

# Research on the Construction of Horror Film Types in the 'Island' Period

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**Abstract:** During the 'island' period of domestic trouble and foreign invasion, Shanghai commercial films were unprecedentedly prosperous, and various types of films appeared one after another. Among them, Ma-Xu Weibang's "Midnight Song" marks the emergence of horror films as a type in the public eye. However, the previous horror film genre films were regarded as commercial films that were crude and paralyzed the spirit of the people, and the academic community has always focused on the creation of horror film genres on Ma-Xu Weibang. By capturing the cultural cracks in the commercial pursuit and political pressure of horror film creation in the 'island' period, this paper sorts out the construction path of horror film types in this period, so as to break the long-standing academic bias against horror commercial genre films and establish their special significance in the context of the times.

**Keywords:** Island period, horror films, type construction, commercial type film.

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## 1. Introduction

The period of "isolated island" is a very special and complex stage in the history of Shanghai film. Under the extreme environment of Japanese siege and concession isolation, Shanghai's film industry not only did not fall into silence, but also showed abnormal commercial prosperity, and various types of films emerged. Among them, horror films, as a new commercial type, are marked by Ma Xu Weibang's "Song of the Night" (1937), and for the first time have obtained a clear type identity in the Chinese film industry. However, for a long time, the academic circles have held a negative attitude towards the evaluation of horror films in this period, or regarded them as crude commercial products, or believed that they paralyzed the spirit of the people and evaded reality. At the same time, the existing research often focuses on the creation of horror films on Ma-Xu Weibang, while ignoring the more complex construction path and cultural function of this type in the context of an 'isolated island'.

This paper attempts to break through the above prejudices and place the horror films in the period of 'island' in the multiple tensions of commercial competition, political pressure, and collective psychology, and examine the specific path of its type construction. From the three dimensions of narrative mode, spatial metaphor, and visual spectacle, this paper analyzes how horror films carry social criticism in the structure of 'ghost house pagoda-ghost revenge-revealing the truth', how to map the isolated island situation and the epitome of feudal old China through closed space, and how to use star symbols and visual marketing to complete type communication and market consolidation. On this basis, this paper further discusses the historical value, cultural value, and industrial value of this type of construction, and reveals the psychological catharsis, metaphorical struggle, and localization transformation function of horror films in the context of extreme times.

Through a systematic review of the construction of horror film types in the 'Island' period, this paper hopes to reverse the simple negation of commercial genre films for a long time,

re-establish their special significance in the history of film and culture, and provide a more dialectical perspective for understanding the formation mechanism of early Chinese genre films.

## 2. Times Motivation

### 2.1. Consumption Demand and Industrial Drive in the Special Era

In 1937, Ma-Xu Weibang's "Singing in the Middle of the Night" was known as the first horror film in China. As Bo Lei said, the emergence of "Singing in the Middle of the Night" marked the rise of the horror film as a film type in China's film industry. Before that, although the horror elements were involved in film creation, on the whole, the horror film was still an unidentified style.[1] 'Previously, China had been rich in martial arts films such as 'Fire Red Lotus Temple'. Although there were some horror elements, the theme was still martial arts, and after entering the 1930s, due to the restrictions of the film censorship law issued by the government, the development of such films once stagnated.

In 1937, the Anti-Japanese War broke out in an all-round way, a large number of refugees poured into the Shanghai concession, and the population surged, creating a huge market demand for the film industry. As Ling Ke said, the Shanghai concession at this time the umbrella is very fragile, they themselves are surrounded and threatened by Japan's powerful armed forces, the situation is precarious; the concession to protect the first is their own interests, rather than the interests of China. In this case, the major film companies profit as the primary purpose, and horror films, as one of the most stimulating senses, attract the box office type to flourish.

### 2.2. Ideology and Cultural Cracks under Political Pressure

Before the outbreak of the Pacific War after the Battle of Shanghai in 1937, the Chinese land outside the Shanghai concession had long been under the rule of the Japanese cold bayonet. At this time, Shanghai became an isolated island.

However, the prosperity of the island economy cannot cover up the people's panic about the country's destruction of the family, which further deepens people's existing fear and imagination of the uncertainty of destiny and the supernatural forces such as ghosts and gods. As scholars say: 'If the western film, love film, and other types of films are from the positive to achieve and meet the public's collective dream, then the horror film is the reverse to express the public's dark feelings of real life; it achieves the dark side of the collective dream in a paranoid and radical way.' [2]

At the same time, the film creators of this period also faced the political pressure of the Japanese and puppet forces on film censorship. In order to maintain a 'neutral' attitude, the concession authorities also strengthened the control of sensitive content of the film. As Yin Jia said: 'In June 1936, the Japanese militarist forces set up 'China Film Co., Ltd.' in Shanghai, monopolizing the film distribution in all occupied areas of central and southern China. The Japanese army also put pressure on the concession authorities to ban the release of anti-Japanese films in 'Isolated Island'.' [3] Although the film newspapers and magazines at that time were mostly negative evaluations of horror films, through the interpretation of the context of the special era, we can see that in the gap between ideology and political pressure, through the 'safe' and 'roundabout' expression of horror films, people's psychological panic and metaphorical symbols provide an excellent shelter.

### **3. The Construction Path of the Type of Horror Film in the 'Island' Period**

During this period, Hollywood horror movies have successively flowed into China. As an 'exotic', how do horror movies break the ideological atmosphere, national cultural barriers, film censorship mechanisms, audience acceptance, and other multiple elements, as a film type, appear in Chinese film history? Therefore, it is particularly important to study the construction path of horror film types in this period.

#### **3.1. Narrative Mode**

With the outbreak of the war, American filmmakers entered and encroached on the Chinese market. Before the "island" period, Hollywood films had a firm foothold in Shanghai. As a Hollywood commercial genre film, the horror film has long formed a mature production system and film market under the unique cultural foundation and religious background of western countries. Under such a huge cultural difference, how does China's local horror film interpret the 'type' coding, break through the barriers of national culture, and usher in the short-term prosperity of horror films, which is inseparable from the construction of narrative mode.

The core narrative structure of the horror film in this period is: 'Ghost House Pagoda-Ghost Revenge-Reveal the Truth' trilogy. The first stage is a representation of order. In a seemingly calm enclosed space, by force majeure to break the suppression of chaotic life, so that hidden grievances emerge. The second stage is the manifestation of terror, that is, the grievances or ghosts hold a strong purpose of revenge. The third stage is the revelation of reason. The truth of 'ghost' revenge is often human and non-supernatural tragedies, such as murder, capture of labor, persecution of feudal ethics, stories of grievances or buried in darkness. For example, the adaptation of the folk legend 'The Legend of White Snake' subverts the folk aesthetic and romantic love legend. Based

on realism, it tells the tragic story of Zhen Baisu, the daughter of Hangzhou's General Army, who finally jumped to the tower and died under patriarchal power. In the gloomy and horrible pagoda, Jiao Xumeng, the son of Zhen Baisu, entered Leifeng Pagoda alone, and found that the rumored mother of witchcraft was only a white-haired, pale, and rickety old woman, a microcosm of the tens of millions of women oppressed under the feudal system. Knowing his mother's grievances, Jiao Xumeng was unable to save his mother. Zhen Baisu jumped into his son's career, and the story ended in tragedy. The horror films of this period, such as 'Female Zombies', 'New Stealth', 'Modern Hell' and so on, have created a kind of non-scientific atmosphere of terror, and the final rational revelation is still settled in the depressed life situation of the lower-class people in the era. In addition, there are a series of films such as Ma-Xu Weibang, which also complete the critical reference to real society through the type of narrative mode of "ghost house pagoda-ghost revenge-uncovering the truth."

#### **3.2. Spatial Metaphor**

In the 'island' period, there are often closed spaces such as ancient pagodas, ancient houses, ancient temples, ancient buildings, ancient houses, and ancient theatres. In addition to creating a strong terrorist atmosphere for the audience, as Basra said in the 'Poetics of Space': 'There are more things in the closed box than in the open box, and the similarity is always broader than the experience.' [4] The implication is that closed space also has abstract forms such as thought, spirit, and society. The closed space in the horror film of the "isolated island" period metaphorizes the isolated island situation in the context of the times and projects the psychological state of the isolated island people to suppress panic, which is a microcosm of the whole feudal old China.

##### **3.2.1. People's Inner Fear is Externalized**

The externalization of people's inner fear. In the horror films of this period, the claustrophobic, tortuous corridors, closed doors, and dark spaces provide a window for the people living in 'isolated islands' to vent their collective panic. At the end of 1937, the concession was filled with lively music and dancing, while the surrounding Chinese areas lay under the cold rule of Japanese bayonets. Although Shanghai's economy ushered in a short and abnormal prosperity, a fear of national life and death lingered in everyone's heart. The closed and horrible environment in the horror film resonates with the people's psychology in the "island" period.

##### **3.2.2. The Direct Correspondence of the Island Situation**

Ma-Xu Weibang's films such as "Song of the Night" and "Soul of Cold Moon Poetry," the gloomy abandoned theaters, the injustice of the ancient tombs, and the ugly social reality of the "isolated island" period are isomorphic.

##### **3.2.3. The Micro Epitome of Feudal Old China**

The film creators in the 'isolated island' period were in the torrent of the times. Under the influence of the 'left-wing film movement', on the one hand, they felt the ever-changing social changes. On the one hand, they saw the closure and backwardness of feudal old China, and finally the resistance to extinction. The closed landscape of the horror film projects the image of old China.

During this period, the closed space was a triple metaphor for the psychology of the people, the situation of the island, and feudal old China. This deep space politics makes the

'island' horror genre film no longer just a commercial film that caters to the audience 's 'shoddy'. It transcends the simple freaks and gods and becomes the 'carrier of the times ' in the true sense. It wraps the collective trauma and social problems of the times in a typed shell. Through the careful construction of this core image, the ' Island ' filmmakers successfully completed a profound writing of the real dilemma and the accurate expression of the collective psychology under the curtain of entertainment.

### 3.3. Visual Spectacle

With the prosperity and maturity of the film industry in the 'island' period, major film studios have gradually realized the importance of film publicity. As an artistic creation, film publicity also belongs to an ideology. Propaganda itself carries a lot of historical information, including the social fashion and humanistic spirit at that time. The particularity of film advertising in a period of time determines that the creation and birth of each film advertisement are branded with a distinctive mark of the times. [5]The commercial publicity of the " isolated island " horror film transcends the simple information transmission in this situation. For example, the star symbols and movie posters in the movie advertisement, as powerful discourse practices and market forces, carry a huge amount of information about the times, reflect the historical style and humanistic spirit of the " isolated island, " and participate in the construction of the horror film type film together with the movie text.

#### 3.3.1. Star symbol

Under the impetus of the prosperity of the local film market and the mature film marketing system of Hollywood, the star symbols appear frequently in the film advertising, and even as an important part, attract the fans into the cinema. The study of stars usually places stars in the social and cultural field to explore how stars become the product of ideology and how social culture uses discourse and strategies to construct the complex image of stars. [6]In this context, horror film advertising uses the huge contrast between the star 's body and the role to create a strong visual spectacle. As shown in Figure 1, the film advertisement of ' Midnight Song ' shows the huge difference between the actor Jin Shan before and after make-up. The uncomfortably disfigured face after make-up occupies half of the proportion of the advertisement in the picture. The highly impactful and different advertising photos warm up the release of ' Midnight Song ' and attract the audience to the cinema with the style of horror and curiosity.



Figure 1. Picture source : ' Xinhua Pictorial ' 1937 Vol.2 No.3,19 pages

During this period, the horror film advertisements in many newspapers and magazines, such as ' Qingqing Film ', ' Chinese Movie Stars ', ' Movie Magazine ', ' Starlight ', ' Times Film ( Shanghai ) ', ' Fan Pictorial ' and ' Movie Yearbook ', use the star 's body to create a strong visual spectacle, create a horrible atmosphere to attract the audience, and participate in the construction of the horror film type together with the film text.

#### 3.3.2. Visual Marketing

The construction of horror film types in the " isolated island " period not only occurs within the text, but is also strengthened and consolidated through a set of highly mature and targeted visual publicity and marketing strategies. Its marketing methods, such as posters and screenshots, not only successfully attracted the target audience at the market level but also participated in shaping the public cognition and aesthetic norms of horror films in this period at the cultural level.

In poster design, the film poster design in the 'island' period is more and more flexible and rich. It is no longer like the posters in the early Republic of China, with only simple text arrangement. Different from the previous black and white color matching, the color responds to the film theme and has unique characteristics of the times. This is also reflected in the 'island' period horror movie posters. Figure 2 is the horror film 'Ghost' directed by Yang Xiaozhong. The characters in the poster design are integrated into the environmental space, and the color is a cold gray tone, highlighting the gloomy and horrible atmosphere. In addition, the poster design characters of ' The Walking Dead of Ancient House ' are surrounded by darkness, and the task of almost deformation is presented to the public by using back-shot and light and shadow. The text briefly conveys the theme of the film.





**Figure 2.** Photograph : Xinhua Pictorial, 1940, Vol.5, No.12, 23-24

Before the release of the film, it distributed selected screenshots to mainstream newspapers such as 'Shenbao' and 'Popular Film News' for suspense marketing. Film companies know which images have the most impact. They are usually the core suspense points and sensory climax points of the narrative. As in the "Monthly Pictorial" released in the "Midnight Song" drama, the selection is the most suspenseful in the film plot, the strongest moment of dramatic tension, can be seen in the dark environment of oppression in the characters' almost distorted posture and expression, and then implicitly reflect the era of human oppression and injustice. The graphic text under the drama is by no means a simple description, but a guiding and even inflammatory narrative intervention that successfully transforms the audience into a "detective" eager to solve the puzzle, thus completing the transformation from "curiosity" to "ticket purchase."

## 4. The Construction Value of the Type of Horror Film in the 'Isolated Island' Period

The typification of horror films in the 'island' period is not a simple film imitation and replication, but a creative transformation in an extreme environment.

### 4.1. Historical Value

In the "isolated island" where the Japanese puppet forces are surrounded and the freedom of speech is extremely compressed, directly expressing anti-Japanese thoughts means a huge risk. With its special form, the horror film of this period provides an excellent 'protective color' for the progressive filmmakers. They coded national suffering, social injustice, and hatred for the invaders as 'ancient house grievances', 'body disfigurement', 'ghost revenge' and other types of elements. The construction of this horror film type is a kind of 'dance with shackles' and metaphorical struggle. At the same time, the island people watch horror movies in fear, confusion, and great uncertainty, but they can obtain

psychological catharsis and temporary relief. Through typed narrative, spatial construction, and visual spectacle construction, the horror film visualizes this collective anxiety as a 'monster' or 'ghost' that can be watched and even eventually defeated, recording collective anxiety and providing a channel for psychological catharsis.

### 4.2. Cultural Value

The horror films in the "isolated island" period did not simply copy Hollywood or German expressionism, but successfully underwent a Sinicized transformation. On the one hand, it absorbs the visual style of expressionism, on the other hand, it deeply roots the image of terror in the cultural soil of China. More importantly, it lets 'Ghost Girl' wear a modern cheongsam, lets the horror story take place in the Western-style theater, creates a unique aesthetic style that is both traditional and modern, both Eastern and Western, and becomes a typical representative of the 'hybrid modernity' of Shanghai culture. It further breaks the prejudice that 'a commercial type film is equal to superficial entertainment'. Under the packaging of entertainment, these films deeply explore the serious themes of cannibalism of feudal ethics, the oppression of social class, and the destruction of individual bodies by war. The rule of typing (such as the "ghost-mystery" structure) ensures its commercial appeal, and its attention to practical problems gives it unprecedented cultural depth and critical strength, realizes the localization and modernity transformation of the horror genre, and expands the cultural depth of the commercial genre film.

### 4.3. Industry Value

The creation of horror films during the island period explored the production and marketing modes of mature types of films, from narrative, space creation to publicity and distribution, forming a set of efficient assembly lines. In particular, its propaganda strategy (star effect, poster visual system) has been very modern, which provides valuable historical experience and operational paradigm for the later development of Chinese commercial genre films. At the same time, it further promoted the cultural status of genre films and film stars. By inviting front-line stars such as Shan Jin to perform and creating Ma-Xu Weibang as the author brand of 'Master of Terror', the horror film in the 'Island' period successfully promoted its position in the cultural hierarchy. As Guang Wangchao said: 'commercial film' or 'commercial' should not be regarded as a derogatory term, but should be regarded as one of the original attributes of the film. [7] It proves that genre films can also be the carrier of artistic expression. Stars participating in genre films can expand their influence and box office appeal instead of 'falling'.

## 5. Conclusion

All in all, the type of construction of horror films in the isolated island period is by no means a trivial weird episode in the history of film, but a unique answer to the Chinese filmmakers' use of commercial wisdom and cultural creativity in extreme difficulties. Its heritage is still worth pondering.

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