

Introduction

“Projecting Cinema”

In 1996, American writer and critic Susan Sontag (1933–2004) famously announced the “decay of cinema.” While she expressed disappointment at the quality of new commercial films, the “decay” was mainly found in the ways in which films were consumed:

You wanted to be kidnapped by the movie—and to be kidnapped was to be overwhelmed by the physical presence of the image. The experience of “going to the movies” was part of it. To see a great film only on television isn’t to have really seen that film. It’s not only a question of the dimensions of the image: the disparity between a larger-than-you image in the theater and the little image on the box at home. The conditions of paying attention in a domestic space are radically disrespectful of film. Now that a film no longer has a standard size, home screens can be as big as living room or bedroom walls. But you are still in a living room or a bedroom. To be kidnapped, you have to be in a movie theater, seated in the dark among anonymous strangers.¹

In other words, the movie theater is supposed to provide size, darkness, immersion—an authentic experience of cinema, whereas home viewing is but a downgrade. If this lament rings a familiar bell for film critics and scholars in the contemporary West, the following account may give readers pause:

Screen up, projector set, focus adjusted, the first light beam appeared, aiming at the screening. Everybody started casting hand shadows and throwing their hats in the air. This was called “projecting cinema” (*fang dianying*). It wasn’t

the case that only when you showed a film that it was considered “projecting cinema.” The rest was also a part of it. You watched the newsreels and then the main feature until the end credits finished rolling. After the light went back on, you stayed behind to watch people put away the equipment and fold the screen. Then you went home after everybody left. This whole process was “projecting cinema.” It was like a festival.²

Cui Yongyuan (b. 1963),³ a famous television producer and host who rose to fame in China in the late 1990s, made these remarks on *Childhood Flashback* (*Tongxin huifang*), a television show that was aired on China Central Television from about 2004 to 2015. The show was dedicated to rebroadcasting classic Chinese films made since 1949, the year of the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). It also included interviews with guests that center on childhood experiences of moviegoing. Born in 1963, Cui based his understanding of cinema largely on his experience attending open-air screenings (*lutian dianying*) in the early 1970s, a period more well known for Mao Zedong’s Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). As we can see, cinema for Cui was less defined as a location (as the movie theater was for Sontag) than as a ritualistic process that began with the installation of the screening apparatus and ended with its disappearance, during which watching films was only one among other activities. Whether one could be “kidnapped” by the film, or whether one got to watch a good film or not, did not seem to be a concern.

As different as these two accounts of moviegoing appear to be, what is striking is how they are similar: Sontag and Cui, important cultural figures in the United States and China, were responding to the same global challenge posed to cinema by broadcast and digital media. During the mid-90s when Sontag published her article, television, videotapes, VCDs, and the newly developed DVD were already offering Western audiences an unprecedented amount of programming that they could enjoy in the comfort of their homes, film being one type of content among others. Consequently, as Sontag notes, “the love of cinema has waned.”⁴ It is not that people stopped watching films. What she means is that a particular kind of cinephilic engagement with cinema in the theatrical setting was disappearing. Cui, on the other hand, was well aware in the interview that the kind of cinema that he described belonged to a bygone era. Like Sontag, he was facing a situation of increasing home media consumption. In the mid-2000s when Cui’s interview took place, Chinese consumers not only had access to many local and cable television channels, but also could easily buy VCDs and

DVDs, both legal and pirated copies. Internet download software like BitTorrent was also popular.

Meanwhile, in addition to new delivery technologies, what made Cui's model of moviegoing obsolete was major shifts in the ways in which cinema as an institution was conceptualized and organized by the Chinese state. From 1949 to the early 1990s, film exhibition remained largely state sponsored as part of the socialist planned economy and a major site for the production of socialist culture and socialist subjects. In the socialist system of film exhibition, exhibition outlets and mobile film projection teams attached to local cultural bureaus, workers' unions, workplaces known as work units (*danwei*), and the military showed films in movie theaters, factories, universities, parks, villages, and military bases—guided by an official recognition of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) that film was both an effective propaganda tool and a mass entertainment medium. Despite post-Cultural Revolution ideological shifts and attempts at reform during the 1980s, the mechanisms of film distribution and exhibition were not completely upended by market logic until after 1992, the year during which Deng Xiaoping's influential tour of southern China took place and the Fourteenth Party Congress announced the development of "socialist market economy" as the official goal of China's economic reforms. In 1994, Hollywood movies began to appear regularly on Chinese screens on a revenue-sharing basis. In the early 2000s, a more efficient, demand-driven "theater circuit system" (*yuanxianzhi*) was put in place as the state opened up the film market for private investment. The commercial movie theater, particularly the multiplex, has since become the standard location for "going to the movies" in urban China.⁵ Open-air screenings still happened in rural areas through state initiatives, but their importance as the center of communal cultural life had dwindled. Unlike Sontag, who witnessed the decline of the movie theater, the mode of film exhibition described by Cui was partly displaced by the *rise* of commercial movie theaters in postsocialist China.

Both Sontag and Cui were also unapologetically nostalgic. Their nostalgia was so straightforward because they did not see changes in practices of cinema as progressive updates of a medium whose identity remained stable. For André Gaudreault and Philippe Marion, cinema has died eight times—every time new technologies seemingly shook up the foundations of cinema, calling into question its identity—and yet cinema has persisted.⁶ Sontag and Cui did not partake in such a view. For them, cinema is defined through a particular mode of exhibition and

consumption, whereas divergence from the model constitutes a deterioration, a betrayal of what cinema really is. One may interpret their rhetorical act as one that articulates an ontology of cinema (i.e., what cinema is) based on a cultural memory of cinema (i.e., what it has been). Cultural memory, in the sense defined by Jan Assmann, is distinguished from communicative memory. While the latter happens in the realm of everyday oral communication, cultural memory depends on cultural formation (texts, images, rites, monuments) and institutional communication, which allow it to transcend the temporality of the everyday. In this way, cultural memory supplies a storage of knowledge from which a group can derive its unity and identity.⁷ What Sontag and Cui accomplished, one by penning a widely circulated article and the other by speaking on national television, was turning their individual experience into cultural memory, on which an identity of cinema emerged and then offered itself to the respective audiences in the United States and China for collective identification. Yet a leap from cultural memory to ontology is only easy for someone securely rooted in an ostensibly homogeneous community. How do we, as critical observers of both Sontag and Cui, reconcile their different versions of cinema?

For the Western(ized) critic, it may be tempting to apply the label “alternative” to the experience of open-air cinema described by Cui, though from Cui’s perspective, his experience was probably not alternative at all. Speaking with the same convicted tone as Sontag, Cui does not present the mode of open-air cinema familiar to his childhood self as a deviation from the standard of theatrical viewing still taken as a normative starting point by many film theorists. To him, what he experienced was not Chinese cinema, Chinese socialist cinema, or an instance of world cinema, but cinema itself. We should then be compelled to ask two questions. First, as Brian Larkin asks in relation to colonial cinema in Nigeria, “does cinema have a stable ontology that simply reproduces itself in different contexts over time and across space or, if we wish to examine the role of cinema outside of the experience of Berlin in the 1920s or New York in the 1920s, does that force us to rethink our conception of cinema?”⁸ Second, what does it mean for our understanding of cinema if we stop treating the “alternative” as a mere “alternative”?

These questions are central to this book, which investigates the history, experience, and memory of film exhibition and moviegoing in China from 1949 to the early 1990s—that is, the socialist period—with 1992 as a symbolic end point. On an empirical level, this book contextualizes contemporary Chinese memories of cinema such as Cui Yongyuan’s.

How were films shown and watched in relation to the political usage of cinema as propaganda? What were the institutions, technologies, and strategies of exhibition? What kinds of experience and memory of moviegoing were generated as China left its socialist legacy behind and entered an era of postsocialism? Drawing on both archival sources and audience testimonies, I approach film exhibition in socialist China through the notion of “cinema off screen,” which is distinguished from an approach that centers on the film, or “cinema on screen.” Recent scholarship on film exhibition, moviegoing, and audiences has gathered momentum under the rubric of “new cinema history.” Moving away from formal analysis of the film text as well as notions of the spectator as a textual construct, “new cinema history” has brought together scholars from across the disciplines of film studies, sociology, anthropology, economics, geography, and cultural studies in a collective effort to reconceptualize cinema as an institution deeply embedded in local space, everyday life, and social relations. China has yet to become a site for extensive research in this particular subfield, which is evidenced by the absence of China in several recent anthologies that offer mostly case studies of film exhibition and moviegoing in Western countries.⁹

While extending the concerns and methods of “new cinema history” to China, this book departs from earlier studies by identifying specific “off screen” interfaces in film exhibition, points or boundaries of interaction other than the film text, such as the exhibition environment and the body—both the projectionist’s and the viewer’s—as well as the screening apparatus. It will show that film exhibition is best seen as a system in which the film shown on screen is only one among many interfaces. The interface effects of all that is non-filmic or “off screen” cannot be ignored. In socialist China, the state consciously implemented film exhibition as an institution that communicated to audiences through multiple interfaces, which in turn shaped cinematic experience in unexpected ways. The concept of cinematic experience includes but is by no means limited to an experience of films. Experience, as Francesco Casetti understands, is “a cognitive act, but one that is always rooted in, and affects, a body (it is ‘embodied’), a culture (it is ‘embedded’), and a situation (it is ‘grounded’).”¹⁰ It is such embodied, situated experiences of Chinese audiences under socialism that this book brings to light.

Meanwhile, the recognition of “cinema off screen” goes beyond China. Just as Cui Yongyuan aspires to a discourse of cinema from what would normally be deemed as a marginalized position in the global order, this book makes a case for the broader implications of Chinese socialist film

exhibition. Beyond the empirical, it destabilizes what is universal and what is seen as alternative. Joining scholars who have identified limitations of paradigms derived from Western cinematic practices, I point out how seemingly universal assumptions about film exhibition and moviegoing are historically situated and what appears unique and “deviant” may in fact be shared conditions. The coexistence of multiple interfaces in film exhibition should not be seen as a Chinese or a Chinese socialist phenomenon, but as an inherent potential of cinema that can manifest in stronger or weaker forms under different material and cultural conditions. In other words, this book develops a theory of film exhibition based on an empirical study of China.

WHAT CAN CHINA TELL US ABOUT CINEMA?

Speaking of the status of film theory in relation to Chinese cinema, Paul Pickowicz, one of the pioneers of Chinese cinema studies in the United States, has posed the following questions: “Why are all the ‘universal’ theories of European or American origin? How would Europeanists or Americanists react if ‘universal’ theories based on empirical studies of China were applied to the European case? I suspect that they would not like it at all.”¹¹ Is Pickowicz right? Has he rightly predicted the fate of this book? There are few references I can rely on to come up with an answer. In cinema and media studies, China remains largely excluded from the discursive space known as theory. It is this separation that this book aims to challenge and reconfigure.

Theory has been the driving force behind film studies since its emergence as an academic discipline in Anglo-American universities in the 1960s and 1970s. As Richard Rushton and Gary Bettison suggest, film theory may simply be seen as a tool that helps us understand the medium better: “By framing general questions about cinematic phenomena, theorists try to disclose the way films work, how they convey meaning, what functions they provide, and the means by which they affect us. Exploring theoretical questions about the medium helps us to grasp the phenomenon of cinema, its broad systems, structures, uses, and effects—and these prototypical features can, in turn, enable us to better understand the workings of individual films.”¹² There is no doubt that asking general, theoretical questions about cinema is beneficial. What is problematic, however, is when these questions are only asked from a Western point of view, informed by European and American traditions of filmmaking and moviegoing. These historically

specific experiences are then generalized as “prototypical features,” as what define cinema itself.

Two recent examples may be mentioned to illustrate these tendencies. One is film phenomenology, which Christian Ferencz-Flatz and Julian Hanich define as an attempt to describe “invariant structures of the film viewer’s lived experience when watching moving images in a cinema or elsewhere.”¹³ However, relying heavily on thick, first-person descriptions, phenomenological studies produced by Western film scholars have only illuminated experiences of Western subjects watching (mostly) Western films in settings familiar to mainstream Western audiences.¹⁴ Some scholars like Laura Wilson have sufficiently acknowledged the role of subjectivity in their analyses.¹⁵ Yet this does not change the fact that the Euro-American focus has biased film phenomenology to frame certain questions as more significant while ignoring others (see chapter 5). Without more comparative analysis, one is also left without recourse to distinguish “invariant structures of the film viewer’s lived experience”—which supposedly remain stable across time and space—from what is historically particular to the specific social, cultural, affective, and cognitive structures in which viewings occur.

Discussions about the identity of cinema prompted by digital technologies constitute another area where Western experiences of cinema tend to dominate. Is cinema still alive in the digital age? Are the boundaries between cinema and other media being erased? Does the transition from analog to digital matter more or less than the relocation of films from big screens to iPads and smartphones? To answer these questions, theorists are compelled to develop narratives of what cinema once was and where it was—such narratives rarely go beyond the dominant models of cinema in Europe and America. For example, in his book *When Movies Were Theater: Architecture, Exhibition, and the Evolution of American Film* (2016), William Paul asks: “If movies are no longer inescapably an art of the theater, have we lost an understanding of the art form that seemed self-evident to past audiences?”¹⁶ But were movies ever “inescapably an art of the theater”? We can find numerous counterexamples not only in non-Western contexts but also in the West, where “alternative” modes of viewing—non-theatrical, rural, itinerant, museum, home exhibitions—have long existed in the shadow of the movie theater. Outside of the privileged space of theory, film studies witnessed the “historical turn” in the 1980s–90s and the rise of world cinema as an academic discourse in the 2000s. The fact that Paul still makes such a universalist assumption after many studies

have demonstrated the diversity of film exhibition suggests that what is at stake is more than a matter of knowledge; it is a question of power. The movie theater was and still is the privileged exhibition site of the dominant commercial film industry. If an understanding of cinema was “self-evident” to “past audiences,” it was only so to audiences that were produced by, and deeply imbricated with, this industry.¹⁷

On the other hand, the growth of English-language scholarship on Chinese and Sinophone cinemas since the 1980s took place as historians and literary scholars discovered cinema as a rich site where society, culture, and politics intersect. The filmic text, in this case, is seen as another conduit for the expression of national cultures or the dominant issues and structures of feelings of given historical periods.¹⁸ Such a framing produces and sustains the gap between the empirical and the theoretical. “Theory,” as Yingjin Zhang observes, is habitually used by China scholars to refer to Western theories.¹⁹ The question of how to situate theory in relation to Chinese and Sinophone cinemas thus becomes one about whether one can ethically apply Western theory to non-Western cases. For some scholars, this is not a problem between the universal and the particular, but a matter of cross-cultural reading politics in an uneven global order in which the West continues to occupy a position of epistemological superiority.

Lingering orientalism is what some fear would take over an analysis of Chinese cinema that derives its interpretive authority from “theory.” Yingjin Zhang worries that dangers in cross-cultural analysis would arise “every time a Western(ized) critic subjects the ‘raw material’ of a film from another culture to an interpretive ‘processing’ exclusively in Western analytic terms.”²⁰ Pickowicz proposes that to study cultural production in China, one must develop China-centered theories—theories grounded in empirical research that takes into account the distinct history of China.²¹ Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh goes so far as to call for the field to de-Westernize. In her view, the automatic acceptance of Western theory bespeaks an unconscious colonial desire. Hence, there is the need for “intellectual decolonization,” which involves “a re-search of ourselves, seeking a lost object that was deferred, suspended or undermined in the process of colonial assimilation.”²² One way to achieve this goal is to introduce what she calls “reverse assimilation” into Chinese film historiography, meaning translating and using indigenous concepts in English scholarship rather than resorting to Western concepts. Yeh’s example is the early twentieth-century concept of *wenyi*, which describes a unique

genre of Chinese films that is similar but cannot be entirely captured by the Western concept of melodrama.²³

While it is necessary to question the validity of theory, Western or non-Western, attempting to de-Westernize a field that itself depends on Western academic infrastructure to exist seems self-defeating at best. Attending any conference on Chinese cinema, literature, and culture nowadays, there is no denying that (Western) theory is unavoidable. Rather than circumventing theory, we need a better, more productive relationship with theory.

It is important to examine what we are missing when we describe the problem in terms of Western theory vs. Chinese materials. In this binary formation, theory is not only seen as foreign, but a given, a fait accompli. Advocating for a use of theory that is self-reflexive and dialogic, Yingjin Zhang writes that “the issue is not that Western theory cannot be applied, but that it should not be applied or imposed unilaterally so as to dominate or domesticate an alien cultural text.”²⁴ What is assumed here is that before a theory is translated and relocated, it is already finished; what is at stake afterward is mainly how the theory is deployed rather than how it can be revised and updated. However, if we look at the fate of any French theory, the Frankfurt School, or German media theory in Anglophone scholarship, it is clear that theory is far from “dead” when it is translated, which rather gives it a second life, a chance to be rediscovered and renewed. For Casetti, an assumption becomes a theory if “besides expressing knowledge, it also succeeds in proposing itself as a community’s heritage.”²⁵ As a shared property of a community, theory should be open to collective authorship. A theoretical discourse, as Victor Fan suggests, can thus be an epistemological space emerging out of networks of debates rather than something that is systematically laid out in an article or a book.²⁶ For various reasons scholars of Chinese cinema and culture have felt excluded from the community that is “theory.” As the focus is on the application of theory, what is precluded is the right to either participate in the ongoing revision of theory or question its production in the first place. What is also not considered is whether a study of China can have general significance beyond China. The scope of Chinese film studies is thus usually limited to the particular geographical area and historical period of a study. It is tempting to assume, as Pickowicz does, that Europeanists and Americanists would not be interested in any “China-centered” theory.

This book is more optimistic about the reception of “China-centered” theory beyond China. The optimism stems from the conviction that what is designated as “alternative” has equal right to participate in the definition of cinema; what Cui Yongyuan believes is cinema should also be recognized as cinema. Mobile projection and open-air cinema, for example, are two overlapping modes of exhibition that the book foregrounds. One may see these as configurations particular to China, or more specifically, China under socialism. Without falling back to a rigid Cold War worldview, one can still maintain, as Larkin does, that there is a fundamental difference between capitalist modes of cinema which treat cinema as a commodity form and spectatorship driven by politics—colonial or socialist.²⁷ Indeed, there were features that resulted from the unique combination of socialist ideology and conditions of underdevelopment that may be hard to generalize beyond China. The ways in which film projectionists were portrayed as model workers, as their manual labor was celebrated in the news media or the mode of atmospheric spectatorship Chinese viewers call “*kan renao*,” may be uniquely “Chinese.” But both mobile projection and open-air cinema are also global paradigms with characteristics shared across national boundaries. If testimonies of Chinese audiences urge us to see how material experiences of interfaces including the space, the atmosphere, and the technical apparatus of film exhibition constituted the bulk of their cinematic experience, then, the book urges its readers to consider, does not a similar, multichannel, multisensory engagement with cinema also exist elsewhere? A thorough look at film exhibition interfaces in socialist China will call attention to parallel elements in other contexts that may otherwise be marginalized or ignored. If there are indeed “invariant structures” of cinematic experience, then the seeming alterity of the Chinese socialist film culture should precisely be the reason why it needs to be introduced into the discursive space of theory. It is only by traversing the heterogeneous that we can distinguish what is particular to a social space and what is ontologically stable about cinema, or whether cinema even has a fixed ontology (my answer, in the end, is “no”).

FILM EXHIBITION AS A SYSTEM OF INTERFACES

Central to my theorization of film exhibition is the concept of interface, which can be broadly defined as the communication boundary between two parts or systems. Having first emerged as a popular word in computer science in the 1960s, *interface* has become an important concept

in media studies. Existing approaches have emphasized the interface as a filter of information or culture. The human-computer interface has been characterized as a “cultural interface” that filters the ways in which users interact with cultural data, including other media objects.²⁸ Mobile interfaces from the book to the mobile phone are recognized as sources of agency that can “enable people to filter, control, and manage their relationships with the spaces and people around them.”²⁹ Interface is also associated with the recent trend in media studies to shift the object of disciplinary inquiry from specific media objects or communication technologies (such as radio, film, and television) to processes of mediation. Observing interfacing relations in diverse situations, media theorists have conceptualized interfaces as effects,³⁰ as dynamics of contact and transformation,³¹ and as the bridging of segmented spheres of knowledge.³²

My evocation of the interface concept branches from these broad discussions and considers film exhibition as a situation rich with interfacing dynamics. In film studies, Seung-hoon Jeong has located the screen as one link along a series of interfaces that “range from the filmic object through the medium (camera-film-screen) to the body (eye-mind),” all of which constitute what classic film theory refers to as the cinematic apparatus.³³ In this model, cinematic experience is easily reduced to a matter of visual perception and cognition, a linear process of information “passing through” the screen, the eye, and the mind. But what happens *during* an encounter with the screen is far more than what goes on *between* the screen and the embodied viewing subject. Interface can be a productive concept for reframing film exhibition precisely because it allows us to expand attention from the film or the screen as a portal into the filmed world to other surfaces, boundaries, and points of interactions associated with film exhibition through which communication or mediation also takes place.

In socialist China, especially during the early years of the PRC known as the Seventeen Years period (1949–1966), film exhibitors and projectionists actively sought to explore, inscribe, and control various interfaces on and off screen to convey state-mandated messages. From the exhibition space to the lecturing of the projectionist, from the screening apparatus to the various media objects (photography, slides, etc.) exhibited alongside films, additional interfaces were emphasized and made meaningful no less significantly than the showing of films, which frequently constituted only one aspect of film exhibition despite being the rubric that tied everything together. This approach to film exhibition

can be seen as presupposing what John Fiske refers to as the “process” school of communication or what Weihong Bao describes as the linear model of the medium.³⁴ In this model, the sender tries to ensure that their message is efficiently and accurately transmitted to the receiver. From the perspective of exhibitors and projectionists, who were trained to be representatives of the state, a central question was thus how different interfaces could be deployed or curated to maximize the effect of mass communication. As Barbara Mittler observes, one strategy that Chinese propagandists adopted during the Cultural Revolution was redundancy, repeating the same messages across multiple platforms.³⁵ If we adopt an expanded view of film exhibition and pay attention to non-filmic interfaces, we can see that this principle was built into the premise of the socialist film exhibition system as well. Film reels were finished products whose integrity needed to be protected. Projectionists could not change or enhance the films. What they could do, and were instructed to do, was to exercise their agency on other interfaces so that the showing of films could be more effectively integrated into the CCP propaganda machine, whose changing and sometimes conflicting messages must be made intelligible through creative labor on the ground.

From the perspective of audiences, their experiences of cinema were not only filtered by multiple interfaces but were frequently of a different register from what is normally considered as reception. Although “new cinema history” and empirical studies of film audiences have foregrounded sociohistorical context as a defining factor of spectatorship, the concept of reception, as Lakshmi Srinivas notes, still habitually refers to how audiences engage with cultural texts.³⁶ In China studies, there has been a wave of recent scholarship focusing on cultural forms of Chinese socialism including visual culture, music, model operas (*yangbanxi*), literature, film, drama, dance, architecture, and museum exhibitions. Under the stigmatized label of “propaganda,” these cultural forms used to be dismissed and ignored by China scholars. But following the boom in scholarship focusing on the Mao era (1949–1976), the current scholarly consensus is that Chinese socialist culture was born out of complex negotiations of shifting political and artistic needs and was never monolithic.³⁷ The reception of propaganda has also remained a shared interest. Mittler, for instance, draws the conclusion that Cultural Revolution propaganda art, which aspired to be a form of popular culture, was actually enjoyed by many, although not all audiences identified with its political messages. Based on her interviews with audience members, Mittler suggests that Chinese audiences vacillated between a “deluded”

and “passive” reception of Cultural Revolution propaganda and a “parasitic” and “subversive” one.³⁸ Chang-tai Hung makes a similar point that audiences were able to engage with political images, texts, and monuments in creative and unpredictable ways.³⁹ In these studies, reception is treated primarily as a relationship between audience members and cultural texts or their intended messages. Of course, Chinese audiences attended screenings with the purpose of watching and enjoying films. But if film exhibition is a system of interfaces, then reception becomes a more general state of interfacing in the presence of films. While it involved engagement with the semiotic and symbolic content which exhibitors strived to control, audiences not only perceived signifying structures but interacted with surfaces (screen, seats, etc.), atmospheres, bodies (the projectionist’s, other viewers’, and their own), objects, landscapes, and weather in a manner that involved their entire bodies: eyes to see, hands to touch, torso, legs, and feet to feel cold, tired, uncomfortable, and yet excited. These were first and foremost *material* experiences.

Even though political ideology played a part in shaping these experiences, what is striking is how moviegoing is so often remembered as something apolitical. In memoirs and in my own interviews with audience members, people talk about the place of moviegoing in their lives (sometimes important, sometimes marginal), the rituals involved, the senses activated, and the anecdotes they remember vividly after years. If one looks for evidence of political indoctrination or quiet resistance in audience accounts, one can certainly find it. But a large portion of cinema-related memory has little to do with audiences’ reaction to ideological positioning or even their enjoyment of the films. In a traditional approach to reception, such memory might appear too trivial and anecdotal to warrant serious consideration. However, once the assumption that consumption of the film is always at the center of an experience of cinema is challenged, it is clear that for many, the seemingly small, non-film-related incidents can be exactly what make up the substance of cinematic experience.

Furthermore, such experience did not derive meaning only from the exhibition interfaces but also from the ways in which moviegoing was embedded in the general flow of life. Exhibition is the interface between cinema and life. While life shapes attitudes toward cinema, through exhibition, cinema has the power to alter everyday rhythms, cultivate communities, and punctuate memory. To understand this effect of cinema, we can evoke a tradition in media studies that John Durham Peters recently summarizes as one that “takes media as modes of being.”⁴⁰

He places into this tradition theorists such as Lewis Mumford, Martin Heidegger, Marshall McLuhan, Bruno Latour, and Friedrich Kittler. What these theorists share in common, Peters suggests, is that they are not concerned with media as information channels or interested in the analysis of texts, audiences, and institutions that occupies mainstream media studies. Instead, their conception of “media” (though some did not use this term) is both broader and more fundamental: “they see media as the strategies and tactics of culture and society, as the devices and crafts by which humans and things, animals and data, hold together in time and space.”⁴¹ Building on this tradition, Peters expands the concept of media to understand our existence within a larger ecological system in the digital age. Using the term *elemental media*, he draws attention to “the taken-for-granted base”—both natural and cultural—that forms enabling environments and anchors our being.

Cinema is not part of Peters’s original conceptualization, but a similar approach can be appropriated for thinking about the impact of cinema on everyday life, for beyond the transmission of meaning, cinema also participates in the reorganization of experience by inserting into life schedules, rituals, conversations, escapes, heterotopic moments, and feelings that run the gamut. In this sense, cinema can be grouped together with calendars, clocks, indexes, maps, lists, and money as what Peters calls logistical media. “The job of logistical media is to organize and orient, to arrange people and property, often into grids. They both coordinate and subordinate, arranging relationships among people and things,” writes Peters.⁴² From this point of view, we need to understand the experiences of moviegoers in socialist China by asking not how they interpreted films, but what kinds of experiences were generated through the particular ways in which environment, bodies, and technological apparatus were arranged by the socialist modes of film exhibition, and what significance is attached to these experiences in retrospect.

It also follows that socialist culture needs to be distinguished from political culture, which has been defined as “shared values, collective visions, common attitudes, and public expectations created by high politics.”⁴³ Focusing on political culture as the center of inquiry, a researcher naturally asks how the CCP employed symbols, rituals, rhetoric, narratives, and visual images to instill shared values among Chinese citizens, and to what degree the production of socialist subjectivity was successful.⁴⁴ But this does not encompass all aspects of socialist culture, which was also a media culture, a technological culture, a popular culture, and a communal culture. Approaching socialist culture in these terms means

that the explanation of a cultural form or practice does not always need to resort to ideology. A medium or technology in a socialist context still carries its own “message” that cannot be reduced to a political usage of the medium. The mobile, open-air mode of exhibition, for instance, introduced a porous atmosphere that defined spectatorship as a form of embodied presence distinct from the dominant mode of attentive viewing in theatrical settings. Although open-air screenings, being mostly free and easily accessible, may be seen as a manifestation of the Maoist ideal of “serving workers, peasants, and soldiers” (*wei gongnongbing fuwu*), to focus only on the political significance would foreclose attention to the multifaceted and embodied ways audiences engaged with exhibition practices, which cannot all be explained by ideology.

BETWEEN ARCHIVES AND MEMORY

The two perspectives the book explores—that of the institutions and individuals behind the formation of the exhibition interfaces and that of the audiences—required a methodology that combined archival and memory research, which yielded two sets of overlapping and yet frequently divergent sources. The book is divided into a historical analysis based on archival materials of how the various exhibition interfaces came into being (chapters 1 to 3) and an examination of audiences’ retrospective accounts (chapters 4 to 6) that reveal how they interfaced with cinema and remember moviegoing on their own terms, in ways that often exceeded state control.

Three types of archival materials informed the book’s historical narrative. Widely circulated publications, including official CCP newspapers *People’s Daily* (*Renmin ribao*, established in 1948) and *Guangming Daily* (*Guangming ribao*, established in 1949), as well as the popular film magazine *Mass Cinema* (*Dazhong dianying*, established in 1950) functioned as high-profile platforms that showcased developments in the socialist film exhibition system as achievements in nation building and modernization. In particular, they celebrated the rural film projectionist as a model socialist worker through reports of their arduous travel in the countryside, their dedicated labor, and personal sacrifices (chapter 2). These newspapers and journals may be seen as a print interface that instructed readers on the ideological significance of film exhibition. Government documents such as work reports and meeting summaries, which I was able to find at Shanghai Municipal Archive and Beijing Municipal Archive, provided glimpses into the inner workings of