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Chinese-Language Cinema, Visual Culture, and the National Construction: A Review of Sheldon H. Lu's *Contemporary Chinese Cinema and Visual Culture*

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Abstract: Professor Sheldon H. Lu's *Contemporary Chinese Cinema and Visual Culture: Envisioning the Nation* examines Chinese-language cinema and visual culture from the late twentieth to early twenty-first century, analyzing how contemporary Chinese film articulates cultural expression and constructs national identity within a transnational context. This review evaluates the book along three dimensions: conceptual framing, central themes, and methodological innovation. Conceptually, Lu maps the scholarly development of "Chinese-language cinema," advancing from traditional film aesthetics to broader visual culture studies. Thematically, he engages with gender politics, spatial reconfigurations, and marginal discourses, exploring the imaginaries of individuals, cities, and the nation. Methodologically, his interdisciplinary approach offers a model for transnational film studies that balances local specificity with global engagement. While not without limitations, the book provides a fresh lens on contemporary Chinese cinema and visual culture and offers valuable insights into asserting Chinese scholarly agency in the international academic arena.

Keywords: Sheldon H. Lu; Chinese-Language Cinema; Visual Culture; Cross-Cultural Studies

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题目: 华语电影、视觉文化与国族构建: 鲁晓鹏《中国当代电影与视觉文化》评述

摘要: 鲁晓鹏《中国当代电影与视觉文化》聚焦 20 世纪末至 21 世纪初的华语电影与视觉

文化实践，在跨国语境中探讨了中国当代电影的文化表达与认同建构。本文从概念考辨、核心议题、方法启示三个维度进行评述，以探析该书的理论贡献与学术价值。概念层面，著作梳理“华语电影”的学术脉络，实现从电影美学研究到视觉文化研究的理论跨越。议题层面，它关注性别政治、空间重构与边缘话语三重向度，探究个体、城市与国家的想象建构。方法层面，其跨学科视野为跨国电影研究提供了兼顾本土关怀与全球对话的学术路径。尽管尚有局限，但该书为中国当代电影与视觉文化研究提供了新颖视域，亦为如何在国际学术话语中建构中国学术主体性提供了重要的启示。

关键词：鲁晓鹏；华语电影；视觉文化；跨文化研究

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Introduction

In the context of globalization, contemporary Chinese cinema, as a vital medium for constructing the national image and narrating the nation's stories, has emerged as a burgeoning focus of academic inquiry. *Contemporary Chinese Cinema and Visual Culture: Envisioning the Nation*, a new work by Professor Sheldon H. Lu, translated by Zhang Qingfang and Gao Jie, was published by SDX Joint Publishing Company in 2025. The book concentrates on Chinese-language cinema and visual culture in a broad sense from the end of the 20th century to the beginning of the 21st century, offering an in-depth exploration of the distinctive aesthetic characteristics of contemporary Chinese film. As a scholar whose academic career spans both China and the United States, Lu's work naturally possesses an inherently cross-cultural and expansive intellectual horizon; this book presents a comprehensive cartography of contemporary Chinese visual culture within a transnational context. The translators' fluent and felicitous rendition has also significantly contributed to the book's favorable reception among Chinese readers.

In terms of its research scope, the book transcends the constraints of traditional Chinese-language film studies, which often take the nation-state as the sole analytical boundary and the narrowly defined film text as the exclusive object of investigation. It achieves a multidimensional expansion across geographical space, media categories, and cultural perspectives. Regarding its content, the work synthesizes macro-level perspectives with micro-level analyses, integrating both breadth and depth to demonstrate significant scholarly value. This review will systematically examine the book from three dimensions: its theoretical framework, core issues, and methodological explorations.

1. Theoretical Framework:

Conceptual Clarification, Transnational Reflection, and the Turn to Visual Culture

The book opens with a theoretical interrogation of the foundational concept of “Chinese-language cinema,” elucidating its historical evolution and paradigmatic significance. Through a systematic review and critical reflection on this concept, the introduction establishes a clear conceptual foundation and theoretical trajectory for the textual analyses that follow. In the contemporary context, where globalization and counter-globalization intersect, how do visual media—such as cinema, photography, and architecture—reimagine the nation-state in

transnational circulation? What tensions emerge between visual representation and identity construction? The introduction foregrounds these questions, which not only illuminate the interactions and conflicts between global and local cultures but also, at the level of textual analysis, highlight the multifaceted identities of Chinese-language cinema in cross-cultural exchange, thereby clarifying how it shapes and disseminates cultural and political notions of the nation within a global framework.

First, Lu systematically traces the development of the academic concept of “Chinese-language cinema” in the introduction. He is recognized as a key proponent of its theoretical articulation. In 1997, his essay collection, *Transnational Chinese Cinemas: Identity, Nationhood, Gender* (University of Hawai‘i Press), first systematically proposed the notion of “transnational Chinese cinema,” marking a shift in overseas Chinese film studies beyond the boundaries of the nation-state toward a transnational paradigm. In 2005, the co-edited volume *Chinese-Language Film: Historiography, Poetics, Politics* (University of Hawai‘i Press, co-edited with Shu-yu Yuh) further established the concept of “Chinese-language cinema” within the English-language academic discourse, gradually attracting scholarly attention. Regarding its scope, Lu notes: “Chinese-language cinema primarily refers to films made in Hanyu and its dialects (i.e., the language and dialects of the Han nationality), as well as films produced in the languages of China’s ethnic minorities, such as Tibetan, Uighur, and Mongolian” (Lu, 2025, p.18). This definition encompasses films produced in mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Chinese diasporic regions, including those in local Hanyu dialects, emphasizing linguistic criteria over geographic boundaries and providing a flexible, pluralistic framework for transregional and cross-cultural film studies.

Second, while elaborating the concept of Chinese-language cinema, Lu maintains a critical reflection on the transnational paradigm. He argues that because Chinese-language cinema frequently addresses transnational issues and involves film production under global capital flows, the concepts of “transnational Chinese cinema” and “Chinese-language cinema” are logically interconnected. The former emphasizes the transnational dimensions of production, circulation, and reception, whereas the latter foregrounds the linkage between language and cultural identity. Importantly, Lu’s transnational approach is not a simple de-nationalization or depoliticization; rather, it seeks to reconsider the meaning of the nation-state in a transnational context. As he observes, “Within the broad framework of Chinese-language cinema, the ‘nation-state’ has not disappeared; rather, it has been reshaped and re-emerges through the twists and turns of history” (Lu, 2025, p.19). This perspective acknowledges the impact of globalization on national boundaries while affirming the nation-state as a central agent of cultural identity and political imagination, reflecting a dialectical theoretical stance.

Finally, Lu situates cinema within a broader visual culture framework rather than restricting his analysis to the medium itself. As Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery note, “Cinema is an open system; it is not merely a constituent part of a whole but a set of interrelated and mutually conditioned elements” (Allen & Gomery, p.21). Drawing on theorists such as W.J.T. Mitchell and Nicholas Mirzoeff, Lu integrates cinema with other visual media—including visual art, architecture, photography, and installation—revealing the pluralistic expressions of visual culture. This expanded perspective enriches the analytical lens of cinema: traditional narrative and cinematic language studies are preserved, while readers are invited to examine the interplay between film and other artistic forms to apprehend its social, political, and cultural significance. Compared with many conventional film studies works, this book advances from a narrow focus on Chinese-language cinema to a broader approach of “contemporary China studies through the lens

of visual culture.”

In conclusion, Lu attends not only to the global circulation of Chinese-language cinema but also critically examines the benefits and constraints of intrinsic globalization within Chinese film. He interrogates the cultural and political reconstruction of the nation-state amid intersecting forces of globalization and counter-globalization. Furthermore, the book explores the paradigmatic features of film and other artistic forms in the Greater China region, employing multidimensional perspectives on gender, space, and marginality.

2. Core Themes:

Multidimensional Perspectives on Gender, Space, and Marginality

Envisioning the Nation consists of eight chapters, with the main body, aside from the introduction and conclusion, covering analyses of Chinese national imagery, explorations of marginal cinema, and investigations of urban spaces. Through detailed textual readings and in-depth theoretical analysis, the author sequentially unveils the multifaceted landscape of contemporary Chinese visual culture. Overall, the examination of gender politics, spatial reconfiguration, and marginal discourse constitutes the book’s three principal interpretive dimensions.

Gender is one of Lu’s primary concerns. As Simone de Beauvoir observes, “sexual status is a mediator, through which the subject acquires a concrete sense of belonging to a particular class” (Beauvoir, 1998, p. 8). Gender not only defines social identity but also reflects the cultural, historical, and structural values embedded within cinematic texts. Lu investigates gender through discussions of “alternative female figures in Chinese-language cinema and their spatial mobility and modernity,” “the reorientations of Hong Kong cinema and transformations of masculinity,” and “the crisis of masculinity in Jia Zhangke’s films,” providing an intertextual lens through which to observe shifts in Chinese cinematic representations and paradigms.

In analyzing female representation, Lu focuses on “alternative female figures” in Chinese-language cinema, exploring how female subjectivity is constructed and expressed within transnationally mobile spaces. He argues that such alternative figures function as symbolic carriers: “the modernity they embody must be understood within specific gender relations” (Lu, 2025, p. 27). Using a temporal axis and case studies such as *The Goddess* (1934), *Flowers of Shanghai* (1998), and *Three Times* (2005), Lu traces the genealogy of female representation from early Chinese-language films to contemporary works, revealing how female characters transcend the confines of traditional domestic spaces to enter public and transnational spheres, thereby achieving recognition of modernity. He pays particular attention to the relationship between female bodies and spatial politics, noting that bodily mobility often intertwines with urban experiences of modernity, forming a distinctive visual narrative. For instance, Lu highlights 1930s Shanghai as an experimental site of Chinese modernity, where the nocturnal cityscape is permeated by the flowing modernity embodied in the figure of the Goddess.

Regarding male representation, Lu adopts a more critical perspective. On one hand, through films such as *Farewell China* (1990) and *Comrades: Almost a Love Story* (1996), he traces the evolution of Chinese masculinity: “from powerless and painfully struggling figures, to exploratory and questioning depictions around the Hong Kong handover, ultimately to 21st-century characters imbued with confidence and agency” (Lu, 2025, p. 63), noting that this resurgence is closely linked to the rise of the new century. On the other hand, he examines the working-class male spectrum in Jia Zhangke’s oeuvre—from the petty thief Xiao Wu in *The Pickpocket* (1997), to the troupe member Cui Mingliang in *Platform* (2000), to the coal miner Han Sanming in *Still Life* (2006)—all of whom navigate multiple economic, emotional, and identity challenges. Lu argues

that such “hybridized masculinity” and complex characterizations provide a new perspective for understanding gender politics in contemporary China.

Space is another crucial analytical dimension. As Pei Xuan observes, it constitutes “an essential element of subject practice, social interaction, production relations, capital flow, and urban construction” (Pei, 2026, pp. 49–56). Lu pays close attention to visual spatiality, illustrating, through the cinematography of *Still Life* and *24 City* (2008), the “strikingly multilayered temporal and spatial structures” in Jia Zhangke’s films, which integrate past, present, memory, desire, and emotion (Lu, 2025, p. 93). He also reflects on the impact of human-made landscapes on nature and critically interrogates the urbanization process in contemporary China. Lu extends spatial analysis beyond cinema to the broader field of visual culture. Using Beijing’s urban transformation as a case study, he examines how architecture, art, photography, and film collectively participate in the reconfiguration and imagination of urban space. From the disappearance of historic city walls to the construction of Olympic venues, Beijing’s urban landscape undergoes radical visual transformation. Lu analyzes the artistic expressions of contemporary artists and photographers, considering how these works critically present the costs and contradictions of urban redevelopment, and exploring the implications for emerging public spaces.

Lu also attends to a wide spectrum of visual practices, including marginal, underground, and independent cinema: “Through the margins, one can perceive the limits and profound absences of the center, which can then be reconstructed at a threshold stage, ultimately pointing toward a new integrative vision” (Xiang, 2024, pp. 259–272, 480). Independent cinema, as a key component of contemporary Chinese visual culture, offers unique insights into marginalized communities and alternative voices in society. The book systematically traces the development from early works by Sixth Generation directors to contemporary independent documentaries, discussing how independent cinema sustains artistic exploration and social critique outside institutional frameworks. Subjects such as laid-off workers, migrant laborers, and urban wanderers are central to Lu’s analysis. He highlights how independent cinema foregrounds marginality and realism, emphasizing simplicity and rough stylistic choices, while also considering how to navigate the boundary between the margins and the mainstream—across resistance and collaboration between independent filmmakers and traditional cultural practitioners (Lu, 2025, p. 137).

Through this three-dimensional lens of gender politics, spatial reconfiguration, and marginal discourse, Lu not only delineates the complex landscape of contemporary Chinese visual culture but also reveals how “flow” functions as a structural force reshaping individual, urban, and self-imaginings.

3. Methodological Exploration: Research Approaches and Implications

Envisioning the Nation possesses not only significant scholarly value but also important methodological implications. Employing an interdisciplinary framework and a transnational perspective, the book provides a comprehensive analysis of Chinese cinema and its role in global cultural exchange. Lu’s distinctive scholarly vision transcends the limitations of traditional film studies, offering valuable insights for both Chinese film research and broader cross-cultural scholarship.

To begin with, the book carefully balances a transnational comparative lens with the construction of scholarly subjectivity. As a long-term overseas scholar, Lu consistently faces challenges regarding academic agency, particularly in avoiding Orientalist or self-Orientalizing interpretations. The book responds to this challenge by adopting a dual interpretive stance:

Western theoretical frameworks are used to examine Chinese experiences, while Chinese experiences are deployed to reflect critically on Western theories. For example, in analyzing the representation of “China,” Lu situates his discussion across both domestic and international screens, showing how Hollywood films present and domesticate the “Other” through specific Orientalist discourse while incorporating Chinese elements to appeal to domestic audiences, and how Chinese films project self-representation both nationally and globally. Moreover, his transnational perspective attends to internal diversity within Chinese-language cinema, encompassing not only the aesthetic characteristics of mainland Chinese films but also productions from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and overseas Chinese communities. This attention to internal differences mitigates homogenization and enriches the basis for constructing scholarly subjectivity.

Building on this, the book integrates case studies with theoretical interpretation. Lu situates textual analysis within broad theoretical frameworks to reveal deep sociocultural meanings, transforming cinematic texts from abstraction to social reality. Drawing on Benedict Anderson’s imagined communities theory, he analyzes how Chinese commercial blockbusters such as *Wolf Warrior 2* (2017), *Operation Red Sea* (2018), and *The Wandering Earth* (2019) construct national identity on screen. Additionally, he applies Laura Mulvey’s theory of visual pleasure derived from the male gaze to examine the encounter between Xu Yiwan and the Russian girl Natasha on a train in *Lost in Russia* (2020), illustrating how films objectify the female body and how contemporary Chinese media depict patriarchal consciousness and gender bias.

Finally, cross-media research constitutes a central methodological innovation. Lu situates cinema within a broader visual cultural context intersecting with architecture, photography, and installation art. For instance, he asserts that “cultural, political, or artistic intervention must originate from the agency of individuals at a specific time and place. Cosmopolitanism is necessarily grounded in the concrete practices of individual artists, architects, and laborers” (Lu, 2025, p.167). Iconic structures such as the National Stadium and the National Grand Theater are examined as markers of national aesthetic values while simultaneously signifying China’s globalization, modernization, and progress. Extending this approach, Lu analyzes Wang Guofeng’s socialist architectural photography, Qin Yufen’s installation works, and Shi Runjiu’s documentary *Bao Du Zhang and Lao Ji’s Family* (2006), thereby capturing the dynamics of cultural and urban space in a multidimensional, layered manner. As he notes, “A fluid, challenging, yet still fragile ‘public space in formation’ is exerting influence on people” (Lu, 2025, p.189). The interplay of different media ultimately produces a complex cultural map of Chinese visuality in the context of globalization: embracing the world while retaining local subjectivity.

These methodological innovations offer several implications for scholars of film aesthetics. Researchers should move beyond the nation-state as the sole analytical frame, adopting a dual perspective that balances global and local dimensions to examine Chinese-language cinema’s development and aesthetic significance. They should also attend to both mainstream commercial narratives and marginalized visual expressions, allowing dominant narratives to reach international audiences while illuminating neglected heterogenous voices. Finally, adopting interdisciplinary and cross-media approaches can guide visual culture research to generate resonances in public spaces with local specificity, enabling Chinese stories to be effectively communicated on a global stage.

Conclusion

Contemporary Chinese Cinema and Visual Culture: Envisioning the Nation is a work of

substantial scholarly value. By providing a clear theoretical framework and rich case analyses, it offers a novel lens for the study of contemporary Chinese cinema and visual culture, while also offering insights into how Chinese scholarship can assert its subjectivity within the international discourse of film aesthetics. Naturally, some issues remain underexplored. On one hand, the book primarily focuses on Chinese cinema and visual culture from the 1990s to the early twenty-first century, with relatively limited engagement with new media visual culture, and thus does not fully connect with the contemporary context of the artificial intelligence era. On the other hand, the analysis centers on the production and signification of visual texts, with comparatively less attention to audience reception and cross-cultural interpretation. This limitation makes it difficult for the book to fully address how aesthetic meanings resonate, gain recognition, or encounter resistance in transnational circulation.

Looking ahead, future scholars in film studies can build upon this work, continuing the scholarly dialogue and advancing Chinese film research toward a more rigorous and expansive academic landscape. By balancing critical perspectives with local consciousness, they can produce research that combines theoretical depth with attentiveness to contemporary cultural and societal concerns, writing new scholarly chapters that reflect both intellectual rigor and temporal relevance.

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