same time, the creation of youth films in mainland China is also facing the problem of homogenization. Conventional film narrative and typical characterization make it easy for the audience to accept the film, but at the same time, it also leads to a single narrative mode, similar plot structure, and the lack of independent personality of the characters. Since 2013, the creation of youth films in mainland China has shown a trend that campus youth films have become the main type. Under the background of this trend, the youth film creation usually takes "nostalgia" as the theme, interweaves the sentimental memory of the lost youth with the current life, and constitutes the content of the whole film, thus ignoring the social value of a broader space and a broader group.

Spatial narrative is a narrative phenomenon existing in all kinds of narrative works. However, in the traditional novel creation and novel research, researchers focus on the study of time, ignoring the study of space. Space is an important visual element of the film. The living environment of the characters and the scenes of the story are directly presented in the form of space. Therefore, space is first and foremost a material existence for viewing and feeling. The location, place, scenery and other contents presented in the film screen constitute the basis of the film narrative. At the same time, on the basis of material, space can have more complex expressive ability through the use of artistic creation means such as color, lighting, props and so on, which presents the subjective understanding and thinking of the creator.

This research has chosen 12 Chinese youth films produced by famous directors in mainland China since the 1990s, which have won awards or nominations in well-known film festivals, to study the types of space and the means of space creation in these films, including the places, places, landscapes and so on presented in the films, as well as the subjective feelings of the creators. It is an interesting and valuable question to use space to express the living conditions, emotional relationships and social connections of young people, breaking the restrictions of time and film style. Only by fully understanding the connotation of space in youth films in mainland China and the related creative ideas, can the audience have associative feelings based on vision, hearing

and so on. For creators, only by mastering the connotation of space and creative means, can they better create their own works and broaden their creative ideas.

Space, as a cultural product of society, has a unique meaning in the film. The definitions of “space”, “youth” and “youth film” in this study are as follows:

### 1) Space means

- The scene in which the character lives
- Scenes play an important role in character formation and story development.

In a word, space is not only the scene where the characters live, but also plays an important role in the development of the characters' personality and stories, so space has a certain metaphorical meaning.

### 2) Youth means

According to the regulations of the National Bureau of Statistics on the age of teenagers, this paper limits the age of “youth” in the concept of “youth films” to 15-34 years old.

### 3) Youth Film means

Youth film is a film that shows young people's exploration of personal and related real life. It usually shows young people's concerns about love, growth, dreams and resistance and obedience to the mainstream culture represented by the elders. The tone of the film is cruel, sad or confused, but also mixed with youth passion and agitation.

## Space Types Of Youth Film in Mainland China

The space in the film is not an abstract concept limited to the geographical level, nor is it a simple description and reproduction of the external world. The selection and construction of each film in the creative space contains not only the historical background behind the story, but also its profound impact on the character and psychology of the characters. In this process, the creation of space goes beyond a single physical location, and involves a comprehensive experience of emotion, meaning and symbols, thus giving the film a more profound connotation.

### 1) Family space

The influence of family members, especially on the growth of young people, is of great significance. Family space is “an ethical organism, a living combination of consanguinity and conjugal relationship” (Wang Minan 2015). As young people enter adolescence or transition into the adult world, the family is indispensable as a stable background in the process of growth. However, in the youth films of mainland China, the family space is often presented in an absent or evasive way. This way of presenting family space reflects the lack of emotional elements that families should possess, such as safety and warmth, in reality. The lack of family space and

its negative effects on the growth of youth groups actually further highlight the necessity and complexity of family as an emotional and social place.

In *The Days* (Wang Xiaoshuai 1993), the young painter's family space is a small dormitory provided by the school. In this cramped space, all the details of life are magnified in the public sphere, just like a sketch is seen through in the sunshine. What is seen through is not only the cramped life, but also the confusion and helplessness of the inner world. In *Xiao Wu* (Jia Zhangke 1998), in *Xiao Wu*'s family space, the selfishness and indifference of his parents can not provide him with the warmth that his family should have. In fact, in the autobiographical films of the sixth generation directors, the family space is often portrayed as a narrow, dark old apartment building, a narrow home for young people, with old furniture. This is the creator's personal feelings, but also the imprint of an era. The alienation of family space actually shows the emotional relationship between youth groups and family members, as well as the family problems existing in society.

With the progress of society, the living conditions of families have changed dramatically, but the elements that determine the different relationships between family members, such as intimacy or alienation, warmth or confrontation, are not the old or modern layout of family space. Similar to the confrontation between young people and adults in the family space in *Einstein And Einstein* (Cao Baoping 2013), or the absence of Chen Nian's father in *Better Days* (Zeng Guoxiang 2019). The incompleteness of family space not only brings great pain to the growth of young people, but also has a far-reaching impact on the shaping and growth of young people's personality.



*Xiao Wu* (1998)



*The Days* (1993)

## 2) Campus space

In addition to family space, campus is also an important element of youth film space narrative. Campus space provides space for young people to learn and grow, but at the same time it is also an ideological space. Campus has clear rules and regulations, which clearly limit the scope of activities, time of activities, behavior norms and so on, and are the epitome of the social system. At the same time, school leaders, teacher groups, student cadres and youth

groups have a clear hierarchy in the campus space. Deviant behavior will be punished by the system. The establishment of campus space in youth films means that the system limits the youth group, and the youth group challenges the rules of campus space, which is a transgression and challenge to the system.

The image of campus space has conflicting places: one is “beautiful campus”, which is represented in the image.

In fact, there are often tall teaching buildings, dense forests, beautiful sunsets and so on. This kind of “beauty” is embedded in young people’s beautiful memories of youth, often integrated with young people’s romantic and ideal feelings, and contrasted with adults’ hypocrisy and secularity. Another kind of campus space is full of oppressive and dilapidated atmosphere, and this repressed atmosphere is cruel and desperate. In *Better Days* (Zeng Guoxiang 2019), young people are trapped in the square teaching building, and the neglected campus violence may trap anyone in it. There is no romantic love here, only the betrayal, violence, abandonment and hypocrisy of the adult society coming ahead of time to the adult society.

Campus space is like a mirror reflecting the adult society, where the rebellion of youth is stopped and punished, and becomes the experience space before entering the adult world. Campus space is usually a direct confrontation of different attitudes in the face of adult society, which contains the complexity of education and system. In this special space, it witnesses the struggle and growth of young people, and is an important stage for the collision of ideas and the shaping of personality.



Thirteen princess trees (2007)



Fleet of time(2014)



Better Days ( 2019)

### 3) Public space

“Space itself is a kind of production, shaped by various social processes and human intervention, and at the same time a kind of force, which in turn affects, guides and restricts the possibilities of activities and the ways of human existence.” In the process of youth growth, they are freed from the depressed family environment and monotonous campus life, and devote themselves to bars, skating rinks, streets, game halls, Internet cafes and other public places to pass the time and break through the shackles. For youth groups, public space is not completely unrestricted, but for youth groups, the relative “freedom” of public space will continue to drive them to enter, escape from family inter-generational conflicts and family alienation, escape from school rules, and seek “maturity”. In the *The Left Ear* (Su Youpeng 2015), Li Er, after stepping out of the family and campus space, changes the image of “obedient children” with persistence and stubbornness, and fully demonstrates the repressed personality characteristics.

The depiction of public spaces in mainland youth films closely relies on the actual background of China’s economic development. In the context of global integration, bars, ice rinks, streets, game halls, and internet cafes have become symbols of modernization and consumer culture. Young people experience a state of conservatism in such a public environment that is different from that of families and schools. For young people, this has a sense of avant-garde and is also a gesture of resistance. In public spaces, drinking alcohol brings anesthesia, socializing with the opposite sex in ice rinks, and internet cafes expand the boundaries of fantasy and friendship, all of which make young people feel the maturity of adult society. However, young people still need to return to their families and schools eventually, and they must face the punishment from the adult world.



The Left Ear(2015)



The Left Ear(2015)

#### 4) Living space

The city is built on the basis of the countryside. In the context of the rapid development of modern industrial society in China today, the subjectivity of the city is based on the denial of the values of the countryside. The poetry of the countryside in the field of traditional literature has disappeared in the pursuit of urbanization and the extreme pursuit of economic construction and industrial development. The countryside has become a lagging existence. The youth films created by the sixth generation directors in the 1990s almost avoided the living space of the countryside. As a product of the process of human modernization, urban space has a profound impact on human civilization, culture and daily life. After 2000, the opposition between the city and the countryside almost disappeared in youth films, and the countryside was only a symbol of some kind of wonder. Such as *Nuan* (Huo Jianqi 2003), beautiful scenery is used to isolate the noise of modern cities. “This film captures the desire of modern people, and takes the beautiful rural scenery as the fixed theme of the film, which satisfies people’s hidden nostalgia complex” (Mo Yan). In fact, the change of rural living space is also a reflection of the social reality of rural population mobility in mainland China since the reform and opening up.



Nuan(2003)



Nuan(2003)

## Means of space construction

### 1) Symbolism of color

Color is the basic element of film scene design, and color is also an important carrier of film art. The color in nature and the integration of human civilization endow color with unique humanistic significance. In the scene design, color can not only promote the development of the story, but also shape the characters. At the same time, the symbolic meaning of color plays a positive role in interpreting the plot of the film, assisting the scene design and enhancing the atmosphere of the film. Color is not only the color in nature, the symbolic meaning of color, but also helps to render the space environment of the film, shape the character of the scene, and build the atmosphere of the scene. Scene design should grasp the elements of color, skillfully use color, and construct the atmosphere needed by the film. The creation of film atmosphere can be expressed by color.

In *Xiao Wu* (Jia Zhangke 1998), *Xiao Wu* comes to the big Shanghai karaoke in a small town to have fun. In a KTV room with dark red lights, he sings Heart Rain with Hu Meimei, a singing girl. The dark red ambiguity becomes the emotional link between Meimei and Xiaowu. The two struggled at the bottom, and their dark lives sprouted some color because they met each other.



*Xiao Wu* ( 1998)

### 2) The contrast of light

In the film language, lighting is an important element. Lighting design to help render film scenes. Set off the atmosphere of the scene and the image of the characters. Lighting design, with the help of light and shadow, to make up for the lack of atmosphere. Lighting design and the creation of scene atmosphere should also reflect the grasp of the whole plot and style. Usually, in films, light is the most artistic carrier of expression.

In *Seventeen Years* (Zhang Yuan 1999), the strong contrast of light highlights the role of prison in educating and reforming people.

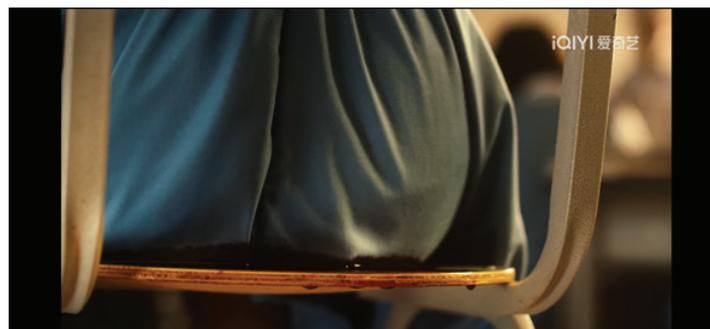


*Seventeen Years* (1999)

### 3) The modeling of props

In film production, props are scene modeling and utensils provided for drama performance and film and television shooting. In the film, there are many props, which can be real scene props or artificial props according to the needs of the plot. These props create conditions for the creation of the film atmosphere. Different props have played a positive role in showing the plot of the film and highlighting the character.

In *Better Days* (Zeng Guoxiang 2019), the red ink that appears twice in the classroom has become a symbol of bullying. The red ink was poured on the girl's chair, which is not only a humiliation in the ordinary sense, but also a kind of physiological discrimination against women, and it is women who impose this kind of discrimination, which makes such details trigger more thinking.



Better Days (2019)

## Conclusion and Discussion

1. The study of youth film space in mainland China is a study of the narrative function and role of space in shaping youth groups, rather than a simple discussion in the geographical sense. In this study, we first realize that it is social science research, not geographical and cultural research.

2. The development of society in mainland China has a direct impact on the expression of space in youth films in mainland China. In the four spaces of family space, campus space, public space and living space, the research on the first three is relatively concentrated and rich. The study of living space, especially with the development of society, the binary opposition between urban and rural areas has disappeared, which deserves more attention.