

Keyword: Alternative Space

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Abstract

This article discusses the connotation of the term ‘alternative space’, and explores the evolution of alternative spaces for Chinese independent films in the past decades. The author reflects upon the origin of alternative spaces, their locality, development, features, administrative properties, and significance in the Chinese social and cultural context. Some reflections are conclusive, yet also adequately descriptive of the current reality of the subject, which, according to the author, is still in development.

The term ‘alternative space’, as a cultural concept, is imported. It can be translated into *tidai kongjian* (替代空间) (literally substitutional space) or *linglei kongjian* (另类空间) (literally other space) in Chinese. The difference between these two translations is small, and they are used according to individual understandings of the connotations and the relevant context. This article explores alternative spaces constituted by and within Chinese independent cinema, whose destinies are determined by the Chinese cinema system. ‘Censorship’ is the key word of the Chinese cinema system. It is an administrative and ideological measure.

To submit to censorship is a central element of the overall production process in the Chinese film-making industry, and an inevitable step on the way to final release and distribution. Censorship in China impedes the production of independent films, which, consequently, have to look for alternative channels in the cultural environment to make up for their missing place in the institutional structure. In this sense, the term ‘substitutional space’ is more appropriate and pertinent than ‘other space’ in that it reveals the dialectical relationships of the existent and the non-existent and of the dominant and the marginal between the state cinema system and Chinese independent films. This ‘alternative space’ is not only physical, but also symbolic. What’s more, the term ‘alternative space’ does not exclude the Otherness of such spaces, which is manifested in the fusion of their physical properties and their cultural standing. To put it plainly, alternative spaces in Chinese independent cinema are not fully equipped movie theatres, hence alternative and substitutional venues.

Alternative spaces originally referred to non-commercial and non-profit art spaces that emerged in the field of contemporary art in the United States in the late 1960s and then became popular throughout the 1970s. Most of these spaces were transformed by spontaneous local artists from abandoned and unused urban spaces. The creative and curatorial practice they carried out in these spaces were, according to contemporary understanding, an endorsement of the avant-garde. The commonplace art forms of today, such as video art, conceptual art, new media art and performance art, were pushed to the forefront, expressing dissatisfaction with classic exhibition modes and work styles and challenging mainstream perceptions. Artists did not conceal their rebellion against the institutionalisation of the existing art system and the commercial nature of art galleries when they occupied unused city spaces and changed their functions and properties through exhibition. Individual artists and art workers were deeply involved in and strongly expressed their own opinions towards social agendas such as urban renewal and the anti-war movement. The alternative space is without doubt an outcome of the historical development of American modern arts.

Alternative spaces have developed in their own right in the United States. Since the 1980s and 1990s, some of the spaces that were once active have disappeared, and some have been incorporated by art institutions. But the inner spirit of alternative spaces has not diminished, and lots of experiences can be passed on. Alternative spaces also emerged in other regions and places outside of the United States, inspiring local artistic practices and playing a social function. At that time, the Asia-Pacific region was in the midst of the economic boom, and alternative spaces became popular in the cities of Japan and East Asia. Their organisational and operational modes brought more initiatives and energy to local art production.

This article will not investigate the path through which the term ‘alternative spaces’, as a kind of intellectual discourse and reference experience, was introduced into the contemporary Chinese art scene, nor will it investigate the exact time when it was introduced. However, from the perspective of art history, spaces with alternative features appeared from the late 1970s and developed continuously in line with China’s reform and opening up to the outside world, although the term was not used to define and name such spaces. By the mid-to-late 1990s, Chinese contemporary artists and art works were gradually known on the international stage, and lots of activities took place in alternative spaces (or other spaces), with both terms being no longer unfamiliar to people in this field. Around 2000, when Beijing 798 was transformed from a declining state-owned factory into a contemporary art park, Chinese artists knew of its New York counterpart, namely SOHO. In the past two decades, a lot of alternative spaces have bloomed in the contemporary Chinese art field, and more conscious efforts have been put into their discursive construction.

The situation with Chinese independent film is slightly different. It cannot be said that there is no awareness of alternative space in this area, but the first and only time I encountered the use of this term was in Ou Ning's (欧宁) account of Yuanyinghui (缘影会) (literally the Society of Film Fans). His overall description was also inspired by contemporary art. In fact, 'alternative space' is not a popular term, neither is there a common consciousness about it in the field of independent films, where, however, real and functional alternative spaces keep emerging in different localities. The origin of alternative spaces for Chinese independent films can be traced back to the emergence of film societies in some large and medium-sized cities in China around 2000, such as the Practice Society (实践社) in Beijing, the U-theque Organisation (缘影会) in Shenzhen and Guangzhou, the 101 Film Club (电影101工作室) in Shanghai, the Rear Window Film Appreciation Club (后窗看电影) in Nanjing, the Freedom Film Society (自由电影) in Shenyang, other film societies in Wuhan and Chengdu, and the film study group (电影学习小组) in Kunming, Yunnan province. As a cultural phenomenon, the emergence of these societies, in a general sense, are the outcome of urbanisation and social development in the process of reform and opening up, but more specifically, it was largely dependent on the improvement of the wider Chinese film environment at that time: not in relief from censorship, but in the prosperous pirated disc market in the late 1990s, which provided movie lovers with an unprecedented amount of resources including art films. Film societies established by movie fans kept looking for public venues to show great films. Therefore, almost all society activities started with screenings of classics by the great masters of film, and then quickly included local films, namely, contemporary Chinese independent films.

Looking back over the past few decades, Chinese independent films, growing from scratch in an institutionalised film system and environment in the late 1980s and early 1990s, bore an inherent demand for the emergence of alternative spaces. In the following decade, many directors produced good films that were shown in international film festivals but unknown to the Chinese audience. The reason was that independent films were not legitimate in relation to the Chinese cinema system and were not entitled to public release. As a result, for a long period, Chinese audiences had no access to independent films despite of the latter's fame in the international field.

Independent films were given a new lease of life around the year of 2000. A new generation of independent filmmakers, thanks to the advent of digital camera, were soon to make their debut. Most of them were born in the 1970s and did not receive a professional film education. Out of the intention of expressing themselves, they started filming with video cameras and contributed their first works at the beginning of the burgeoning DV era, such as *Old Men* 老头 (dir. Yang Lina 杨荔钠, 1999), *Beijing Cotton Fluffer* 北京弹匠 (dir. Zhu Chuanming 朱传明, 1999), *Along the Railway* 铁路沿线 (dir. Du Haibin 杜海滨, 2000), *More Than One is Unhappy* 不快乐的不止你一个 (dir. Wang Fen

王分, 2000), as well as *Jiang Hu* 江湖 (1999) produced by the veteran documentary producer Wu Wenguang (吴文光) in this period.

These works were first introduced to the public by Beijing Practice Society, which, though established later than Shenzhen Yuanying Film Club, was the first film society to show independent films and launch live post-screening dialogues between the filmmaker and the audience. Some of the organisers of the Practice Society were students and graduates from the Beijing Film Academy and had some knowledge of independent films and connections with filmmakers. This convenient access to resources made the Practice Society the best-known organiser of independent film screenings within six months of its establishment.

However, the so-called Practice Society existed only on paper rather than being a real entity with well-defined organisational structures, rights and obligations. All film societies and clubs in China at that time were not administrative organisations, but spontaneous groups started by young film lovers on a whim. The situation started to change as independent film screenings became regular activities reaching more extended audiences and independent film exhibitions were put on. In order to hold these public events legally, film societies adapted themselves into administrative organisations by affiliating to research institutions, universities, art centres, and commercial companies, because few non-profit organisations in China were entitled to legal independent status.

The Practice Society first showed independent films in the bar on Huang Tingzi street no. 50, three hundred meters away from the Beijing Film Academy. Jian Ning (简宁), the owner of the bar, was a contemporary poet, and his partner, Mr. Lin, understood from his past experience of living in the US the role of bars as hubs of marginal cultural activity. In addition, Beijing as the cultural centre at that time was eager to embrace every single type of new activity. Therefore, from August 2000 for about a year, the bar on Huang Tingzi street no. 50 became the fixed venue for Saturday afternoon independent film screenings by the Practice Society. It was here that the Practice Society organised the most influential and well-received events. The bar disappeared a long time ago, but the cultural memories with it would always be embedded in the hearts of film lovers of that period.

Neither the organisers of the Practice Society nor the audience realised that they had jointly created a space for independent films that had long been trapped in institutional limbo and hence out of sight of the public. In this space, these highly personal cultural products could be seen and discussed by the public. This entry of independent films to the public sphere was both tangible and symbolic, breaking their long-standing institutional confinement. In the mainland Chinese cultural scene, the bar on Huang Tingzi street no. 50 became an alternative space in the network of institutional regulations

and film censorship.

The Practice Society explored more spaces in bars and multi-purpose classrooms at universities. Though it never used the name ‘alternative space’ or ‘other space’ in any instance, what it did in promoting Chinese independent films was an effort to construct alternative spaces. One year later, after the first public independent film screening, the Practice Society, jointly with Shenyang Freedom Film Society and organisers from film societies from all over the country, launched and held the first independent film festival in Beijing. The festival held a nationwide tour in Shenyang, Hangzhou, Xi’an and Kunming, meeting its audiences and awakening awareness of independent films among a more extensive public. Film societies throughout the country held activities in the following twenty years despite constant interference and the obstructions of censorship. More and more alternative spaces emerged in the process, like sparks of fire spreading widely.

This creation of independent film spaces was spontaneous. Nor did it seek to name itself. Ou Ning used the term ‘alternative spaces’ in an interview about the work of Shenzhen Yuanying Film Club, but there was no consensus regarding awareness or understanding of this term in the field of Chinese independent film. There was a misalignment between discourse and reality: it was the demands and reality of Chinese culture that finally activated the term, while the discourse and experience of the other only played a supplementary role. That is to say, whether we call them ‘alternative spaces’ or not, spaces for showing independent film would have been created and maintained in China regardless.

The development of alternative spaces has undergone three phases since 2000. The first phase was from 2000 to 2003 when film societies were established in different Chinese cities and the first Chinese independent film festival was held through their joint efforts. The second phase was from 2003 to 2013 when the Chinese cities of Beijing, Nanjing, Chongqing and Kunming held their own independent film festivals. In the third phase from 2013 to the present, independent film festivals in different cities were abolished and new ways of showing independent films took the place. This time line shows that the evolution of alternative spaces in China is parallel with the development of independent films. Alternative spaces, as a cultural product, holds a marginal position in the Chinese cultural and social structure, and this marginality gathers genuine enthusiasm and efforts that keep Chinese independent films alive. From its emergence to the present, Chinese independent film has maintained a valuable development continuity in a complete loop from film shooting to dissemination (if not distribution in its proper sense). It is valuable because behind every single step forward, there are the people who, though not connected in daily life, identify with each other in their common emotional and cultural pursuits, or the spirit of cultural resistance that was spontaneously born in

them and will never be given up.

One thing about alternative spaces in China that has remained the same throughout the past twenty years: they emerge out of bars, book shops, multifunctional classrooms in universities, lecture halls in libraries, and screening rooms in art centres, etc. Therefore, alternative spaces are loaned and owners of spaces and organisers of activities work together to make events happen. That is to say, alternative spaces for independent films are ‘adhesive’ in nature, which distinguishes them from spaces for other purposes such as contemporary art exhibition. Generally, alternative spaces for other purposes are easier to maintain as they are more likely to be owned by producers and patrons of art works. The situation of spaces for Chinese independent films enriches the connotations of the term ‘alternative space’ by endowing them with a sense of mobility and uncertainty, which echoes with the features of local film societies in China.

The current situation of alternative spaces for independent films reflects their difficulties in entering the domain of dominant culture in China. In 2010, Fanhall Studio (现象工作室) established the Fanhall Art Centre (现象艺术中心) in Xiaobao Village of Songzhuang in Tongzhou, Beijing. The art centre was a three-storey building with a café and a cinema inside, and functioned as the venue for the annual film festival and independent film screenings. The Fanhall Art Centre was a pioneer in providing an independent, long-term space for Chinese independent films. It was the alternative space proper as far as its defining features, administrative properties, operation modes, and the events held were concerned. Unfortunately, it suffered repeated setbacks and was finally banned from showing independent films three years later.

The efforts made by film societies to explore alternative spaces for independent films were spontaneous. The earliest alternative spaces showed films for free and received no financial support. Audiences coming to bars were limited groups with small numbers, while film showings at universities were by convention free of charge. Most of all, as they were not licensed, independent films were not approved for commercial purposes, and were thus not legitimately available for public circulation – even if this was not technically illegal.

Members of film societies volunteered to maintain alternative spaces and sought sponsorship to cover the basic expenses. As the acquisition of sponsorship was dependent on chance, to promote independent films would have almost been a mission impossible were it not for the persistence and enthusiasm of volunteers. In recent years, some film societies started to sell tickets to cover expenses such as inviting directors, but the overall situation was still difficult. In fact, it is unrealistic to expect independent films to turn a profit in any cultural system. The final way out for alternative spaces is,

hopefully, to receive supports from cultural funds on the basis of the recognition of their cultural value.

To sum up, as the term 'alternative space' has been completely localised in China, only in the Chinese social and cultural context can its connotations be fully understood. In the past twenty years, alternative spaces have provided a channel for Chinese independent films to reach an audience and made them visible to more public. Alternative spaces, together with Chinese independent films, will leave their imprint on the cultural history of China. At the same time, this is not finished work. The creation of alternative spaces in the independent film scene is still a dynamic process, with a long road ahead. Only over the *longue durée* of history will the full image of alternative spaces be revealed.