

Analyzing Violence and Spatial Narrative in Chinese Mainland Youth Films (1990-2022)

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the evolution of youth films in Chinese cinema from 1990 to 2022, focusing on the portrayal of youth violence and the use of spatial narratives to reflect the societal and cultural changes in China. Through a comprehensive analysis of selected films, the study traces how youth violence, including domestic, social, and campus violence, has been depicted across three distinct periods. In the 1990s, youth films primarily focused on personal growth and rebellion against family authority, with violence largely reflecting generational conflicts. In the 2000s, as China experienced increased globalization and commercialization, the focus shifted towards social violence, including bullying and peer pressure, as youth navigated the tensions between traditional values and modernity. The 2010s saw a marked rise in campus violence, reflecting the intense academic pressures and mental health challenges faced by Chinese youth.

The paper also explores how spatial narratives—specifically family, public, and campus spaces—play a crucial role in shaping the characters' development. Family spaces are often depicted as restrictive, while public spaces offer a sense of freedom and self-expression. Campus spaces, particularly in recent films, symbolize both the constraints of societal institutions and the potential for individual growth. By examining how violence interacts with these spaces, the study highlights how the evolving portrayal of youth violence in Chinese cinema mirrors societal anxieties and the changing concerns of youth in modern China.

Finally, the paper discusses the implications of these findings for the future of youth films in China, particularly in the context of social media, digital platforms, and globalization. It proposes that filmmakers adopt a more nuanced approach to the portrayal of youth violence and create more authentic representations of youth struggles. The paper also suggests avenues for future research, including comparative studies of youth films from different countries and investigations into the psychological effects of these films on young audiences.

Keywords: Youth films, Chinese cinema, violence, spatial narrative, campus violence, societal change, youth identity, globalization, media influence.

1. INTRODUCTION

Background

The evolution of youth films in Chinese cinema from 1990 to 2022 is a reflection of the dramatic societal transformations that have taken place in China over the past three decades. Beginning in the early 1990s, as China underwent rapid economic reforms and opening to global markets, youth films emerged as an important genre that captured the shifting identity and concerns of young people. During this period, the Chinese government adopted policies that encouraged the liberalization of the film industry, leading to increased opportunities for both domestic and international filmmakers. The rising influence of Western culture and cinema, especially after China's entry

into the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, brought significant shifts in the way youth were represented in films. Chinese Mainland cinema has finally bridged the significant temporal gap with global cinema. Alongside Hong Kong and Taiwanese cinema, it now jointly shapes the vibrant film cultural landscape of contemporary China. The growth of youth and their youthful vitality have evolved into cultural propositions that have garnered extensive attention from both the era and society.(Wang, 2011).

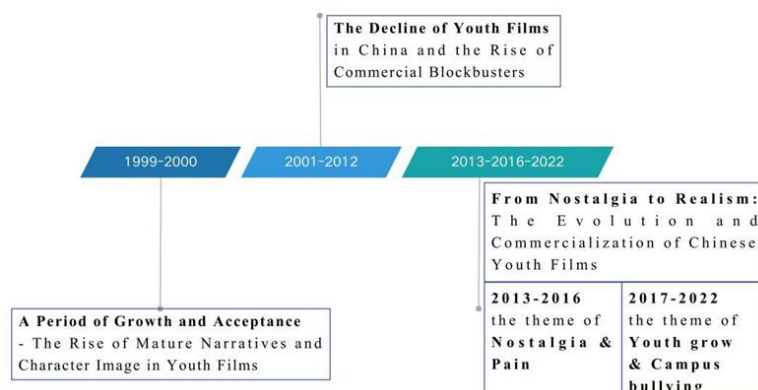
The changing portrayal of youth culture in Chinese cinema is deeply entwined with the broader social changes happening within the country. As the nation's economy boomed, Chinese youth became increasingly exposed to global media, which had a profound impact on their self-perceptions and aspirations. The integration of global technologies, such as digital media and the internet, also played a pivotal role in reshaping how youth films were produced and consumed. Youth cinema has undoubtedly emerged as a distinctive feature of contemporary Chinese cinema. While demonstrating modest yet promising growth in quantity, it has carved out its own artistic lineage, characterized by a pronounced desire for expression and well-defined artistic aspirations. Youth cinema has come to exhibit a converging artistic temperament and spiritual demeanor. Not only do these films maintain intensely focused and remarkably consistent core themes throughout their narratives, but they also demonstrate striking uniformity in their depiction of specific spaces, employment of visual symbols, and positioning of character archetypes (Xie, 2010) .

Furthermore, the commercialization of the Chinese film industry had a significant influence on the portrayal of violence in films. As the industry became more market-driven, there was a noticeable shift towards more sensationalized and dramatic content, which included a more explicit representation of violence. Violence became a tool for filmmakers to address complex societal issues, such as disillusionment, frustration, and alienation among the youth. Among the various forms of entertainment offered by cinema, violence has been affirmed as a fundamental aesthetic element (Xie, 2010) .

Research Focus

This study focuses on three central elements that define the evolution of Chinese youth films from 1990 to 2022: the development of youth films, the depiction of violence, and the role of spatial narratives. Youth films in China during this period not only reflect the changing social and economic landscape but also serve as a lens through which to examine the shifting identities, fears, and desires of Chinese youth. By analyzing the portrayal of violence, this study will explore how films address domestic violence, social violence, and campus violence, each of which has a distinct impact on character development and narrative progression.

Another key focus of this research is the role of spatial narratives in youth films. Space in cinema has always been a powerful narrative tool, and in the case of youth films, the depiction of family, public, and campus spaces is critical in shaping the characters' sense of self and their relationship to the world around them. These spaces are not merely physical backdrops but are symbolic representations of societal constraints and opportunities. The family space often represents traditional Chinese values and the pressure of conformity, while public spaces offer freedom and the possibility of self-expression. The campus, as a site of youth rebellion and personal development, functions as a microcosm of Chinese society, embodying the tensions between individual desires and social expectations.



The development of Youth Films in Chinese mainland from 1990 - 2022

Research Objectives

This research aims to trace the historical and thematic development of youth films in China from 1990 to 2022, considering the social, political, and technological factors that have shaped the genre. Specifically, the paper will:

1. **Examine the historical and thematic development of youth films** in China from 1990 to 2022. This includes analyzing how shifts in Chinese society, such as economic reforms, the rise of digital media, and changing government policies, influenced the way youth were depicted on screen. By exploring the evolution of cinematic narratives and film technology, this research will highlight how youth cinema has transitioned from reflecting the individualized expressions of the 1990s to showcasing a more globalized youth culture.
2. **Critically analyze the representation of violence in youth films**, categorizing it into domestic, social, and campus violence. This research will explore how these different forms of violence function in the narrative to drive character development and explore societal issues. Domestic violence often symbolizes the struggle between traditional family values and personal freedom, while social violence reflects broader societal inequalities, and campus violence highlights the pressures of academic and peer relationships. The study will investigate how these forms of violence are used to reflect the anxieties, frustrations, and conflicts faced by youth in contemporary Chinese society.
3. **Investigate the role of spatial narratives in shaping character growth and societal reflection.** Family, public, and campus spaces are central to the identity formation of youth characters. By analyzing how these spaces are represented in Chinese youth films, the paper will explore how they function not only as physical settings but also as metaphors for the larger social structures that influence the characters' behavior and development. The family space often acts as a site of conflict between tradition and change, while public spaces offer opportunities for freedom and rebellion. The campus space, in particular, serves as a pivotal site where youth struggle with authority, identity, and their place within society. By studying these spaces, the research will highlight how youth films use spatial narratives to critique social norms and offer new possibilities for youth self-expression.

This paper aims to make a significant contribution to the understanding of how Chinese youth films reflect broader societal changes and youth culture in contemporary China. Through a detailed analysis of violence, space, and character development, this study will provide a comprehensive understanding of how youth films serve as a cultural and social artifact, reflecting the aspirations, frustrations, and challenges of a generation navigating a rapidly changing world.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Youth Films and Social Context

The evolution of youth films in China has been profoundly shaped by the nation's socio-political transformations, particularly those occurring after 1990. During the mid-to-late 1980s, Chinese cinema still lacked personalized narratives of youth coming-of-age. However, as China opened its economy to the global market, Chinese youth began to access a broader spectrum of cultural expressions. The mass production of youth cinema stands as both an inevitable consequence of this generation of filmmakers' adherence to an individualistic artistic philosophy and a forceful rebuttal to the political instrumentalist view of cinema (Xie, 2010). These films began to reflect the new dynamics between the individual and society, particularly as the younger generation grappled with the pressures of modernity, globalization, and the erosion of traditional values.

Youth culture, once primarily shaped by state ideology, began to evolve rapidly in the face of external influences, notably the influx of global media, which provided Chinese youth with exposure to Western lifestyles, values, and cinematic traditions. This clash between traditional Chinese values and the allure of global trends became a central theme in youth cinema. In the mid-1980s, Cui Jian's rock music symbolically heralded the birth of the "game-playing generation." Subsequently, the literary prominence of the "Pizi" (rogue) writer Wang Shuo formally

crystallized this generational cohort. Later, as Wang Shuo's novels were adapted into film and television productions in waves, not only were the cynical and irreverent "Pizi" archetypes socially legitimized, but "Pizi culture" transiently emerged as the defining social ethos of China's cultural transformation. (Wang, 2011). Family structures, once a central source of social cohesion and moral guidance, were depicted as sites of conflict, as youth increasingly rebelled against the authoritarian nature of traditional Chinese familial authority. These shifts also coincided with changes in urbanization, where young people began to leave rural areas in search of opportunities in cities, contributing to a growing sense of disconnection and cultural tension between generations.

The evolution of the youth film genre in China is thus intertwined with broader societal shifts, from the influence of Western capitalism to the complexities introduced by the country's rapid economic modernization. The construction of the image of youth in different eras and societies inevitably reflects the cultural demands of dominant social values(Wang, 2011).

Theoretical Frameworks

To provide a robust theoretical foundation for understanding the space within youth films, this paper draws on **Spatial Narrative Theory**, particularly the works of French philosopher Michel Foucault and sociologist Henri Lefebvre. Foucault's concept of "heterotopia" offers a useful lens for analyzing how space in youth films is not merely a physical setting but a complex site of cultural and social meanings. In his theory, heterotopias are spaces of otherness, places that simultaneously represent and disrupt the normal order of society. In youth films, such spaces can include places of rebellion, such as nightclubs, urban streets, and sometimes even schools, where young people negotiate their identities outside traditional structures.

Henri Lefebvre's concept of spatial practices also offers critical insight into how the built environment influences the actions and thoughts of individuals. Lefebvre suggested that space is not merely a physical environment, but rather the materialization of social power, ideology, and economic structures. In the context of youth films, spaces like the home, school, and public spaces are more than backdrops for action; they are key components that influence the development of youth characters. The tension between public and private spaces in youth films often reflects larger societal tensions, such as the desire for individual freedom versus the constraints imposed by family and society. These spatial dynamics help frame the psychological and emotional journeys of characters, giving a deeper understanding of how space influences their perceptions of self and others.

Moreover, **Youth Subculture Theory** provides additional layers of analysis to understand how youth in Chinese cinema are portrayed as a subculture defined by resistance, rebellion, and the search for identity. This theoretical approach focuses on the ways in which youth groups, often marginalized, create their own cultural and social spaces in opposition to mainstream values. According to cultural theorists such as Dick Hebdige, diverse discourses, definitions, and meanings within the ideological sphere vie for signification — that is, for the appropriation of signs — and this struggle even extends to the most unremarkable corners of daily life. The films analyzed in this study reflect this theoretical framework, with youth characters frequently portrayed as engaging in acts of resistance, whether through acts of violence, deviant behavior, or the rejection of parental and institutional authority.

Violence in Cinema

The representation of violence in youth films has long been a subject of both cultural fascination and societal concern. In Chinese youth films, violence has been depicted in both explicit forms—such as physical altercations and bullying—and implicit forms—such as social exclusion, emotional manipulation, and psychological violence. The explicit portrayal of violence often serves as a narrative device to heighten dramatic tension and to explore the darker aspects of youth identity and development. For example, scenes of physical violence between youth characters, often set in the chaotic spaces of schools or urban environments, are used to symbolize the internal and external struggles of young people attempting to assert their identity in a rapidly changing world.

However, implicit forms of violence—such as the emotional manipulation of peers, social exclusion, and the alienation that accompanies societal pressures—are equally significant. These forms of violence are often depicted as the emotional and psychological burdens that youth carry, stemming from societal expectations, familial pressures, or class struggles. This moderate violence, characterized by transgression and bounded by

subversiveness, has been continually expressed and reinforced in subsequent lyrical coming-of-age films. Today, such tempered violence has become one of the fundamental aesthetic paradigms for depicting violence in youth growth narratives.(Wang, 2011)

Violence, whether explicit or implicit, is used in Chinese youth films not only to drive the plot forward but also to reflect the societal anxieties of the time. The violence depicted in youth films serves as a mirror for the struggles and disillusionments of a generation caught between the conflicting forces of modernity and tradition. It often speaks to the alienation and frustration that young people experience as they seek to define their identity in a world that is both promising and perilous. The role of violence, then, is not simply to shock or entertain, but to offer a critique of the social and familial systems that often fail to support or understand the needs of youth. As shown in *Figure 1*, the outcry of young people in rock music reveals the contradictions between the youth group and society. The function of violence in the narrative serves to manifest the realistic circumstances faced by Chinese society.



Figure1- On July 16, 1988, the seventh edition of People's Daily published an article, lyrics and songs about Cui Jian (崔健) and the rock music *Nothing to My Name*

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Qualitative Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the development of youth films in Chinese mainland cinema from 1990 to 2022, with a specific emphasis on the portrayal of violence and the use of spatial narrative structures. The qualitative approach is particularly suited to this research because it allows for an in-depth examination of symbolic content, narrative devices, and thematic nuances that cannot be quantified in purely numerical terms. Rather than aiming to measure the frequency of violence or categorize space through rigid coding systems, this methodology prioritizes the interpretation of meaning, subtext, and emotional resonance within the films. Through close reading and interpretive analysis, the study will identify patterns, themes, and shifts in cinematic storytelling that reflect broader societal transformations.

The sample comprises twelve youth films spanning three significant periods: the maturation period of the 1990s, the decline phase from 2001 to 2012, and the transitional era from 2013 to 2022 marked by a shift from nostalgia to realism. Each film has been selected based on its narrative complexity, critical reception, and thematic engagement with youth-related issues such as identity crisis, social pressure, rebellion, and violence. Particular attention is given to the films' structure, character arcs, and mise-en-scène, especially regarding the spatial environments in which the narrative unfolds. Any analysis must situate all information within a broader framework of social structural factors, including politics, gender issues, race, class, and ideology. This entails examining how these factors align with or contradict both the universal perceptions and images we hold about ourselves, as well as those embedded within local contexts. (Robert, 2004)

In this methodology, narrative structure is examined to understand how plotlines evolve, especially in relation to moments of violence and spatial tension. Character development is traced in connection with how young protagonists navigate personal dilemmas in environments such as family homes, schools, and public spaces. These

character trajectories are compared across decades to observe any transformations in cinematic storytelling and thematic focus. In this way, the study combines textual analysis with cultural critique, drawing from theories of film narratology, spatial representation, and youth subcultures to interpret how violence and space function within the selected films.

Data Collection

The data collection process integrates multiple qualitative techniques to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research problem. First, thematic analysis of film content is conducted to identify recurring motifs related to violence (domestic, social, and campus-based) and spatial dynamics (family, public, and school environments). These themes are tracked across the selected films to discern how their function changes over time and within varying social contexts. Thematic coding is used not in a statistical sense, but as a guide to structure interpretation and reveal underlying cinematic strategies.

In addition to textual analysis, qualitative interviews are conducted with filmmakers, critics, and academic scholars who specialize in Chinese cinema and youth studies. These interviews serve to contextualize the films within the broader framework of Chinese cultural production and provide expert insights into the creative intentions behind certain narrative and aesthetic choices. Their observations will help deepen the analysis of how violence and space are conceived by those involved in the film industry and offer perspectives on how these elements connect with real-world youth experiences.

Moreover, surveys are distributed to a targeted group of young audiences in China, particularly university students aged 18–25, to assess how they perceive and interpret violence and space in youth films. These responses allow for a reflection on audience reception and contribute to understanding how effectively youth films resonate with contemporary youth concerns. The survey results will not be used to establish generalizations but rather to provide anecdotal evidence and thematic reinforcement for the core analytical claims of the paper.

Observational research is also integrated into the data collection process. This involves a close study of how spatial elements are used in specific scenes to influence tone, character interaction, and thematic development. For instance, particular attention is paid to camera movement, framing, lighting, and set design as tools that visually emphasize confinement, liberation, conflict, or alienation within the space.

Film Selection Criteria

The selection of the twelve films analyzed in this study follows clear and deliberate criteria. Each film has been chosen based on its thematic focus on youth-related issues, particularly the depiction of violence and its reliance on spatial environments to develop character and narrative arcs. Only films that feature youth as primary protagonists, with a strong emphasis on personal or social conflict, have been included in the sample. Additionally, the films must present at least one form of violence—domestic, social, or campus—that is integral to the plot. This ensures that the analysis remains centered on how violence functions as a narrative device and symbol of wider societal tensions.

An equally important selection criterion is the role of space in the film. Each chosen film must utilize at least two major spatial settings—family, public, or school space—in such a way that it contributes to the unfolding of the narrative or the psychological development of the protagonist. Spatial dynamics are critical for evaluating how youth navigate societal expectations, institutional authority, and personal freedom. The presence of recurring spatial motifs across the film sample allows for comparative analysis across time periods and cultural contexts.

Finally, the films selected have received recognition at national or international film festivals, or have achieved critical acclaim within academic circles. This recognition ensures that the films are not only culturally relevant but also reflect the artistic and intellectual aspirations of the filmmakers. These selections include works from both mainstream commercial cinema and independent productions, providing a balanced overview of how youth issues are portrayed across different segments of the Chinese film industry. By drawing from both established and emerging voices in Chinese cinema, the study offers a rich and nuanced perspective on the development of youth film as a genre, as well as its evolving engagement with violence and space.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Evolution of Youth Films (1990–2022)

The portrayal of youth in Chinese cinema has undergone significant changes over the past three decades, reflecting the broader social, economic, and political transformations in the country. In the **1990–2000** period, youth films primarily focused on personal growth, rebellion, and family dynamics. During this phase, films were often deeply rooted in the social and cultural transformations following China's economic reforms. These films depicted youth navigating the generational divides created by the rapid modernization of the country. The narratives of this period revolved around emotional conflicts between the younger generation's desire for independence and the older generation's adherence to traditional values. Youth violence in this period was depicted mostly within domestic settings, where family tension and generational conflict often led to acts of rebellion and emotional upheaval.

The **2001–2012** period saw an increased global influence on Chinese cinema, particularly from Hollywood. This shift led to a more commercially oriented film industry, where the narratives began to reflect a more introspective look at youth identity and alienation. The portrayal of violence shifted from being primarily domestic to include more **social violence**, such as bullying, peer pressure, and societal exclusion. This was a time when the social fabric of China was rapidly changing, and youth were increasingly struggling with balancing traditional values with the temptations of global consumer culture. Youth violence in this era, therefore, was not just an internal conflict but also a reflection of broader social issues like class struggle and the pressure to conform to societal expectations. Films from this period became more stylized, with increased attention to psychological and emotional dimensions of violence.

The most notable shift occurred in the **2013–2022** period, where **campus violence** took center stage. As the educational system became increasingly competitive, youth films began focusing on the emotional and psychological toll of academic pressure, bullying, and the intense desire for success. This period marked a significant escalation in the depiction of **campus violence**, both physical and psychological. In many films, the school environment became a central setting for conflict, symbolizing the pressures youth face in Chinese society. Campus violence in this period became a metaphor for the broader societal issues of competition, conformity, and the pursuit of academic excellence, reflecting the increasing mental health challenges among young people. The rise in campus violence portrayed in films revealed a deeper concern about the emotional and psychological well-being of youth, as they struggled with academic stress and social pressure.

Analysis of Violence

The depiction of violence in youth films plays a crucial role in shaping character development and advancing the plot. **Domestic violence** in earlier films was often used to highlight the conflict between the older, traditional generation and the younger, more rebellious generation. In these films, violence was often a direct result of rigid familial expectations and authoritarian parenting styles. As youth rebelled against these pressures, violence became a means of asserting independence or signaling emotional distress.

As Chinese youth films evolved in the **2001–2012** period, the depiction of violence became more complex. **Social violence**, such as bullying, exclusion, and peer pressure, emerged as central themes. These films portrayed how youth were subjected to various forms of social aggression, including emotional and psychological manipulation, often within the context of their peer groups or educational settings. Social violence in these films reflected the deep-seated anxieties youth felt about their place in society, highlighting the internal struggles that many youth faced as they navigated the expectations placed upon them by both their families and society at large.

By the **2013–2022** period, **campus violence** became the dominant form of violence depicted in youth films. The pressures of the academic system, along with the social dynamics within schools, led to a significant increase in violent acts among students. Bullying, both physical and emotional, became a central theme in many films. These films not only depicted the outward violence between students but also the emotional trauma and psychological effects that such violence caused. Campus violence in this period is often portrayed as a manifestation of the competitive educational system and the pressures youth face to succeed at all costs. These films increasingly

highlighted the toll that academic and social pressures take on youth, including mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and self-harm.

Spatial Narrative in Youth Films

The role of **spatial narrative** in youth films is crucial for understanding how environments shape character behavior and development. **Family space**, in early youth films, is depicted as restrictive and confining. Family homes often represent the traditional values that are imposed on the youth by older generations. The restrictive nature of the family space is used to highlight the emotional and psychological struggles of youth as they attempt to break free from the expectations and authority of their families. These films portray the family space as a site of conflict, where youth face emotional repression and stifled personal expression.

In contrast, **public space** is depicted as a site of freedom and self-expression. Public spaces, such as streets, parks, and open areas, offer youth the opportunity to escape from the constraints of their family and educational environments. These spaces become places where youth can express their individuality and explore their identities away from the judgment of authority figures. Public spaces in youth films serve as metaphors for personal freedom, offering characters a temporary refuge from the pressures of family and school life. Public space represents autonomy and the opportunity for youth to engage with the world on their own terms.

Finally, **campus space** becomes increasingly significant in youth films from 2001 onward, reflecting the growing importance of educational environments in shaping the lives of youth. School campuses in these films represent a battleground where youth struggle with societal expectations, academic pressure, and peer relationships. The campus space is depicted as both a site of opportunity and oppression, where youth must navigate institutional authority while attempting to assert their personal identity. The films highlight the emotional and psychological conflicts that arise from the competition, conformity, and social interactions within school environments. As youth face increasing pressure to perform academically and conform socially, the campus space becomes a central setting for conflict and character development.

5. DISCUSSION

Changes in Narrative Focus

Over the course of the three periods studied (1990-2022), the portrayal of youth violence in Chinese cinema has undergone a significant transformation, reflecting broader shifts in society. In the **1990s**, youth films were primarily focused on familial relationships and the emotional struggles of young characters within the home. Violence during this period was often portrayed as a direct response to family authority, with youth rebelling against parental expectations and societal norms. The emphasis was on personal growth and the tension between the older and younger generations, with youth violence often serving as a catalyst for character development. These films captured the anxieties of a generation caught between traditional Confucian values and the rapidly changing socio-political environment of post-reform China.

In contrast, the **2000s** saw the increasing globalization and commercialization of Chinese cinema, which influenced the way youth violence was depicted. The narrative focus shifted toward broader societal issues such as social violence, bullying, and peer pressure, reflecting the pressures young people faced within their social and educational environments. During this period, films depicted youth as struggling with identity crises, alienation, and the psychological effects of societal expectations, especially in relation to academic achievement and social conformity. The depiction of violence became more complex, incorporating both physical violence and emotional manipulation, showing how social dynamics such as competition, status, and acceptance contributed to youth aggression and psychological harm.

The most significant shift occurred in the **2010s**, where **campus violence** became a central theme in youth films. With the intensification of China's educational system, films began to focus more explicitly on the psychological and emotional impact of academic pressures. Youth violence, particularly within the school setting, became not only a depiction of physical conflict but also a reflection of deeper issues such as mental health struggles, social isolation, and the emotional toll of competitive education. These films illustrated the anxiety and stress experienced by young people as they navigated the challenges of school life, social expectations, and peer relationships. The rise of

campus violence in Chinese youth films during this period offers a poignant reflection of contemporary youth concerns, highlighting how institutional and societal pressures shape the behaviors and experiences of young people.

Role of Space in Character Development

The use of **spatial narratives** in youth films is integral to understanding how environments shape the identities and behaviors of characters. Each space—whether it be the family home, public areas, or campus settings—serves as a reflection of the larger societal forces influencing the characters' emotional and psychological journeys. **Family space** is often depicted as restrictive, embodying the societal expectations placed on youth by their families. In many films from the 1990s, the family environment serves as a site of emotional conflict, where the youth struggle to assert their independence and find their identity in a context that emphasizes tradition and authority. Family space is often portrayed as stifling, limiting the characters' growth and forcing them to confront the generational gap between their desires for personal freedom and the expectations placed on them by their elders.

Public space, on the other hand, offers youth a sense of freedom and independence. It becomes a place where characters can explore their identities, form relationships, and engage with the world beyond the confines of family and school. Public spaces such as streets, parks, and urban settings symbolize escape and autonomy, providing youth with the physical and emotional space to break free from the pressures of home and society. These spaces allow for self-expression and exploration, marking a significant shift from the family-centered narrative to one in which the characters venture into the broader social world.

As youth films evolved, particularly in the **2000s and 2010s**, **campus space** began to dominate the narrative. Schools and universities became the primary setting where youth characters interacted with authority figures, peers, and their own sense of self. The campus was depicted as both a site of opportunity and constraint, where youth struggled with academic pressures, social expectations, and personal aspirations. The school environment became symbolic of the larger societal forces at play, representing the competition, conformity, and institutional authority that youth had to navigate. As the depiction of campus violence increased, the school environment shifted from being a place of learning to a site of conflict, where youth confront their inner turmoil and the external pressures of academic success and social acceptance.

Violence as a Reflection of Youth Subculture

Youth violence in Chinese cinema is often framed as a form of **resistance, empowerment, or identity construction**. Violence is not simply an isolated act but rather a means for youth to assert their autonomy, challenge authority, and navigate their place in society. This is particularly evident in earlier youth films, where violence served as a reaction to familial and social constraints. For many characters, violence becomes a tool for reclaiming control over their lives, an expression of their frustration with the expectations and limitations imposed by their families and society.

In many youth films, particularly in the **2000s and 2010s**, violence also reflects the **youth subculture's resistance** to mainstream culture. According to **Youth Subculture Theory**, youth often define themselves in opposition to the dominant cultural norms, and violence can serve as an expression of defiance. In these films, violence becomes a way for youth to construct their identities, to challenge the social norms that dictate their behavior, and to navigate the complexities of belonging and power. The depiction of violence as part of a youth subculture highlights the broader social context in which youth act out their frustrations. It underscores the ways in which societal pressures—whether related to academic achievement, peer relationships, or familial expectations—can lead youth to engage in aggressive or self-destructive behavior as a means of asserting their existence in a world that often seems to marginalize them.

Impact of Globalization and Marketization

The increasing **marketization** and **globalization** of Chinese cinema have had a profound influence on the portrayal of youth issues, particularly violence. As China's film industry became more integrated with global cinema, filmmakers began to adopt Western storytelling techniques and genres, which in turn influenced the way youth violence was depicted on screen. The global success of Hollywood action films, thrillers, and teen dramas has

led to the incorporation of similar themes and narrative structures in Chinese youth films. This trend has contributed to a more **globalized cinematic language**, where issues of youth violence, identity, and rebellion are explored within a framework that blends Chinese social realities with global storytelling trends.

The commercialization of Chinese cinema has also led to an emphasis on **sensationalism**, where violence is often used to attract audiences and increase box office sales. While this has led to more graphic portrayals of violence, it has also raised important questions about the ethical responsibilities of filmmakers in representing youth issues. As youth films become more commercialized, there is a risk that the portrayal of violence could be oversimplified or sensationalized, reducing its social relevance and impact. Filmmakers need to strike a balance between creating engaging narratives and maintaining a realistic, thoughtful representation of the challenges faced by youth in contemporary society. The globalization of the film industry has introduced new opportunities for Chinese youth cinema to address global issues, but it also requires filmmakers to be mindful of how these issues are portrayed and the impact they may have on audiences.

6. CONCLUSION

Summary of Key Findings

This study has examined the evolution of youth films in Chinese cinema from 1990 to 2022, focusing on the portrayal of youth violence and the role of spatial narratives in reflecting the societal transformations within China. Across the three periods studied, youth films have progressively adapted to the shifting social and cultural landscapes, with the portrayal of violence and the use of space evolving in response to these changes. In the **1990s**, youth films were largely shaped by the societal transitions of post-reform China, with a focus on familial conflicts, generational divides, and personal rebellion. Violence in this period was predominantly domestic, reflecting the strained relationships between youth and authority figures. The films portrayed the younger generation's struggle for independence and identity, mirroring the broader societal shift from traditional values to more individualistic ideals.

The **2000s** marked a period of increased globalization and commercialization in Chinese cinema. Youth films from this period began to shift their focus from domestic violence to **social violence**, exploring issues like bullying, peer pressure, and social exclusion. These films reflected the growing influence of global media and the tensions between traditional values and the influx of Western ideals. The themes of alienation, identity crises, and internal conflict became more prominent, as youth struggled with their place in a rapidly modernizing society. The portrayal of violence shifted from being merely physical to include more psychological and emotional forms of aggression, highlighting the impact of societal expectations and global influences on Chinese youth.

In the **2010s**, the focus shifted once again, with **campus violence** becoming the central theme in many youth films. This shift reflects the increasing pressures within China's competitive educational system, where youth face intense academic stress, social competition, and the burden of societal expectations. Films from this period increasingly depicted violence not just as a form of rebellion or resistance but also as a manifestation of deeper emotional and psychological struggles. These films offer a nuanced portrayal of the impact of academic pressures, mental health issues, and the search for personal identity within the context of an oppressive educational environment. The rise of campus violence in this period underscores the growing concern over the mental and emotional well-being of youth in contemporary Chinese society.

Implications for Future Cinema

The future of youth films in China will undoubtedly be influenced by the continued rise of social media, digital platforms, and global streaming services. As technology advances and digital media becomes more prevalent, youth films will be increasingly shaped by the realities of the digital age. Social media platforms provide new avenues for exploring the complexities of youth identity, self-expression, and social dynamics. The way youth engage with technology and the online world will become an important area for filmmakers to explore in future youth cinema.

Furthermore, the increasing marketization of Chinese cinema calls for a more responsible and nuanced portrayal of **youth violence**. Filmmakers must move beyond sensationalized depictions of violence and instead focus on the underlying causes of aggression, including societal pressures, family dysfunction, and academic stress. Violence

should be portrayed not just as a plot device, but as a complex emotional response to the challenges faced by youth in contemporary China. There is an opportunity for filmmakers to create more authentic and thoughtful representations of youth struggles, moving away from clichés and offering a deeper exploration of the psychological and emotional experiences of young people.

The rise of global streaming services also presents an opportunity for Chinese youth films to reach a wider audience, both domestically and internationally. Filmmakers should be mindful of the global influences shaping youth culture, while also ensuring that the portrayal of youth issues remains authentic to Chinese societal realities. As global cinema continues to evolve, there is a need for Chinese filmmakers to strike a balance between local cultural contexts and universal themes, allowing their films to resonate with audiences both in China and abroad.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future research should focus on comparing youth films from China with those from other countries, particularly with regard to the portrayal of youth violence and identity. Comparative studies could explore how cultural, political, and social differences shape the representation of youth struggles in different contexts. It would be valuable to examine how youth violence is framed in films from other parts of Asia, Europe, or the Americas, to better understand how global trends in youth cinema intersect with regional cultural concerns.

Another important avenue for future research is the psychological impact of youth films on their audiences. Studies could explore how young people interpret and react to the violence depicted in these films, as well as how such portrayals influence their perceptions of authority, power, and social norms. Researchers could investigate how the representation of youth violence in Chinese cinema affects the attitudes and behaviors of young viewers, particularly in relation to aggression, peer relationships, and mental health. Understanding these effects could offer valuable insights into the broader social impact of cinema and its role in shaping youth culture.

Finally, further research could also investigate how **youth subcultures** are represented in Chinese youth films, particularly in relation to the ways youth express resistance to societal norms. This could involve examining how different subgroups, such as students from different socioeconomic backgrounds, ethnic minorities, or digital natives, are portrayed in relation to violence and identity formation. Such studies could shed light on how cinema reflects and reinforces cultural divisions and social inequalities within Chinese society.

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