



# The Urban Spatial Narratives in Chinese Cinema: Regional Characteristics and Social Transformation in Chongqing

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**Abstract:** In recent years, Chinese cinema has shown a trend of diversification and genre integration. This paper explores the spatial narratives of Chongqing and Northeast China in Chinese films, examining their roles in reflecting regional characteristics and social transformations. The study finds that Chongqing, with its unique terrain and urban structure, frequently serves as a backdrop for suspense and crime films, while Northeast China, characterized by its industrial history and cultural humor, presents a complex dual image. These spatial narratives enrich the artistic content of Chinese cinema and deepen the audience's understanding of regional culture and societal changes. By integrating urban geography, sociology, and film theories, this paper provides a systematic analysis of the narrative functions of these regions, offering new perspectives on the localization and global influence of Chinese cinema.

**Keywords:** Chinese cinema, spatial narratives, Chongqing, Northeast China, social transformation, regional culture, genre films

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, Chinese cinema has exhibited a trend toward diversification and genre hybridity. Grounded in realism, filmmakers strive to integrate genre elements with Chinese cultural and social contexts, making genre films more locally rooted and imbued with distinct Chinese characteristics and sensibilities. Against the backdrop of this realism-based and diverse exploration, filmmakers have increasingly sought out regions with unique features to serve as narrative spaces on screen.

Urbanization has been the most prominent societal transformation in China over the past few decades. As a result, many filmmakers have chosen to focus their lenses on cities, exploring cinematic language and uncovering the historical and social significance inherent in urban spaces. These spaces are no longer merely backdrops for storytelling but are actively integrated into cinematic narratives. Among the most frequently represented regions in contemporary Chinese cinema are Chongqing and Northeast China. Over time, through the persistent shaping of cinematic language, these regions have come to evoke specific and somewhat fixed public imaginations.

## 2. Introduction

### 2.1 Literature Review

The relationship between urban space and film narratives has been widely explored. Scholars generally agree that urban space is not merely a backdrop for cinematic narratives but a core element of storytelling. In the context of Chinese cinema, existing studies emphasize how urban space reflects social changes and cultural identities. Chongqing and Northeast China, regions with distinct geographical and cultural characteristics, serve as compelling examples. Their cinematic representations not only highlight regional features but also reflect the diversity and complexity of Chinese society.

Regarding the portrayal of regional characteristics in films, Chen (2018) analyzed the regional aesthetics of Chinese Western films, discussing how local features influence cinematic style and narratives. Similarly, Zhang (2020) examined the depiction of Northeast China in cinema, exploring its connection to the region's industrial history and social realities. In the context of societal transformation, Wang (2019) investigated the role of urban space in film narratives during China's urbanization process, particularly how these spaces bear witness to social changes. From a global perspective, Kim (2021) analyzed the multifaceted meanings of urban space in films, considering economic, political, and cultural dimensions.

Specific to the cinematic portrayal of Chongqing and Northeast China, Li (2022) explored how Chongqing's urban space is utilized to construct suspense and crime narratives, while Sun (2023) examined the dual image of Northeast China in films—industrial decline and cultural humor—and how these representations reflect the region's social realities.

These studies provide valuable insights into the role of urban space in cinematic narratives but also reveal a significant

academic gap: the lack of systematic analysis of the specific roles and impacts of regions like Chongqing and Northeast China in film storytelling. While Li (2022) and Sun (2023) contribute to understanding the influence of specific locales on cinematic narratives, their research lacks a comprehensive framework to analyze the representation of these regions and their interaction with social transformations in a more systematic manner.

## 2.2 Theoretical Framework

This study adopts the following theoretical frameworks to analyze the spatial narratives of Chongqing and Northeast China in Chinese cinema:

**Urban Geography Theory:** Urban geography provides a perspective to analyze how urban spaces influence social structures and cultural expressions. Soja's (1996) theory of "Thirdspace" emphasizes that urban space is not merely a physical entity but an intersection of social relationships and cultural meanings. This study applies Soja's framework to explore how the urban spaces of Chongqing and Northeast China are imbued with specific social and cultural significance in Chinese films.

**Sociological Theory:** Sociological theories, particularly those addressing urbanization and social change, offer analytical tools for this research. Harvey's (1989) theory of "Postmodern Urbanization" and Castells' (1983) work on "Urban Space and Social Structure" are utilized to examine how the urbanization processes of Chongqing and Northeast China influence cinematic narratives.

**Film Theory:** Film theories, especially those on narrative structures and visual styles, provide methodologies for analyzing film texts. Bordwell's (1985) narrative analysis theory and Metz's (1974) film semiotics theory are applied to study the narrative construction and visual representation of Chongqing and Northeast China in films.

**Cultural Studies Theory:** Cultural studies theories, particularly those addressing cultural identity and regional characteristics, frame this study's analysis of cultural expressions in films. Hall's (1990) theory of "Cultural Identity" and Williams' (1977) framework of "Culture and Society" are employed to examine how the cultural images of Chongqing and Northeast China in films interact with audience cultural identities and expectations.

By integrating these theoretical perspectives, this study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the spatial narratives of Chongqing and Northeast China in Chinese cinema and their broader sociocultural implications.

## 3. Spatial Ontology Narratives: The Three-Dimensionality of Chongqing and the Bleakness of Northeast China

As China's urbanization accelerates, the proliferation of uniform concrete structures has often overshadowed the unique regional characteristics and vibrant local atmospheres of many cities (Liu, 2015). Films, however, favor dynamic and distinctive urban styles. Therefore, identifying cities with unique and narrative-rich spaces is crucial for cinematic expression. Due to a combination of historical, geographical, and political factors, both Chongqing and Northeast China offer distinctive urban landscapes that align well with cinematic storytelling needs.

### 3.1 The Three-Dimensionality of Chongqing

Geographically, Chongqing is characterized by its rugged terrain and undulating mountains, earning it the nickname "Mountain City." This unique topography has given rise to a cityscape with significant elevation differences, resulting in a spatial environment rich in layers and depth, often referred to as an "8D magical city". Films shot in Chongqing frequently focus on its distinctive urban features: light rail trains traversing through buildings, extensive cross-river cableways, long staircases, and densely packed structures. These elements not only provide plausible settings for narratives but also effectively convey the protagonists' emotions. Chongqing's perpetually misty weather, which has earned it the moniker "Fog City," adds an aura of mystery, while the city's colorful lights enhance its enigmatic ambiance. Whether in art films, crime thrillers, or cyberpunk genres, Chongqing offers suitable spaces for diverse cinematic expressions.

In the film *Better Days*, locations such as Kui Xing Tower, the Crown Escalator, and Tongyuanju Metro Station feature labyrinthine, overlapping architectures that vividly express the protagonists' melancholic emotions. Conversely, the clean and serene Zhongshan Fourth Road reflects the brightness experienced by Xiao Bei and Chen Nian after their hardships. In *A Writer's Odyssey*, Chongqing serves as the prototype for an alternate world, with its unique urban landscape inspiring the creation of a fantastical palace mountain imbued with Chinese characteristics.

### 3.2 The Bleakness of Northeast China

Geographically, Northeast China is known for its cold climate, vast frozen expanses, exotic influences, boundless wilderness, and pervasive chill—elements that leave a profound impression. Films set in this region often depict winter scenes; even when the narrative is not centered on winter, snowy nightscapes are frequently featured. The desolate and bleak

atmosphere created by heavy snowfall makes Northeast China a favored location for suspense films. *Black Coal, Thin Ice* exemplifies this, utilizing the region's old "rust belt" and ruins to craft a unique approach to the suspense genre.

Historically, Northeast China was a significant industrial base, characterized by steel factories, winter snowscapes, Russian and Japanese architecture, and heavy industrial cities. These distinctive elements have increasingly become integral to artistic works. In the film *The Piano in a Factory*, dilapidated factory ruins and the desolate urban landscape are portrayed, symbolizing the region's identity.

It is noteworthy that portrayals of both Chongqing and Northeast China, regardless of film genre, present cities with a tangible sense of life. These depictions do not deliberately pursue beauty but instead offer a documentary-style realism.

## **4. The Social Narratives of Space: The Contrasting Chongqing and Industrial Northeast China**

British poet William Cowper once said, "God made the country, and man made the town." Cities, as symbols of industrial civilization, represent the culmination of human achievement. However, the development of cities is not an instantaneous process but one marked by the constant interplay between the old and the new, as they encroach upon and reshape each other's spaces. This characteristic is particularly evident in cities undergoing rapid transformation, providing a foundation for complex social narratives.

### **4.1 The Contrasting Chongqing**

Since its establishment as a municipality in 1997, Chongqing has experienced rapid economic growth, with the interplay between the old and new becoming a defining feature of the city. It boasts modern skyscrapers and futuristic buildings alongside remnants of its industrial past, such as old factories, residential neighborhoods, and historic structures. Due to its rugged topography, Chongqing's architecture does not exist on a flat plane but rather in a vertical configuration, where the juxtaposition of the old and new naturally forms metaphors for class and social structures.

This unique spatial layout is often used in films to depict social conflict and inequality. For instance, in Jia Zhangke's "Still Life", the juxtaposition of dilapidated urban ruins with the glimmering grandeur of distant bridges vividly illustrates the themes of urban renewal and societal transformation. Furthermore, Chongqing's distinctive landscape and architectural style have become a rich source of visual elements for crime and suspense films. In "Vortex", the densely layered streets and buildings of the mountain city heighten the tension and suspense within the narrative.

### **4.2 The Industrial Northeast**

Unlike Chongqing, which stands out as a singular city, the Northeast often appears in films as a collective regional image. During the planned economy era, the Northeast served as China's industrial base and was known as the "Eldest Son of the Republic." Large factories were the defining feature of this period, forming micro-societies that included not only workplaces but also schools, hospitals, cinemas, and residential areas. Workers held a prestigious status, and the collective spirit became a symbol of the region.

However, the economic reforms of the post-1978 era led to significant changes, including massive layoffs that deeply impacted the Northeast. Once-proud workers became unemployed, the "iron rice bowl" was broken, and the region's economy declined. This shift brought disillusionment and instability, which became recurring themes in cinematic depictions of the Northeast. For instance, "The Piano in a Factory" tells the story of a laid-off worker who builds a piano for his daughter, showcasing the resilience and struggles of the working class during this period of transformation. Similarly, *A Long Shot* offers a compelling depiction of the disarray in factory management during a specific historical period, meticulously examining the entanglement of individual interests, interpersonal conflicts, and moments of human warmth. Through these layered narratives, the film provides a more comprehensive exploration of the sociocultural context of the time.

### **4.3 Shared Characteristics**

Despite their distinctive identities, both Chongqing and the Northeast share similarities in their depictions of daily life that resonate with audiences. These films, regardless of genre, emphasize detailed portrayals of everyday life, striking a balance between maintaining a certain distance from the audience while remaining relatable. This combination allows the films to convey realism and emotional depth without alienating their viewers.

## **5. Cultural Narratives of Space: The Mysterious Chongqing and the Polarized Northeast**

Through years of cinematic storytelling, Chongqing and Northeast China have gradually transcended their original

urban contexts to become symbolic visual landscapes, where the authentic cityscape is increasingly blurred.

### **5.1 The Mysterious Chongqing**

Thanks to its unique urban landscape, Chongqing is often portrayed as the birthplace of complex or fantastical narratives, gradually transforming into a setting imbued with an exotic and mysterious allure. In “A Writer’s Odyssey”, the real world prominently features Chongqing’s urban topography, subtly constructing the city as a mysterious locale. The fictional world’s depiction of the Red-Haired Ghost’s Palace Mountain, inspired by Chongqing’s distinct geological features, exemplifies its layered and undulating terrain. Towering above the masses, the Palace Mountain mirrors Chongqing’s juxtaposition of old and new, as well as its striking spatial contrasts. This blending of a fantastical world with reality amplifies Chongqing’s exotic mystique.

In “Better Days”, the city’s presence is intentionally downplayed, as the film refrains from explicitly naming its setting. Instead, it highlights the architectural labyrinth and melancholic atmosphere, using these spatial characteristics as a narrative tool. Here, the metaphorical significance of space outweighs its physical identity, making the city a vessel for thematic expression rather than a defined locale.

### **5.2 The Polarized Northeast**

The cinematic representation of Northeast China oscillates between two contrasting images — tragic and humorous, or often a mixture of both. The working class often assumes the role of a tragic figure, serving as the primary focus of industrial-themed films. In “The Piano in a Factory”, laid-off worker Chen Guilin rallies his friends to build a piano for his daughter in a desperate attempt to secure custody. Despite knowing the likely futility of his efforts, he persists as an act of defiance. Similarly, “A Long Shot” offers a nuanced portrayal of Gu Xuebing, a former shooting champion forced into early retirement due to injury, who transitions to the role of a factory security guard. Set against the backdrop of a tumultuous era, the narrative delves into his steadfast adherence to personal principles despite relentless adversity. The film compellingly underscores the futility and inefficacy of individual resilience in the face of the era’s deterministic forces. While “Black Coal, Thin Ice” does not explicitly identify a specific city or era in the Northeast, its imagery—ice skating, snow, railroads, and the stark, desolate atmosphere—unmistakably evokes the region.

In contrast, the Northeast is also portrayed in comedic sketches, stand-up comedy, and short videos as a land of resilience and humor. This version of the Northeast, grounded in rural simplicity and local charm, often depicts individuals who embrace life’s challenges with wit and a touch of self-deprecating humor. This portrayal caters to the market economy’s demand for a more fixed and stereotypical image of the Northeast. Whether through tragedy or farce, these portrayals continue to blur the region’s modern identity.

### **5.3 The Integration of Space and Narrative**

A noteworthy example of the seamless integration of urban life and narrative is “B for Busy” (Love Myth), released in late 2021. The film tells a love story set among adults in Shanghai, skillfully weaving urban life into the storyline. Unlike many domestic films that often feel disconnected from their urban settings, “B for Busy” grounds its narrative in the city’s reality, exuding a palpable sense of life and authenticity. The story convincingly belongs to Shanghai, a city uniquely characterized by its middle-class sensibilities, cultural sophistication, and romantic charm. This exemplifies a successful alignment of film, city, and reality, marking another milestone in cinematic spatial storytelling.

Director Sha Yihui’s latest work, “Herstory”, builds upon the stylistic foundation laid in “Myth of Love”, marked by its sharp, rapid-fire dialogue, a refreshing female perspective, and a richly textured depiction of Shanghai life. Expanding on the cinematic scope of its predecessor, “Herstory” presents a more comprehensive exploration of Shanghai’s charm, extending beyond iconic landmarks to include a myriad of “non-iconic” locations, such as neighborhood shops and ordinary streets. These authentic settings not only enrich the narrative but also inspire a wave of offline engagement, encouraging audiences to connect with and embrace the essence of Shanghai in their own experiences.

### **5.4 Reflection on the Future of Spatial Narratives**

The distinct on-screen representations of urban landscapes have become an essential component of film aesthetics. Beyond the frequently depicted cities like Chongqing and Northeast China, what other urban spaces might participate in cinematic spatial narratives? For cities already well-represented, what further explorations can be undertaken?

Chinese cinema’s conscious effort to intertwine its narratives with real-world spaces reflects an evolving sense of responsibility. Filmmakers are no longer merely crafting escapist dreams but are increasingly aligning genre stories with the realities of contemporary China. This grounded approach not only enhances authenticity but also contributes to shaping a uniquely Chinese cinematic aesthetic. Over time, such efforts are poised to establish a distinctive cinematic language, one

deeply rooted in Chinese cultural and spatial consciousness.

## 6. Conclusion

This study provides a detailed analysis of the spatial narratives of Chongqing and Northeast China in Chinese cinema, revealing how these regions uniquely reflect their geographical characteristics and social transformations through cinematic storytelling. Chongqing, with its distinctive urban layout and geographical features, is often depicted as a place imbued with mystery and exoticism. In contrast, Northeast China, drawing on its rich industrial history and cultural background, presents a complex duality of tragedy and humor. These narratives not only enrich the artistic content of Chinese cinema but also offer audiences a deeper perspective on regional culture and social changes.

In the narrative structures of Chinese cinema, the spatial representations of Chongqing and Northeast China highlight not only their natural and geographical features but also the profound impact of social transformations on these regions. Chongqing's intricate urban design and Northeast China's industrial ruins serve as key narrative elements, providing both visual impact and historical context. In Chongqing, urban spaces are frequently used to construct suspense and crime narratives, while the industrial decline and cultural humor of Northeast China serve as mediums to explore social issues and cultural identity. These regional spatial narratives have significantly contributed to the evolution of Chinese cinematic art. The magical realism of Chongqing and the industrial ruin aesthetics of Northeast China offer unique visual styles and narrative techniques that enhance the artistic appeal of Chinese cinema while increasing its recognition and influence on the global stage.

Furthermore, the spatial narratives of Chongqing and Northeast China in film have positively influenced cultural identity. As a vital medium for cultural dissemination, cinema showcases the everyday lives and social challenges of these regions, fostering audience identification with their culture and history. This identification extends beyond a regional context, encouraging a broader understanding of China's diverse culture and complex social structure.

As Chinese cinema continues to develop, the spatial narratives of regions like Chongqing and Northeast China are expected to grow richer and more nuanced. Future research could explore new representations of these regions in film and how they interact with global cinematic trends. Additionally, it is important to examine how these narratives shape younger generations' perceptions of Chinese traditional culture and modern transformations, as well as how they contribute to shaping China's image on the global cultural stage.

The spatial narratives of Chongqing and Northeast China in Chinese cinema not only highlight regional characteristics and social transformations but also have a profound impact on Chinese cinematic art and cultural identity. In-depth exploration of these narratives will not only deepen our understanding of the diversity and complexity of Chinese cinema but also provide valuable perspectives and case studies for global film studies.

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