

Introduction

Chronotopia: Urban Space and Time in Twenty-First-Century Sinophone Film and Fiction

So he will be obliged to define time in such a way that the rate of a clock depends upon where the clock may be.

—Einstein, “The Foundation of the General Theory of Relativity”

In literature and art itself, temporal and spatial determinations are inseparable from one another, and always coloured by emotions and values.

—Bakhtin, “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel”

According to Albert Einstein’s theories of relativity, space and time form a unified fabric that shapes and is shaped by the mass of the objects that inhabit it.¹ This means that there are no absolute coordinates for the universe, but that statements about things like velocity and position will be relative to the individual observer. We understand this to be true on an astronomic scale for all the stuff that goes on at the fringes of and beyond Earth’s atmosphere—from GPS satellites to distant black holes, but usually this fact has little impact on how we behave on a day-to-day basis. In fiction, however, the implications of relativity and warped space-time can be introduced into quotidian scenarios to form a textual link between the seemingly diverse chronotopes of universe and living room. Here space can become not just theoretically but perceptibly mutable and a moment in time can be made to linger on the pages of a book.²

One of the first literary scholars to be inspired by Einstein’s concept of space-time was Mikhail Bakhtin, who, in his influential essay “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel” from 1937, used the term *chronotope* to describe how different literary environments determined plot development and narrative structure. In his analysis, the literary landscape affects how objects and characters behave and move about, just as space-time curvature determines the paths

of celestial bodies. For example, he described the road as a linear chronotope of unexpected meetings, whereas the village engenders a more circular temporality defined by departure and return.³

Since Bakhtin, several literary scholars, such as Robert Nadeau, Katherine Hayle, Susan Strehle, and Elana Gomel, have continued the practice of borrowing concepts and metaphors from contemporary physics to analyze fiction, while Wai Chee Dimock has used Einstein's description of observer relativity as a model for a more democratic form of literary criticism.⁴ Whereas Bakhtin wrote at a time when narratology focused largely on literary temporality,⁵ we have since experienced a spatial turn in literary studies, beginning in the 1960s, with geographers like Doreen Massey, Edward Soja, and David Harvey as well as cultural theorists such as Henri Lefebvre and Michel Foucault drawing attention to the spatial conditions of human life. Indeed, Foucault contended that the latter part of the twentieth century constituted an "epoch of space" following the nineteenth century's attention to history.⁶ This trend in literary research is continuing strong today with a dedicated book series, *Geocriticism and Spatial Literary Studies*, edited by Robert Tally Jr., devoted to the subject. However, as Elana Gomel argues, and many adherents of spatiality studies acknowledge, since narrative is inherently temporal, all the four dimensions are relevant to literary analysis, particularly in the case of modern and postmodern fiction written after the new narratives of relative space-time first became part of a common vocabulary.⁷ In the field of philosophy, scholars such as Kuang-ming Wu have argued that an understanding of space and time as inextricably entangled is neither new nor strange. He contends that premodern Chinese thinking is characterized by a fundamental cognitive synthesis of time and space, expressed in notions that reality is "time-spaced," because space is always defined historically, and "space-timed," because we engage with previous epochs by imagining ourselves walking through the landscape of the past.⁸ Regardless of whether this anti-abstract approach is typical of *all* premodern Chinese thinking, the conclusion drawn by Gomel and Wu that a unified space-time is neither counterintuitive nor relevant only to the field of natural science is significant.

Though Bakhtin's schema of typological chronotopes may seem a little too generalizing and structuralist today, his proposal to understand narrative time as a function of narrative space, and vice versa, was truly revolutionary. As seen above, several scholars have aimed to introduce and develop Bakhtin's legacy to the study of various genres and fields. The essays in this thematic cluster aim to further this engagement with literary space-time from the rich and varied perspective of twenty-first-century Sinophone film and fiction, whose compressed and intense urbanity lends a new, sharp edge to the study of space and time in literature. The playful title "Chronotopia," couples Bakhtin's term with Foucault's *heterotopia*, referring to a "kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real

sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted.”⁹ It is meant to illustrate the creative aspects of our collective endeavor that set out to probe and expand the existing methods for analyzing literary space-time by examining the fictional time-spaces that live behind, around, and through real cities. By virtue of a shared spatiotemporal focus on urban scenarios (the collective prism through which we cast our individual rays), the diverse literary and cinematic materials analyzed produce a synergy of new perspectives on urban fiction and new practices for literary research. Chronotopia, then, is a short space of time for methodological experimentation, bringing the spatiotemporal backdrop of all literary world-building to the forefront of the analysis.

While urban realities have been part and parcel of Sinophone film and fiction throughout the modern period,¹⁰ the late twentieth century and the early twenty-first saw the rise of a new urban era where the city was no longer defined against the rural realities of the countryside and the ancestral village (*guxiang* 故鄉), but had for many become the primary landscape of human existence.¹¹ Furthermore, the accelerated, if erratic, urbanization of the second half of the twentieth century had been followed by a period of gentrification that is still ongoing in many cities across China and East Asia today. The urban condition in much of the Chinese-speaking world, then, is one of chaotic and rapid changeability, characterized by built environments in flux. It is these unstable conditions that the individual subject must try to identify with and make sense of, not to mention live in. For writers and filmmakers, however, such fluid cityscapes have also presented a rich ground for exploring the nature of, and interconnections between, time and space as experienced by city dwellers.

In this themed cluster on urban space-time in twenty-first-century Sinophone film and fiction, we encounter wandering flats, ghostly spaces, and nostalgic fantasies that foster an interpretation of space and time as fundamentally entangled in the city, as well as an understanding that such spatiotemporal structures are often unpredictable and inherently mutable. Jie Lu’s article “Multiple Time-Spaces: Dialogical Representation of the Global City in Chinese New Urban and Rural-Migrant Films” presents a methodological marriage between two Bakhtinian concepts—dialogism and the chronotope of the city—in a pioneering effort to expand the category of Chinese “urban film” (*dushi dianying* 都市電影) to include not only new urban films (*xin dushi dianying* 新都市電影), but also rural-urban migrant films (*nongmingong dianying* 農民工電影). By employing a reading focused on urban experiences of time and space, Lu shows that migrant films constitute an important and unignorable angle on today’s Chinese city. Winnie L. M. Yee, in her article “Ghostly Chronotopes: Spectral Cityscapes in Post-2000 Chinese Literature,” explores the Bakhtinian chronotope of the threshold from the perspective of

contemporary Chinese novels that feature ghosts or ghostly characters. Through her innovative pursuit of a “spectral chronotope,” she reframes haunted narratives as vessels for collective memory. Frederike Schneider-Vielsäcker’s contribution, “Spatiotemporal Explorations: Narrating Social Inequalities in Contemporary Chinese Science Fiction,” analyzes the fantastic space-time of contemporary Chinese science fiction as a medium for critical commentary on contemporary urban realities. In her study, she examines futuristic narratives of spatiotemporal segregation, where not only status and income are unequally distributed, but fundamental resources such as space and time are as well. In their joint article, “Reconfiguring the Chronotope: Spatiotemporal Representations and Cultural Imaginations Beijing in *Mr. Six*,” Xuesong Shao and Sheldon Lu focus on the chronotope of “Old Beijing” (*lao Beijing* 老北京) and its quintessential incarnation in the *hutong* 胡同 (alleys). Through their detailed and contextual analysis of the film, they uncover a complex form of contemporary nostalgia, evoked by the contrasting images of two generations of characters and buildings that make up present-day Beijing. In the final article, “Take the Elevator to Tomorrow: Mobile Space and Lingering Time in Contemporary Urban Fiction,” I round up our multivocal study with a look at elevators as literary figures that point explicitly to the joined nature of space and time. I propose the term *time-space*¹² as a methodological device that allows us to study such enclosed, yet movable rooms, and I engage in a comparative analysis of two literary elevators and the roles they play in literary narrative and fictional cityscape.

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Notes

- 1 In the words of physicist Robert Geroch in his delightful and eminently readable book *General Relativity from A to B*, Einstein’s general theory of relativity is essentially “a theory of gravitation which (for reasons perhaps not altogether understood) also touches on the structure of space and time” (Geroch, *General Relativity*, ix).
- 2 Parts of this discussion also inform my book-length study of space, time, and memory in urban Sinophone fiction; see Møller-Olsen, *Sensing the Sinophone*.
- 3 Bakhtin, “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel,” 243–48.
- 4 See list of references for titles.
- 5 As exemplified by the work of Vladimir Propp. The study of time in modern narratology did not stand still, however, but continued to develop and received a new complexity

- in the work of Paul Ricoeur and Gerard Genette. It was later adapted to postmodern conditions by Ursula K. Heise.
- 6 Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," 22.
 - 7 Gomel, *Narrative Space and Time*, 6.
 - 8 Wu, "Spatiotemporal Interpenetration in Chinese Thinking," 17–18.
 - 9 Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," 3.
 - 10 See for instance Braester, *Painting the City Red*; Scheen, *Shanghai Literary Imaginings*; Song, *Mapping Beijing*; Zhang, *City in Modern Chinese Literature and Film*.
 - 11 This shift is described in detail by Robin Visser in her brilliant work *Cities Surround the Countryside*.
 - 12 I use the term *time-space* in a similar manner in my book *Sensing the Sinophone*.

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