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The malling of the movies: Film exhibition reforms, multiplexes, and film consumption in the new millennium in urban China

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to examine China's multiplex boom in the new millennium. As a result of film exhibition deregulation policy, the hot investment trend caused a 'cinema building frenzy', which significantly changed the face of the movie exhibition sector in the Chinese film industry. The dramatic growth in the multiplex is congruent with commercial real estate developments, urbanization and consumerism in China. This article considers the multiplex as a cinematic heterotopia and the state's support for the multiplex development as a case study of China's strategies of 'controlled commodification'. I argue that through the modernization and commodification of cinema-going space, the state recreated the social relations between the government and the film industry, as well as between cultural regulation, people's public life and human behavior.

KEYWORDS

Multiplex; heterotopia; public space; consumption; film exhibition; commercialization

Introduction

China is experiencing one of the greatest theater-building booms in its history. This surge is the direct result of the state's deregulation policies on cinema investment, announced in 2003, which allowed state-owned and non-state-owned enterprises or individual investors to invest in and transform cinemas (Xu 2003). As a consequence, the film exhibition sector has attracted significant investment, generating a cinema-building frenzy. Then, the multiplex emerged. With deregulation, cinemas in China began to undergo fundamental changes, moving away from the single-screen model to the multiplex theater, a phenomenon that is expanding rapidly in both major metropolitan cities and second- and third-tier cities. This cinema transformation can also be attributed to the introduction of shopping malls into China in the early 2000s as a retail innovation (Wang, Zhang, and Wang 2006, 20). That most multiplexes in China are housed in shopping malls is an outcome of the collaboration between commercial real estate developers and movie exhibitors. The Dalian Wanda Group was one of the earliest real estate companies to build multiplex cinemas in its shopping malls. Its acquisition of AMC Entertainment for \$2.6 billion in 2012

marked China's largest acquisition of a US company, and created the largest theater chain in the world (Voigt 2012). The purchase became the most exciting news in the Chinese film industry, signifying above all the increasing strength and economic scale of the movie exhibition industry in the wake of China's 2002 inauguration of a new distribution and exhibition system: the so-called "theater circuit system" (*yuan xian zhi*), a strong sign of its deeper movie industry reforms. The state, therefore, used film exhibition reform to roil stagnant movie reforms, rendering the film exhibition sector the pioneering area of China's adoption of worldwide film practices and the most dynamic aspect of industrial transformation.

The proliferation of the multiplex and the subsequent film consumption boom provide the new lenses through which to examine the state's new strategies in media liberalization as well as the country's social, cultural and consumption changes. The emergence of the multiplex is thus an integral part of the larger economic, social and cultural developments (such as the advent of commercial real estate, urbanization and rising consumerism) that occurred in China after it joined the World Trade Organization (WTO). The story of the Chinese multiplex also offers unique insight into China's 'soft power' initiative in the cultural sector and its ambitions for the Chinese film industry. As the country's economic growth model turns toward domestic consumption and moves away from investment and import/export business models in the new millennium, the film industry becomes one of China's new growth engines. As such, China's entertainment and leisure industries have had to converge with the international trend of satisfying the needs of an emerging middle class longing to participate in metropolitan modernity and consumerism. In particular, the state's deregulation policies on cinema can be understood as a continuation of its leisure consumption policy of the mid-1990s and as a concrete action of converting cultural capital into economic capital (Wang 2001). As Jing Wang (2001) observes:

The government rediscovery of culture as a site, where new ruling technologies can be deployed and converted simultaneously into economic capital, constitutes one of its most innovative strategies of statecraft since the founding of the People's Republic. This proves that all crises have only perfected the state machine instead of smashing it – parodying Marx and remembering 4 June 1989. (72)

In the new millennium, the development of the multiplex in China is a state-led nationalized project of 'controlled commodification', a concept defined by Kokkeong Wong (2001) 'as a situation in which the state constitutes the most determining influence over media operating as a commercial, profit-driven institution in a market economy' (17). Wong (2001) posits this theory of controlled commodification to explicate the existential contradiction in Singapore's export-oriented development policy and its culture within the material context of global capitalism (17). Although Wong does not include China as an example of peripheral capitalism in East Asia in his book, China's one political party, the contradictions within its economic, political and cultural policies, as well as its strict control of mass media renders this theory useful and applicable. Generally, commodification refers to processes that reduce social relations to an exchange relation (as quoted in Weber and Lu 2007). The technique that the Chinese state uses to recreate the social alliance between film and politics in the context of global capitalism is closer to Wong's theory of 'controlled commodification'. Similar to Singapore, the Chinese state plays a determining role in managing the commercialization of the film industry and

recreates the social relations between the government and the film industry, as well as between cultural regulation, citizen's public life and human behavior.

This article raises a number of questions. What were the state's strategies to stimulate the transformation of film exhibition sector? Why has the state supported the development of the multiplex? How did the advent of the multiplex significantly alter cinema-going space? And, finally, how does this improved cinema space relate to people's public lives? Informed by political theorist Michael Walzer (1986) and the work of Michel Foucault (1967/2008), this article suggests that cinema-going space in China has been transformed from a 'single-minded' to an 'open-minded but highly controlled space'. I argue that this special characteristic of the multiplex became a favorable urban project for the Chinese state to promote consumption and display its modernity in the midst of the country's transition to capitalism. In this sense, Foucault's *heterotopia* provides a useful tool for analyzing the state's preference to develop 'open-minded but highly controlled' public space such as shopping malls and the multiplex as outcomes of a new national urban development policy. In particular, this essay considers the multiplex a 'utopian Panopticon' (Johnson 2006, 84). The multiplex in China also demonstrates similar characteristics to those described by Ravenscroft, Chua, and Wee (2001), who argue that 'the cinema takes the form of a heterotopia, or compensatory world (Foucault 1986a), in which people may experience "freedom" within socially constructed and maintained boundaries' (217).

This article examines the multiplex phenomenon in relation to the role of the state, distribution and exhibition reforms, and the rise of new public spaces in China. This study provides evidence that the phenomenal growth of the multiplex does, indeed, drive the Chinese film industry toward a deeper level of marketization and commercialization. As Charles R. Acland (2000) has pointed out regarding the critical function of film exhibition, 'It is important to understand the way that film exhibition, as an industrial and cultural endeavor, is invested in a project of stabilization, of making audiences and making (or imagining) them as readable, predictable, and knowable' (357). In the Chinese context, the film exhibition reforms in the 2000s may also be considered an industrial and cultural endeavor on the part of both the Chinese state and the film industry, collaborating to rebuild the heterotopic cinematic world – a highly regulated space into which Chinese people can escape from daily lives fraught with stress, social inequality and anxiety due to China's rapid economic development and social transitions.

The socialist film distribution and exhibition system

Before the new theater chain distribution system was inaugurated in the 2000s, China's old film distribution and exhibition system had operated for over 50 years. It followed the Soviet model and was based on administrative regions. This multilayer distribution system within the administrative regional limitations resulted in inefficiency and low productivity in film distribution and financial return as well as in local protectionism due to ineffective administration management. All 16 of the state-owned film studios produced films under the aegis of the Chinese government's production quota and plans for each year. The government provided funding to the film studios for their film productions and for covering 'overhead' costs (Ni 1994). The China Film Corporation (CFC), the sole national film distributor assigned by the government, bought all of the films produced by

the 16 film studios for a flat fee. Then, the CFC distributed films to its local divisions at different levels in the Chinese administrative framework; the local divisions took charge of distributing the films to theaters and collecting box-office receipts. Within this planned economic infrastructure were many distribution companies at various levels – from the central government and provincial governments, to city, town and village governments (Fang 2004, 22). This distribution system was beneficial to the distribution and exhibition sector, but not to the film studios. Clearly, the three sectors of production, distribution and exhibition of the film industry under the command economy system were disconnected not only from the market, but also from each other.

This socialist-planned distribution and exhibition system combined both government functions and enterprise management. It is fair to say that the infrastructure of the film industry at that time fulfilled its mission as a propaganda machine under the command economy system, not only securing the dissemination of socialist ideologies in the form of film, but also controlling the regular operations of the film industry. This infrastructure also quite effectively achieved and guaranteed the status of ‘film’ as a leading entertainment medium for the Chinese people and a mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) under the prevailing political constraints. When the state stopped providing funds for film studios, and the film industry began to decentralize, this self-contained film production system no longer functioned properly or held various forces in equilibrium. The conflicts of interest among the three sectors stood out. Due to the special nature and function of film for the CCP, the state’s reform measures were limited to small repairs, such as price adjustments of movie tickets and film prints – in a sharp contrast to its bold measures on other state-owned industries. The bigger change occurred in 1993, one year after the 14th National Congress of the Communist Party of China was held, in October 1992. The Congress endorsed Deng’s call for ‘accelerating reform and opening-up’, and adopted his theory of ‘socialist market economy’ as the guideline for restructuring China’s economy (Vohra 1994, 47). This economic liberalization policy impacted the movie industry so that the state granted film studios the right to distribute their films directly to provincial and municipal distribution companies without having to go through the China Film Corporation. However, there were still many barriers and obstacles among the three sectors. The conflicts between provincial and municipal distribution companies, this time stood out, activated as they were by the availability of limited numbers of films and bidding wars over the price of Hollywood imports. As a result, the film market again plunged into a messy dilemma, with each provincial and municipal distribution company acting of its own free will (Tang 2009, 5). It was not until the new millennium that administrative barriers in the production, distribution and exhibition sectors shook up significantly, due to the implementation of a new theater chain system.

New theater chains, film supply and the market structure

The big transition took place on 18 December 2001, when the state announced that the old distribution system would be discarded and that the new theater chains would formally be in operation by June 2002 (Shen 2005, 221). The new theater circuit system intended to change the mode of film supply and circulation under the command economy. According to the state’s official definition, theater chains should be established based on capital or film supply (Zhang 2003, 15). In contrast to theater chains in Western

countries, China's theater chains had various forms of ownership during the industrial transition. Ownership could be formed by an alliance among movie theaters, a film distributor and movie theaters, or a film producer and movie theaters using signed contracts to unify the theater chain's brand, movie release schedule and management. The state also allowed theater chains to be established beyond the administrative regions' limitations (Zhang 2003, 15).

This new distribution system was obviously a top-down reform implemented through forced administrative measures, rather than through market functions. According to the state's regulation policy, cinema exhibitors must obtain film prints from the theater chain company with which they affiliate and pay management fees of 2% to 5% (Fan 2012, 16). If a cinema does not join a theater chain, it has no way to directly obtain a film print from film distributors. From this arrangement, theater chain companies functioned as intermediaries between film distributors and exhibitors. In addition, the state made use of Hollywood blockbusters to force movie theaters to take action; the state would stop supplying imported Hollywood blockbusters if cinemas, especially in major cities such as Beijing, Tianjin and Guangzhou, did not join a theater chain company by the end of June 2002 (Shen 2005, 222). This was an effective tactic because Hollywood blockbusters are the major box-office generators for cinemas. With these mandatory measures, 36 theater chains formed, with a combined total of 1188 theaters, and screen numbers reached 2396 by 2004 (Shen 2005, 222).

In terms of capital resources and corporate structure, there are mainly two business models in China's theater chains: the chain store and the joint venture. Wanda Cinema Circuit is an example of the chain store; that is, Dalian Wanda Group has ownership of all its cinemas and has achieved a unified management control, brand and release schedule (Liu 2009, 63). The joint venture, such as the Shanghai United Circuit, involves state-owned film distribution companies that cooperate with local cinema exhibitors or with privately owned cinema investors through a signed contract. This model's loose contract between a theater chain company and contracted movie theaters has potential problems if the theater chain company cannot maintain firm control over its contracted movie theaters, especially with regard to film release schedules and management. After the theater chains began to operate, a production company was able to distribute its films through any theater chain and was no longer confined by administrative regions. The theater chain system introduced a degree of competition into the exhibition sector; the barriers between producers, distributors and exhibitors were lifted; the rigid administrative hierarchies were broken down; and the circulation of films was extended and accelerated.

In the early stages of the new theater chain system, the government was a major investor in that almost all of the theater chains were formed from existing state-owned or local-government-owned distribution companies and cinemas. After the government allowed private capital to invest in building modern cinemas in 2003, privately owned theater chains and privately invested multiplexes sprang up and have become an important force in the exhibition sector due to their strong capital and flexible management. In particular, Wanda Cinema Circuit's success quickly convinced private investors to enter the film exhibition industry, prompting the multiplex boom. These private investors either created theater chains and invested in multiplexes independently or collaborated with existing theater chains or state-owned film companies to build multiplexes.

Although privately owned theater chains are becoming an important force in the market, the state's policies favor the state-owned media conglomerates that have a competitive advantage in achieving 'vertical integration' with the state's support and resources. This strategy conforms to the Chinese government's goal to promote a 'socialist market economy', in which public ownership plays a dominant role and diverse forms of ownership develop side by side (Wu 2005, 178). Thus, the state maintains control over the media sector by means of supporting public ownership of media. With the government's support, theater chains owned or controlled by state-owned media conglomerates expanded rapidly in the market. The best example is China Film Group (CFG). Under the state's direct control, the CFG took advantage of mergers caused by the theater chain policy to aggressively participate in several big theater chains, thereby controlling the exhibition outlets through a bigger market share. The China Film Stellar Theater Chain is a subdivision of the CFG. This theater chain is co-owned by the privately owned Stellar Media Corporation but controlled by the CFG. As the largest state-owned media conglomerate, the CFG has grand ambitions to control not only the northern part of the domestic film market, but also the southern part. To achieve this goal, the CFG collaborated with Guangdong Film Distribution Company, which controlled most of the southeastern film market in China, to create the China Film South Cinema Circuit. This theater circuit eventually came to be controlled by the CFG, which held 56% of the stock in 2007 (Liu 2009, 76).

Currently, the five largest domestic theater chains – the Wanda Cinema Line, the China Film Stellar Theater Chain, the Shanghai United Circuit, the China Film South Cinema Circuit and the New Film Association – dominate the exhibition sector. Other than the Wanda, the rest of the largest theater chains are controlled by state-owned media conglomerates. The total box-office revenue of these five largest circuits was 2.33 billion yuan, accounting for 58% of the market share in 2008; the remaining 42% of the market share was held mainly by midsize and small theater chains that specialize in operating movie theaters in small- and medium-sized cities (Liu 2009, 64). From 2010 to 2012, these five theater chains still retain dominance in the market, although a few privately owned theater chains such as Dadi's Digital Cinema climbed into the list of top 10 theater chains by box-office revenue (Liu and Han 2013, 120).

The theater chain policy successfully stimulated multiplex investments. After the Chinese government sanctioned theater chains, theater chains were dedicated to increasing their movie screens by building new multiplexes. The rapid growth of multiplexes and screens has become a significant engine of movie sales, with every increase in movie screens boosting audience admissions and box-office receipts. The numbers of cinemas and screens are significant as theatrical exhibition continues to be the main driver of revenue in the film industry, accounting for 81% of total industry income in 2012 (Jiang 2013a). As shown in Table 1, the number of multiplex cinemas increased threefold, the number of screens increased sixfold and box-office revenue more than 10-fold between 2002 and 2013 (Peng 2012). Gary Edgerton (2002) has described the multiplex in 1980s America as 'a major stimulant, enabling a handful of chains to grow gradually at first, then meteorically over the subsequent two decades' (155). China's multiplex boom has had a similar effect, becoming a major stimulant for the rapid growth of theater chains. Since 2002, the number of theater chains has grown from 36 in 2004 to 46 in 2012 (Liu 2013).

The theater chains have effectively invigorated efforts toward collaboration among the production, distribution and exhibition sectors, thereby revitalizing the film industry.

Table 1. The development of theater circuits and screens in China between 2002 and 2013.

Year	Theater chains	Cinemas	Screens	New cinemas	New screens	Box-office revenue (in million RMB)
2002	35	872	1581	—	—	950
2003	32	1045	1923	173	342	1100
2004	33	1188	2396	143	443	1520
2005	36	1243	2668	55	272	2046
2006	33	1326	3034	182	366	2620
2007	34	1427	3527	102	493	3327
2008	34	1545	4097	118	570	4341
2009	37	1680	4723	142	626	6206
2010	38	1993	6256	313	1533	10,172
2011	39	2796	9286	803	3030	131,15
2012	46	3680	13,118	880	3832	17,073
2013	46	4682	18,195	—	6077	21,500

Source: From Peng (2012).

Within 10 years, the economic scale of Chinese film exhibition has seen phenomenal growth. According to data, city attendees increased from 73.03 million in 2005 to 472 million in 2012 (Liu and Han 2013, 113). China now has 4582 cinema complexes and 18,195 screens (Frater 2014). With the growing number of movie screens, film distributors have the opportunity to achieve very broad releases for their big-budget pictures. For example, the film *The Founding of a Republic* (2009) was released on 1450 screens across the country (Fu 2009, 509). Most other big-budget Chinese blockbusters have used ‘wide release’ as a distribution pattern and relied on first-week box-office performance. There is no doubt that theater chains and the multiplex boom helped enlarge the film industry’s overall scale of modernization and commercialization.

Location strategies, real estate investors and the shopping mall model

The multiplex became a mainstream film exhibition venue in the cinema industry worldwide. Multiplexing is the practice of housing two or more screens under one roof, thus maximizing audience size, while essentially paying the building and management overhead costs, employee salaries and other fixed costs for only one structure (Edgerton 2002, 158). According to Ravenscroft et al. (2001), this form of structure:

enables exhibitors to spread risks, since they can manage their total portfolio of screens to ensure that a poor performance at one screen can be offset by good performances at the others, instead of having to adhere to a fixed movie schedule, as was formerly the case. (218)

King Sturge (2000) has claimed that the development of the Cineplex ‘presents a more attractive film-going environment, and through multi-screening, has made popular films more readily accessible to the masses’ (as quoted in Ravenscroft et al. 2001, 216). Justin Smith (2005) offered a similar perspective: ‘Multiplexes represent a new self-consciousness on the part of the cinematic exhibition sector which has sought to reinvent the cinema experience for the consumer in the context of a range of competing retail and leisure experiences’ (251).

The trend of siting multiplexes in shopping malls started in the West and spread along with general mall culture (Athique and Hill 2007). The marriage of shopping malls and cinemas was described as ‘a major revolution in distribution’ (Kowinski 1983, 55) when it

appeared in the USA. ‘Mall culture’ hit China in the 2000s, and, according to Ralph Jennings (2006), ‘Today, about 200 malls with an anchor store, a food court, entertainment, and parking operate in China. More and more are on the way as Chinese consumers begin to show mall-rat tendencies.’ As reported in the 2012 *Development Report on Cooperation between China Shopping Malls and Chain Brands*, the findings from a study conducted by CCFA and Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu Ltd., China had 2812 shopping malls with a construction area of 177 million square meters by the end of 2011 (Li 2013). China will have 4000 shopping malls by 2015, a more than 40% increase over the current number, according to the latest report by the China Chain Store and Franchise Association (Li 2013).

The state’s decision to develop modern multiplex theaters demonstrates its determination to integrate the local film industry into the international film community, embrace the global commercial culture and diversify the people’s public and cultural life. As a significant component of the shopping mall, which ‘offer[s] a favorable climate, a high potential for social interaction, a perceived freedom from safety concerns, and a large selection of consumable goods and experiences’ (Bloch, Ridgway, and Dawson 1994, 23), multiplexes provide Chinese people with new movie-going experiences. Going to a film is no longer the sole reason for Chinese people to visit a cinema in the shopping mall. Movie-going, shopping, eating, sports and other leisure activities can be realized within the shopping mall, which has become a so-called a ‘one-stop shop for all needs’, delivering ‘integrated recreation and leisure consumption’ (Li 2011, 28). Like large, enclosed shopping malls in North America, shopping malls in China are also becoming ‘a premier habitat for consumers’ (Bloch, Ridgway, and Dawson 1994, 24).

The development of the mall multiplex is based on China’s tiered city system that is characterized by cities’ economies of scale and population size. Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen comprise the first tier. Most multiplexes target first-tier cities, then move into second-tier and third-tier cities (Han 2009, 288–291). Most second-tier cities are municipalities or provincial capitals. Currently, the multiplexes built in China are concentrated in first-tier and some second-tier cities, which are currently the major contributors to Chinese box-office revenues, accounting for 66% of box-office revenues in 2012 (Jiang 2013b). Great disparities exist between second- and third-tier cities and large cities in terms of cinema exhibition facilities, viewing conditions, film resources and audience attitudes toward film consumption (Entgroup 2009, 50). Multiplexes for second- and third-tier cities have yet to be fully developed, although some theater chains have started to build them.

Locally, cinema construction patterns are emerging out of cities’ major commercial shopping areas through district shopping areas and into residential community areas (Han 2009, 297–298). Commercial shopping areas and business districts with a concentrated flow of people, capital, information and logistics in large cities are the most popular locations for multiplex investors. Their consumer targets and local characteristics are similar to those of film consumption. Commercial districts and shopping malls are often located in proximity to convenient public transportation. Although residential properties in larger cities have experienced a trend toward suburbanization, suburban entertainment sites are not very well equipped. Cinema’s development in China has not followed the suburbanization trend of its Western counterparts. Cities are still the cultural hot spots, and downtown areas of cities are the center of consumption, leisure and cultural activities. The mall multiplex in China is often located on the top floor of a high-rise shopping mall,

an area believed to have the least commercial value in the mall. This floor strategy not only helps elevate the commercial value of that floor, but also keeps consumers in the mall longer. It also broadens the flow of attendees and creates loyal consumers, in turn, enhancing attendance numbers for the cinema in the mall (Li 2011, 30).

But mall multiplex development in China cannot succeed without real estate developers' financial support. Similar to America's cinema construction boom in the 1980s, which was not entirely controlled by the exhibition sector but instead by shopping center developers (Guback 1987, 69), China's cinema boom is not completely controlled by the exhibition sector; real estate developers have played a significant role. It is no overstatement to say that real estate entrepreneurs and shopping mall developers have become the most important financial resources for China's cinema transformation and multiplex construction (Han 2009, 284). For example, the success and rapid rise of the Wanda Cinema Circuit in the cinema exhibition industry prompted other real estate developers to follow its lead (Bao 2008, 479). They took advantage of these new opportunities by either investing in multiplexes or collaborating with local film exhibitors to renovate old cinemas. In most cases, the exhibitor reserves a space in a shopping mall in which to build the multiplex cinema. Both sides work together to determine the cinema's interior design, decoration, seating, number of screens and market positioning with respect to the location, population, consumption potentials, transportation and per capita disposable income of the area surrounding the shopping mall and new cinema. The exhibitor pays a fixed base rental fee or a certain percentage of the net box-office receipts to the shopping mall developer (Li 2011, 33). Originally, the rental period would last 20 years, but this period was reduced to 10–12 years by 2011 (Li 2011, 33). The long-term rental deal caused both parties to become closely intertwined. Currently, other than real estate developers as the most important financial resource, investment capital in cinema building also comes from state-owned media conglomerates like the China Film Group, the government special fund, national banks, foreign capital and Hong Kong capital (Han 2009, 282).

The main driving forces behind the new shopping malls and the multiplexes are urbanization and consumerism. According to *China Daily*:

Urbanization is one of the structural adjustments aimed at reducing China's reliance on external demand. China's rate of urbanization lags behind other countries with similar levels of income. Including the 140 million rural migrants living in the city without an urban hukou (city residency card), China has 46 percent of its population living in cities, whereas the world average is above 50 percent. (Yao 2009)

In past decades, rapid urbanization has greatly increased domestic consumption and stimulated economic growth in China. The state will extend this policy to boost domestic consumption in the economy (Wang and Stanway 2013). According to Edwards and Lim (2013), 'The government hopes 60 percent of the population of almost 1.4 billion will be urban residents by 2020 and will build homes, roads, hospitals and schools for them.' As China undergoes economic growth and urban development, Chinese people are getting richer, and a middle class is emerging. According to an analysis of official government statistics by the China Market Research Group, 'The average disposable income of urban Chinese households rose to around \$3,000 per capita in 2010. That means a typical family of three earns around \$9,000 a year' (Censky 2012). In terms of international experience, when real gross domestic product (GDP) per capita reaches \$1000, a nation's structure of

consumption will change. At this stage, the rate of residents' entertainment consumption rises. When real GDP per capita reaches a \$1500–\$3000 range, cultural and entertainment consumption enters a stage of rapid growth (Li 2011, 28). Increases in disposable income and developing entertainment needs make the advent of the multiplex an appropriate occurrence in the 2000s, both for shopping mall developers and for consumers seeking new consumption patterns and sites. In examining changing leisure time, space and consumption in China from the 1980s to the 2000s, Kevin Latham (2007) argues that China's leisure activities have undergone a massive transformation – from being collectively oriented in Mao's era to being individual- and family-oriented in the post-Mao era (236). Latham notes, 'There was greater commercialization and commodification of leisure time and space' (239). He goes on to claim that this was because 'people's leisure pastimes have themselves been commercialized and commoditized. So, this has not only changed the relationship between the consumer and goods or services, it has transformed the space of consumption' (235).

The multiplex as a cinematic heterotopia

The multiplex provides an illuminating context in which to examine how the space of film consumption has been transformed and commoditized in contemporary China. Michael Walzer's (1986) concepts of 'single-minded' space and 'open-minded' space are particularly instructive in understanding the transformation and commodification of cinema-going space in China. Walzer (1986) has classified urban space in two categories: 'single-minded', which fulfills a single function, and 'open-minded', which means designed for a variety of uses in which every citizen participates and tolerates others who share the space with them (321). Before the 2000s, most of old cinemas in China were single-screened freestanding movie houses with a big auditorium holding 1000–2000 seats and were located in downtown areas of cities with easy access to mass transit. Old cinemas did not offer extra space or other leisure activities as a way of encouraging patrons to enjoy a longer stay (Figures 1 and 2). As such, the old cinemas were 'single-minded spaces and designed by planners who have only movie-going in mind for single-minded citizens who often hurry to the movie and home again' (Walzer 1986, 321). Because of many factors – such as television, home video technology and pirated DVDs – going to movies was no longer the top entertainment choice for Chinese people in the late 1980s and 1990s. More importantly, the old cinemas in most Chinese cities were built in the 1950s and 1960s, and were dilapidated and poorly equipped (Mao 2003, 183). Of the more than 7000 cinemas nationwide, fewer than 200 screens had a Dolby digital sound system (Mao 2003, 190). As Jiang Wei, the general manager of Broadway Cinema, pointed out in an interview in 2004:

The economic downturn of the Chinese film market has been closely related to poor facility and projection technologies in movie theaters. Old cinemas' environment and service were no better than lying comfortably at home to watch pirated discs. So, the cinemas were not attractive enough for moviegoers to come to cinemas, and that is why theatrical film consumption will inevitably go downhill. (as quoted in Fang 2004, 23)

It is evident that the old cinemas' antiquated facilities, 'single-minded space' design, and shortage of screens could not meet the entertainment needs of 1.3 billion people.



Figure 1. Da Guangming Cinema in Tianjin. http://www.tianjinwe.com/tianjin/jsbb/201510/t20151027_909682.html



Figure 2. Inside the Da Guangming Cinema in Tianjin. http://www.tianjinwe.com/tianjin/jsbb/201510/t20151027_909682.html

However, due to their prime real estate locations downtown, those old cinemas still had investment potential. To encourage exhibitors to renovate their facilities, the state offered low-interest loans and allocated a special governmental fund for exhibitors willing to remodel their single-screen auditorium into a duplex or triplex ([Approaches of the National Film Special Funds 2004](#)). However, some exhibitors were still short of the money necessary to independently upgrade their cinemas and were thus in need of outside funding to finish their cinema renovation projects.

The marriage of shopping mall and multiplex made movie theaters no longer a single-functioned site for moviegoers. Meanwhile, many multiplex cinemas in China have attempted to offer other leisure activities within the space of cinema to encourage moviegoers' participation and keep them entertained. For example, the Beijing UME Cineplex incorporates a bar, bookstore and gaming area to attract moviegoers to linger and to encourage loyalty ([Figures 3 and 4](#)). Some neighborhood multiplexes in residential areas are also built as 'open-minded' spaces, providing moviegoers with multiple entertainment activities. For instance, the Hong Kong-based Broadway Circuit opened art-house theaters called Broadway Cinematheque in Hong Kong and Beijing in residential districts. These two multiplexes also include a bookstore, cafe and DVD store ([Figure 5](#)). Similarly, in 2007, Beijing-based real estate developer Antaeus Group promoted the concept of the so-called '1+X mode of cinema', with '1' meaning a cinema and 'X' meaning stores attached to the cinema and leisure activities being set up within the cinema ([Figures 6 –8](#)). What this type of cinema promotes is a '1 + X film lifestyle' that provides young people a comfortable place for film watching, dating and hanging out ([Zhang 2006](#)). This real estate



Figure 3. A gaming area inside the Beijing UME (photographed by the author, 2013).



Figure 4. A book club inside the Beijing UME (photographed by the author, 2013).

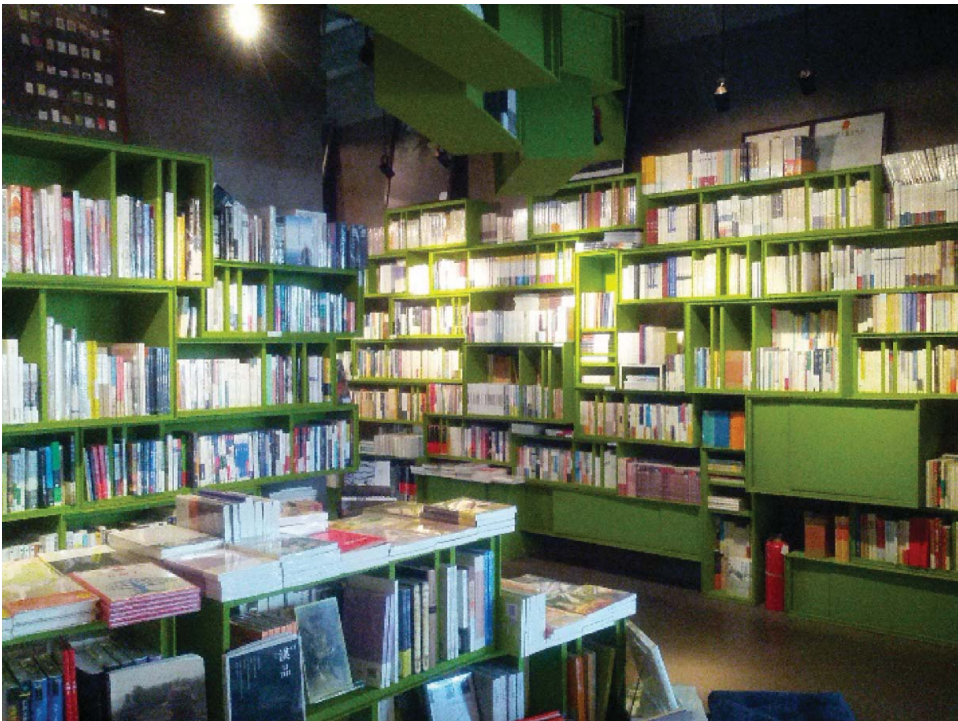


Figure 5. A book store inside the Beijing Broadway Cinematheque (photographed by the author, 2013).



Figure 6. Beijing Today 17.5 Cinema in a residential area (photographed by the author, 2013).



Figure 7. A DVD store inside the Beijing Today 17.5 Cinema (photographed by the author, 2013).



Figure 8. A gaming area inside the Beijing Today 17.5 Cinema (photographed by the author, 2013).

developer opened its first ‘1+ cinema’ on the fourth floor of Shanghai’s Bailian Zhonghuan Commerce Plaza. Later, the Antaeus Group built more ‘1+ cinemas’ in Beijing, Shanghai, Changchun, Chengdu and Tibet (Li 2007). All of these cinemas include a coffee shop, bookstore and DVD stores, as well as added services such as movies on demand and simulation video games; these entertainment perks and concierge services allow them to offer moviegoers more entertainment activities than regular multiplexes, ideally converting them into loyal patrons.

The above-mentioned examples demonstrate that the constructed environments in the multiplex cinemas have become multi-functionalized and commoditized. The multiplex and its ‘open-mindedness’ have effectively retained audiences longer than old cinemas and reinvigorated Chinese people’s interest in movie-going as a major entertainment activity. On a par with international standards, most multiplexes in China are outfitted with comfortable seating, three-dimensional (3D) screens, digital sound systems, sufficient lighting and popcorn imported from the United States. As a staff member working in a multiplex cinema in Shengzhou city pointed out in an interview, ‘A lot of our customers were in their 50s or older and have not seen a movie on a big screen in 10 or 20 years. They realized things have changed a lot’ (Pierson 2011). These enhanced viewing conditions in the multiplexes have encouraged and effectively compelled Chinese customers to leave their homes and go to the movies.

The commodification and ‘open-mindedness’ of cinema-going space in the multiplex reinforce cinema as a ‘heterotopia’, a term coined by Michael Foucault in his 1967 work

Other Spaces (Des espaces autres). According to Foucault (1967/2008), heterotopia is ‘a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found with the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted’ (17). In these non-hegemonic conditions, spaces become compensational heterotopia, physically and mentally (21). For Foucault, utopias are sites with no real place, whereas heterotopias are real places in our society (17). Foucault designated the mirror as a perfect example of a ‘mixed, joint experience’: a utopia and, at the same time, a heterotopia, where a sort of ‘counteraction’ on the world that we are, is exerted (17). Like a mirror, the multiplex is heterotopic, a real place, but one that also leads us into the utopian world, a ‘placeless place’, in which moving images provide a space of the illusion of everyday life disrupted from the time and place of our real world. With regard to the relation between heterotopia and power, Peter Johnson (2006) has suggested, ‘Although Foucault describes heterotopia as “actually existing utopia,” the conception is not tied to a space that promotes any promise, any hope or any primary form of resistance or liberation’ (84). The multiplex as heterotopia not only offers utopian moments – and thus discontinuation of our real spatial and temporal positions – but also eventually disrupts that utopia when we step out of the movie theater. However, the utopian moments in the multiplex offer limited freedom and are under the cinema’s control (Figures 9 and 10). As Acland (2003) puts it:



Figure 9. A board of auditorium rules inside the Kunming Broadway Cinema (photographed by the author, 2013).



Figure 10. Signs of auditorium rules inside the Beijing Wanda Cinema (photographed by the author, 2013).

The cinematic sphere, contrarily, it would appear, offers the opportunity to glimpse the orderly and servile nature of a population. The policing of ushers, the presence of security cameras, the regiment of scheduling, and the overt appeals to decorum in film trailers (feet off the seat in front, no talking, no cell phone, and pagers off, etc.) are indices of the intense interest in encouraging civility and reducing the prospects for impromptu interventions (and economically unproductive) interventions. (231)

Similarly, Ravenscroft et al. (2001) commented on the Singapore Cineplex, in which ‘cinema assumes the role of heterotopia, offering simultaneously a site of freedom, but one that is bounded by, and subservient to, the overarching structure of society’ (229). They go on to suggest:

Such sites are, thus, an integral element in exercising coercion upon the body, as a calculated manipulation of its elements, gestures and behavior. In encouraging people to use such spaces, Foucault thus shows how they are effectively drawn into the disciplinary “web.” (225)

In other words, the space of the cinema is not a site that allows one to enact Bakhtin’s utopian version of ‘carnavalesque’ – a behavioral paradigm that opposes official order and ideology. Rather, the multiplex functions more like a ‘utopian Panopticon’ (Johnson 2006, 84), where moviegoers may enjoy a utopian relaxation while agreeing to be disciplined within the space.

Both shopping mall and the multiplex exhibit Foucault’s third principle of the heterotopia, which is the capability of ‘juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible’ (Foucault 1967, 19). The commodification of

the modern multiplex exhibits these characteristics in an even more obvious way. Both the multiplex and the shopping mall are real places, and juxtapose different spaces and different sites. Both sites also exhibit the relational aspect of heterotopic sites, as Johnson (2006) has suggested:

For Foucault, the heterotopian site par excellence provides a passage to and through other heterotopias: brothels, colonies, gardens and so on. Foucault seems to be suggesting a relational aspect of these spaces; they form relationships both within the site and between sites. (80)

It is the heterotopian nature of the multiplex and the shopping mall that make them welcome and favorable urban projects in which the state can develop new public spaces and regulate people's public lives and behavior – as compared to other public spaces, such as squares, streets and parks, which still bear a potential threat due to their greater capacity for unpredictable and spontaneous behavior. Although this 'loss of true public space' in the shopping mall has become an international phenomenon and part of an ongoing debate (Gaubatz 2008, 78), it no doubt caters to the state's needs for new forms of public space and control in the post-socialist era. The governance techniques the state now uses to develop new public spaces and promote leisure culture are commodification and consumerism. Wang (2001) has examined the rise of government-constructed discourse on leisure culture and consumerism in the mid-1990s in urban China, arguing that the promotion of leisure culture and consumerism is a well-calculated state policy, through which the state took over the discursive power from Chinese elites to use it selectively for its own ends (72). By analyzing leisure culture campaigns in Beijing in the mid-1990s, Wang (2001) noted, 'The party-state attempted to appropriate leisure culture officially into its ideological agenda and to give a facelift to the party's age-old discourse of socialist spiritual civilization' (78). According to Wang (2001), the state's major policies of materializing leisure culture and consumption 'were implemented to level consumption capacities, to increase the incentives of industries to invest, and to whet the appetite of the public to spend' (75). The shopping mall and the multiplex can be understood as integral to the state's continuous effort toward 'building the material base of mass consumption' (Wang 2001, 76).

Some scholars have argued that the state's consumption strategy works as 'a social palliative, enabling the Party to retain control despite the ideological void left after the demise of Maoism' (as quoted in Latham 2002, 217). However, Kevin Latham addresses a counter-argument and contends that even though the notion of consumption as a social palliative has some force, 'it fails to provide an adequate explanation of Party legitimacy in the post-Mao period' (Latham 2002, 229). He goes on to assert that it is the notion of transition in the local rhetoric plays an important role in maintaining the CCP's hegemonic legitimacy and power (Latham 2002, 230). He warns of the negative effects of consumption brought about by the CCP, particularly using the increasing growth of global media consumption in China as an example to demonstrate that it actually threatens the government's 'mouthpiece' model of media production. However, Latham did not see the CCP's changes in governance strategies and commodification of Chinese culture. For example, film as a cog in the propaganda machine was redefined as a culture industry and tool of soft power in the early 2000s. Moreover, consumption has been legitimized as the nation's growth strategy as China entered the twenty-first century. In December 2004, the Chinese government announced its intention to transition away from growth driven by

investment and a global trade surplus, toward growth more dependent on domestic consumption (Lardy 2006). This consumption model has been incorporated into the ‘rhetorics of transition’.

In sum, the development of the multiplex is part of the state’s efforts to materialize mass consumption. For the state, modernized movie theaters not only serve as an image of Chinese modernity, but may also convey a positive signal to the world as Fishman (2002) observes:

A democratic polity needs what the philosopher Michael Walzer has called “open-minded spaces,” places where a wide variety of people can coexist, places where a wide variety of functions encourage unexpected activities, places whose multiple possibilities lead naturally to the communication that makes democracy possible. (9)

Conclusion

The year 2002 can be marked as the most important year for the Chinese film industry, which had been in a severe economic downturn for over 10 years. It was in 2002, at the 16th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, that the state redefined the film industry as a profit-making cultural industry (Liu 2010). Film — once the most important propaganda apparatus of the CCP — was re-envisioned by the government as an instrument of the nation’s soft power, and an important engine of the cultural economy. Since then, the film industry has undergone a period of rapid growth.

The government’s conceptual changes in film authorized and accelerated the industry transformation from a socialist propaganda machine to a profit-seeking entity, much like the Frankfurt model of the cultural industry, which is characterized by mass consumption and standardized commercial film production (Adorno and Horkheimer 1993). This deeper level of commercialization of the film industry can also be read as the state’s proactive measure to respond to globalization, and the possible consequences of the ‘loss of culture’ (Tomlinson 1991). Faced with Hollywood’s cultural threat, the Chinese state hopes to build a stronger film industry through a self-redemptive reform project, and to retain its hegemony through the re-imagination of culture. Having recognized the power of popular culture — and aspiring to become a strong competitor with Hollywood, and to create a national image through global cultural exports — the state selected the movie exhibition sector as a vanguard to keep up with international standard film practices, and to modernize the cinema-going space for film consumption, thereby accelerating the commercialization of the film industry.

The state-authorized development of the new format of film consumption sites has satisfied the state’s multiple needs as an authoritarian but responsible government. The multiplex’s unique characteristic of blurring the distinction between private and public spaces has become an ideal venue in which the government may regulate public behavior and promote consumerism. As Broudehoux (2004) has observed:

The centrality of consumption to the contemporary urban experience has resulted in the neglect of other aspects of city life in urban governance, including the role of the city as a home, a place for self — and collective — representation, and a public sphere where local politics are debated. Concerned with the creation of a ‘favorable business climate’ and pressured to maintain a positive image to attract economic development, many urban governments have adopted a host of new measures for the control and regulation of human behavior. (5)

The multiplex and shopping malls as significant parts of the national urban development project in the aestheticization of China's urban landscape not only facilitate to sell an image of Chinese modernity, but also have become a new measure to control and regulate human behavior. Meanwhile, the modernization of cinema-going space in the mall multiplex has also functioned as a demonstration of the state's effective response to the Chinese people's expectation to gain access to new forms of consumption and leisure, as well as the local film industry's call for a deeper commercialization.

China's consumerism arrived later than its Western counterparts. Its unique path to modernity and a consumer society, as well as the state's existing political economic framework, made the government determined to take advantage of the 'rhetoric of affluence' to serve its hegemony. The multiplex as a modern space for film consumption became legitimized in urban China, and worked as a tactic in attempting regulatory control over the citizen, globalization and modernity. During this process, Chinese consumers have become 'complicit participants' in the worldwide spread of modern consumerism, and along with the state and the film industry, have together creating a stronger, fast-running machine of film business within the cultural economy.

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