

## BOOK REVIEW

Chenshu Zhou,

*Cinema Off Screen: Moviegoing in Socialist China*  
(Oakland: University of California Press, 2021)

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If we cease to perceive cinema as an audiovisual aesthetic exhibited in the enclosed space of the movie theatre, in what other ways can we conceptualize cinema and the cinematic experience? Moreover, once we shift our attention away from specific filmic texts and turn to extra-filmic elements, what kind of knowledge or theory about cinema can be generated?

These methodological and ontological questions are what *Cinema Off Screen: Moviegoing in Socialist China* invites us to consider. Joining scholarly inquiries in new cinema history that aim to reconceptualize the institution of cinema, Chenshu Zhou presents a compelling account of the heterogeneous practices and embodied experiences of film exhibition in socialist China. The case study of China, as Zhou posits, will contribute to a new theory of cinema, which challenges the hegemonic “theatrical model” that has largely defined the ontology of cinema. The theatrical model, or what Zhou names as the “theater bias in film studies,” understands the institution of cinema through the praxis of the commercial film industry and privileges the standardized, concentrated mode of viewing fostered by the space of the movie theater. In contradistinction to the theatrical model, Chinese socialist film exhibition, with its physical mobility, spatial openness, and sensory abundance, urges us to rethink what cinema is and what kind of bodily experience, in addition to the visual, the cinematic apparatus can engender.

Rather than treat Chinese socialist film exhibition as an alternative to the dominant, theater-based paradigm, which would inevitably reinforce the binary of the universal and the particular, Zhou aptly cites examples of non-theatrical practices from early cinema and world cinema throughout the book to

position Chinese socialist film exhibition within a transnational and transhistorical framework. The discovery of cross-cultural parallels and structural resemblance illuminates shared historical, technological, and material conditions between film practices in otherwise disconnected time and space. Moreover, such a comparative reading effectively reveals what appears to be the universal model of cinema is but one particular historical configuration of it.

To readers interested in Maoist China, *Cinema Off Screen* incisively reveals the materiality, intermediality, and corporeality of Chinese socialist cultural production. As Zhou helpfully points out, socialist cinema, and by extension, Chinese socialist culture, should be understood at once as “a media culture, a technological culture, a popular culture, and a communal culture” (14). Therefore, the book not only presents an excellent discursive analysis of a wide variety of political narratives of socialist cinema—the Maoist instruction of serving the people, the ideological interpellation of socialist new person, and the revolutionary plotline of struggle, but also highlights non-discursive constituents of the cinematic apparatus, from media technologies of exhibition to immersive experiences of moviegoing. The assemblage of these two categories of knowledge attests to the entwinement between the ideological and the material, the technological and the experiential, and acknowledges the situatedness of socialist film exhibition within political agendas, social relations, and everyday life.

The past two decades has witnessed burgeoning scholarship that rethinks Chinese socialist cinema beyond the single lens of the political institution of arts. These works, combining close analysis of film texts and historical investigation of the ecology of

cultural production, reveal the aesthetic and ideological complexity of Maoist film culture. In a similar vein, *Cinema Off Screen* sets to challenge the prevalent perception of socialist film exhibition as a form of state-sanctioned propaganda. Conceptualizing *xuanchuan* (each of the characters literally means “to announce” and “to transmit”) as processes of mediation, Zhou highlights indigenous appropriation and heterogeneous reception among different agents in the establishment of a nationwide network of film exhibition. For instance, her discovery of the diverse responses of moviegoers, ranging from atmospheric spectatorship to tactile engagement, testifies the inadequacy of understanding the reception of socialist cinema through the Manichean view of either conformity to or resistance against a given propagandistic scheme. Such excavation of the multiple exhibition strategies and spectatorial positions resonates with, among this cluster of scholarship, Jie Li (2020)’s theorization of the “guerilla tactics” in film exhibition and reception, Tina Mai Chen (2003)’s and Xiaoning Lu (2020)’s discussions of socialist subject formation through moviegoing, and Barbara Mittler (2012)’s observation of the dialectic between the political and the popular.

Another subject that *Cinema Off Screen* engages with is that of exhibition, which has been recently taken up by scholars in PRC cultural studies to examine the materiality of Maoist political culture. Denise Ho, in *Curating Revolution: Politics on Display in Mao’s China* (2018), contends that the culture of exhibition—the display of objects, the transformation of spaces, and the acts of curation—provided much political legitimacy to the socialist state. Exhibition involves “display with arrangement, and narration with propagandizing” (Ho, 21), which ultimately served the pedagogical purpose of ideological transformation. Kirk Denton (2013) and Jie Li (2020) both turn to the exhibitionary space of museums—including the actual and the imaginative, in which the state and individual actors inscribed, transmitted, and remediated a plethora of historical memories through tangible materials. Read together, these scholarly works bring to light the material construction of exhibitionary space as well as various cultural techniques of exhibiting historical objects that sought to cultivate communal memory and political identity.

A critical difference between Zhou’s conceptualization of exhibition and the aforementioned studies lies in that, in addition to deciphering the message a given exhibitionary practice intended to transmit, she further observes, in a McLuhanian manner, that the medium of exhibition is a message by itself. In this light, Zhou introduces the concept of interface to designate how film exhibition, being a conglomeration of plural surfaces and mediums, fosters a wide variety of interaction and communication—for instance, the intermedial transaction between cinema and folk performance, the atmospheric immersion of the body into the environment, and the haptic play of the hand with the screen. The theorization of film exhibition as an interfacing apparatus that crosses multiple medium boundaries, therefore, allows the author to situate her inquiry of socialist cinema within the broader field of media history and recognize processes of intermediation and bodily entanglement of the cinematic apparatus. The media-centered approach not only acknowledges cinema’s multiple off-screen interfaces that can “generate divergent or conflicting meanings, pleasures, and experiences” (133), but highlights the mediating roles of human bodies, media technologies, and the environment that collectively contribute to the dynamic media ecology of cinema.

*Cinema Off Screen* is built on extensive archival research and oral history interviews. Materials such as county gazetteers and testimonies from moviegoers who spent significant time in the country help to narrate the much-overlooked history of the cinematic apparatus and experience in rural China. The infrastructural underdevelopment and material scarcity in those locales demanded a different mode of film exhibition than that of the urban, theater-based mode of screening. Mobile projection teams were formed and open-air cinema was set up, the process of which laid bare the physical apparatus of cinema consisting of the objects of projectors, power generators, and film reels as well as the laboring bodies of film projectionists. In her narrative about rural exhibition arrangements, the author discovers practices of *tu*-cinema, a locally made, relatively immobile slideshow projection that broadcasted communal news to peasant audiences. Despite its technological backwardness, this improvisational medium won tremendous popularity and

marginalized the screening of films. Zhou's investigation of rural film exhibition, on the one hand, reveals the tension and competition between different mediums in creating a socialist mass culture, and on the other, unsettles a linear, technology-determined historiography that ranks media by technological advance.

Zhou deploys the concept of the cinematic experience, that is, the situated, embodied, and affective encounter with cinema, to describe the heterogeneous reception of film exhibition among moviegoers. The laboriously conducted oral history accounts as well as collection of memories from published sources allow the author to move beyond an analysis of film policies or exhibition manuals, which could only describe the intended, ideal spectatorship. Instead, these personal recollections provide rich experiential textures that supplement, deviate, or even contradict what Tina Mai Chen terms as the "mimetic model of spectatorship," which emphasizes the transformative potential of filmic characters on off-screen viewers. Memories of socialist moviegoers are often about anecdotes and rituals associated with the activity of film exhibition, and are abundant with details about the feelings and bodily interactions with the built environment, the communal space, and the material apparatus of the screen. The diversity of these cinematic experiences encapsulates multisensory encounters with cinema, or cinema's potential to reconfigure the spectator's sensorium, thereby displacing the hegemony of vision.

*Cinema Off Screen* consists of six chapters evenly divided into two parts. Each chapter narrates a particular interface or interfacing effect of socialist film exhibition. Part I addresses cultural techniques and media technologies deployed in socialist film exhibition to mobilize the audience, and Part II is devoted to a study of the audience's multisensory interactions with the cinematic apparatus.

Chapter One focuses on the transformation of the space of film exhibition. With the founding of the PRC, both the socialist state and cultural workers became aware of the importance of creating new exhibition space of cinema that could interpellate the audience and disseminate socialist messages. As a result, not only did the space of urban movie theaters

undergo significant transformation to shake off its association with bourgeois luxury, but there emerged new sites of moviegoing that effectively boosted film attendance across the country: nontheatrical venues of workers' cultural palaces and workers' clubs and practices of mobile film projection in suburban and rural China. The spatial transformation of film exhibition is indicative of the commitment of the socialist state to bring culture to the masses and synthesize political education and mass recreation.

Chapter Two turns to film projectionists and their laboring bodies. While projectionists have their bodies hidden in much of film history, they were made visible, public, and oftentimes role models in socialist China to embody ideals of hard work, endurance, and service to the people. In a country with underdeveloped infrastructure, mobile projection teams had to rely on their physical labor to reach remote regions and bring films to the rural population. Facing challenges of infrastructural lack and material shortage, film projectionists had to perform a series of techniques of the body—in particular, physical endurance of and bodily adaptation to adversary environments—to deliver films to audiences in rural and remote areas. In this way, they contributed to the establishment of a nationwide film network, and they were also celebrated as model laborers that exemplified socialist new subjecthood.

Chapter Three examines the multimedia practices deployed during film screenings. In a typical film exhibition session, in addition to the showing of the film, film projectionists introduced a variety of activities and media forms, including slide projection, lecturing, and folk performance, which problematized the privileged status of the screening of films in film exhibition. Tracing the genealogy of lantern slides in modern China, Zhou illustrates how this media technology was refashioned in socialist film exhibition as *tu*-cinema that served the pedagogical purpose to disseminate political and practical knowledge to the audience. Additionally, projectionists used folk performance and lecturing to ensure effective political communication. The popularization of these extra-filmic media practices, on the one hand, showcased grassroots creativity and indigenous inventions by film projectionists, and on the other hand, pinpointed the multimedia

environment in which socialist film exhibition was embedded.

Chapter Four theorizes atmospheric spectatorship in socialist open-air cinema, which engaged multiple senses of the spectators. Distinct from the immersive mode of viewing, open-air cinema encouraged “a more holistic experience of environment, nature, community, crowds, and rituals” (105). The bodily interactions between the spectators and the built environment challenges the undisrupted, concentrated mode of viewing encouraged by the space of the movie theater. Specifically, Zhou examines the rural practice of *kan renao*, a ritualistic, atmospheric experience of communal gatherings fostered by open-air cinema. As Zhou convincingly demonstrates, open-air cinema is hardly an experience unique to socialist China but part of a global phenomenon that had been hitherto obscured by the theater-bias in film history.

Chapter Five uncovers physical discomfort experienced in open-air cinema. Discomfort often resulted from material scarcity and unpleasant viewing environments that rendered the spectatorial bodies precarious, and yet it possessed an uplifting potential that could “[sublimate] the activity of movie going via a revolutionary structure of feelings that celebrates struggle” (135). In their recollections, moviegoers tended to remember fondly such physical discomfort and derived positive meanings from it, which could be attributed to both the political discourse of struggle and the film narrative of torture. The discovery of physical discomfort, as Zhou suggests, brought into sharp relief bodily feelings of the spectators as a critical site of memory, experience, and encounter with the apparatus of cinema.

The concluding chapter zeroes into the object of film screen and traces the interactions between moviegoers and the screen. With elaborate oral history accounts, Zhou highlights the materiality of the film screen and identifies multiple ways of engaging with it, such as touching, playing, and watching from behind. These diverse responses to the film screen, rather than being naïve reactions to the cinematic apparatus from less seasoned spectators, illustrate how moviegoing can be

understood as an activity of play that was subjunctive, ritualistic, and playful.

*Cinema Off Screen* adopts a rather unconventional historical framework that ends with the year 1992, when the socialist institution of film exhibition was completely displaced amid the rising tide of market economy. Such demarcation invites us to conceptualize socialist culture as a distinctive mode of cultural institution with its own logic of production and distribution as well as a lived experience of the everyday in which culture was intimately embedded in the rhythm of communal life. While certain political events may formally conclude an era, the lingering presence of a given mode of cultural configuration may outlive its political counterpart and continue to exist as trace, experience, and material relics.

The remains and reminiscence of socialist film exhibition in contemporary China, therefore, press us to consider questions of the socialist legacy and post-socialist nostalgia. If socialist film exhibition functions simultaneously as a media institution, material culture, and lived experiences, what are the legacies, both tangible and intangible, that we can retrieve by revisiting the socialist past? While practices of socialist moviegoing constitute the primary focus of the book, it is interesting to observe that Zhou also includes episodes about post-socialist appropriations of socialist film exhibition in TV programs and films. If we agree with Arif Dirlik and perceive post-socialism as not so much a specific, post-Cold War moment as a historical condition characterized by ideological contestations and representational incoherence (34), then how should we understand the stakes as well as appeals of the nostalgic remediation of the socialist cinematic apparatus in post-socialist China?

In addition, I have a methodological question for the author about the minimal presence of filmic texts in the book. When the author does introduce specific films, she oftentimes analyzes contemporary cinematic reenactment of the socialist cinematic experience, the gesture of which testifies the effectiveness of employing filmic texts to remember the past. If it is the case, then what has made the author decide not to use films produced during the

socialist period to reconstruct the cinematic experience of socialist film exhibition?

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## Response

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At a time when our attention is easily stretched to a million different directions, it is an absolute privilege to be on the receiving end of a book review. I thank PRC History Review for commissioning a timely review of my book *Cinema Off Screen: Moviegoing in Socialist China*. My deepest gratitude goes to Yucong Hao, who not only read the book with forensic attention but does such a wonderful job laying out the different ways readers may find the book relevant. It is forever thrilling to find that somehow, I have managed to get my ideas across. Thank you, Yucong, for indulging me in this very special feeling.

I would like to take this opportunity to respond to Yucong's two sets of questions near the end of her review, one about postsocialist nostalgia, the other about the choice to avoid filmic texts in the book. Incidentally, these are two areas in which my thinking has continued to evolve since the publication of the book. I will address the second question first, as it is slightly easier to answer, and then move on to the more complex issue of nostalgia.

Why did I decide not to analyze socialist films more in this book? Part of it was to make a point, to strengthen the framework of "cinema off screen," and to show that it is possible to describe cinematic experiences without the film. Sometimes, when the viewer's moviegoing experience is less dependent on any particular films, it is *necessary* to look away and look around for "off screen" interfaces, whose functioning in the phenomenon known as cinema is what the book seeks to foreground. However, polemics aside, I must stress that the "cinema off screen" is essentially an incomplete picture of moviegoing. There cannot literally be moviegoing without the movie (except for in avant-garde artistic practices such as Nam June Paik's 1965 work *Zen for Film* in which he screened a clear roll of film). Audiences attending film screenings will end up watching something. The "cinema on screen" happens concurrently with the "cinema off screen."

Ideally, one would investigate both, including their inevitable entanglement, for a fuller description of the experiences of cinema. In a course called "Cinema and Socialism" which I recently taught with my colleague Julia Alekseyeva, I assigned chapter 5 of *Cinema Off Screen* ("Discomfort") in the same week as the popular North Korean film *The Flower Girl* (1972). While I initially viewed the chapter and the film as achieving different purposes, students instinctively brought them together, wondering how the discomfort of rural open-air screenings might have helped viewers gain greater understanding of the pain and suffering on screen. This question made me see how one-sided my original focus is in that chapter, pursuing only the question how revolutionary narratives of torture prepared viewers to experience discomfort in a certain way. But what sources can we rely on to answer the students' question beyond mere speculation or psychoanalyzing? I'm afraid that audience testimonies—decades-old memories—that deeply engage with filmic texts are hard to come by. Indeed, the notion of "cinema off screen" was born out of disappointment and frustration with the audiences' terseness. Most of the people I interviewed for this project could not talk about any films for longer than one or two sentences but could talk around the films about their moviegoing experiences. "Cinema off screen" is an attempt at theorization that strives to mirror that shape of collective memory.

Nostalgia is another challenge working with memory. If moviegoing memories can bypass films, a study of moviegoing memories cannot bypass nostalgia. To the opposite of trauma, which often erases, skips, and blurs painful memories, nostalgia tends to supply an abundance of narrative details of the past—the kind of details that a researcher relishes. Yet precisely because nostalgia is too eager to tell, one has to keep wondering what is motivating that desire, what is shaping its discourse, what and who is silenced at the same time.

There has been much scholarship on the curious phenomenon of postsocialist or post-communist nostalgia across the former socialist bloc, including China, Russia, and Eastern Europe. The scholarly consensus is to read nostalgia as an index of the problems of the present: it was the instability and uncertainties of the postsocialist transitions that render the socialist past into imagined homelands of security, stability, and innocence. Nostalgia thus has the potential to be either critical or reactionary, tendencies captured in Svetlana Boym's classic distinction between reflective and restorative nostalgia.<sup>1</sup> In either case, nostalgia is a fascinating object of analysis as it is directly tied up with any "post-x" condition, a prism into ongoing re-imaginings of the past, present, and future.

While general lessons about postsocialist nostalgia apply to moviegoing as well, a less asked question is what nostalgic accounts of socialist moviegoing suggest about the past, present, and future of cinema? I begin *Cinema Off Screen* with a juxtaposition between Susan Sontag's and Cui Yongyuan's divergent nostalgia toward disparate cinematic *dispositifs* to relativize any singular ontology about cinema and end the book with a call to recognize cinema through family resemblance. But despite the need to diversify cinema, the *dispositifs* Sontag and Cui each long for—the movie theater for Sontag and open-air cinema for Cui – do share one thing in common: they were both collective viewing situations. A case can be made for not interpreting postsocialist nostalgia for socialist moviegoing through the lens of postsocialism per se, and instead connecting such nostalgia with changes in media technology and how they have impacted the formation of communities and everyday life. In the gradual loss of film viewing as a collective experience, the contemporary Chinese romanticization of open-air cinema, I believe, should have resonance across ideological and cultural divides as it highlights a legacy about how public spaces can be redefined through cinematic projections to articulate collective belongings. This is relevant not only for sporadic attempts to revive open-air screenings today, but also for the increasing presence of giant LED screens and public projection

arts across major urban centers in the world. If it is possible to wrestle the definition of cinema away from the monopoly of white, Western experiences, then it may not be so far-fetched to see the universality in Chinese socialist legacies, to use historically grounded nostalgic sentiments to guide critical reflections anywhere, and to imagine possible futures based on short-lived experiments and under-fulfilled promises that transcend cultural and ideological specificity.

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<sup>1</sup> Boym, Svetlana. *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic Books, 2001.