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# **“Shanghai in the Night”: A Study of Urban Memory on Ballroom Dance Culture Based on the Republican Shanghai Films (1920s-1940s)**

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## **Abstract**

In the rapid process of modernisation, Chinese metropolises like Shanghai have gradually tended towards a homogenization – the city's identity formed by its semi-colonial history, vernacular architecture, and locals' habits has been largely replaced by modernist design, culture and lifestyle. To retrieve the vanishing urban memory, this study aims to use film as a method to trace back Shanghai's past to one of its most distinctive urban images - the ballroom dance culture in the Republican era. The popularity of ballroom dancing represented Shanghai's modern qualities, deeply influenced by Western lifestyles, which imparted the city with a unique charm of blending cultures. This study utilises filmic materials to explore the ballroom dance culture from an urban perspective. More precisely, after collecting all Republican Shanghai films (1920s to 1940s), a qualitative analysis was conducted to examine the related information embodied in filmic images. Through the lens of film, the urban memory of ballroom dancing is deconstructed into two facets: the venues and the participants. The venues are classified according to their architectural features, while the participants are explicated in terms of the character traits represented. Furthermore, the study interprets the filmmaker's intention and viewpoint, as well as public attitudes toward ballroom dance culture, to unravel the social ideology of the time. By reviving such unique urban memory, this research polishes the city's cultural image and strengthens the local spirit, thus providing valuable insights for the development of Shanghai by projecting its past into the future.

**Keywords:** Republican era, film, Old Shanghai, ballroom dance culture, ballroom dance hall, urban memory

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## **1. Introduction**

In China's massive urbanisation process, metropolises like Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenzhen have witnessed rapid construction, renovation, and transformation. However, such urban development

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achieved through monetary accumulation lacks cultural meaning. The jungle formed by steel and concrete has led these cities toward homogenisation, making them indistinguishable from other international metropolises. Modernist designs overwrote the city's past, erasing its local identity and gradually fading its urban historical memory. To make a city more vibrant and attractive, it is crucial to preserve and strengthen its cultural and local identity. Focusing on Shanghai, a representative international metropolis known for its thriving commerce, modernity, and openness, this research aims to explore and revive Shanghai's unique urban memory, thereby delving into its cultural essence and making it more attractive in its future development. This, in turn, will stimulate local economic growth and cultural development, as well as provide reference insights for the development of other cities.

To polish Shanghai's cultural image, it can be traced back to the Republican era, when ballroom dance culture was one of its significant urban features. Since the opening of Shanghai in 1843, ballroom dance has entered the city along with foreign expatriates. However, at that time, the number of ballrooms was limited – their scale was small, and they were usually affiliated with hotels, restaurants, clubs, cafes, and so on – rarely appearing as independent establishments (Ma & Bai, 2007). Moreover, in the feudal society, Chinese people were deeply influenced by the traditional ideology of “no intimacy between men and women”, which led to difficulty accepting this “improper” form of embracing dance. Thus, in this historical time, ballroom dance was confined to Westerners and didn't become popular among the Chinese community. The victory of the 1911 Revolution marked the arrival of the Republican era, a sign of the end of over two thousand years of feudal autocracy in China. From then on, China entered a period of modernisation, moving from feudal to modern society and from agricultural to industrial civilisation. As the birthplace of modern urbanism in China, Shanghai witnessed the collision and fusion between Western foreign civilisation and traditional Chinese culture. Shanghai, as the commercial centre of China, in particular the which served as the concession area and the gathering place for foreigners, nurtured a blend of Chinese and Western cultural entertainment under the stimulation of a developed commodity economy and entertainment industry- the ballroom dance culture. Dance halls, parks, and cinemas- these public spaces collectively constitute the material carriers of “Modernity.” The term “Modernity” became the keyword of Shanghai culture during the Republican era, and Shanghai's ballroom dance culture was one of the icons standing for this modern cultural atmosphere. It not only represented the unity of the global and the local, but also reflected Shanghai's modernity during the Republican era. The Carlton Ballroom, founded on Park Road in 1923, was the first ballroom in China established by Chinese entrepreneurs (Xue, 2000). From then on, ballroom dance halls in Shanghai have sprung up like mushrooms after rain, spreading throughout the city. Dancing girls became a popular profession, and Western-style ballroom dance became one of the mainstream lifestyles among people in Shanghai. In the early 1920s, Shanghai earned the reputation of ‘Paris of the East’ due to its numerous ballroom dance halls (Clifford, 1991).

The main reasons for the flourishing development of dance culture in Shanghai during the Republican era can be summarised as follows: Firstly, the “New Culture Movement” during the Republican era ignited a revolution against old traditions, accelerating the acceptance of Western culture in Chinese urban society. People's ideological concepts gradually changed, and they no longer regarded ballroom dancing as a “dangerous trend”; instead, it became a fashionable and attractive entertainment activity accepted and embraced by the people of Shanghai. Secondly, the women's liberation movement that emerged from the late Qing Dynasty, including abolishing foot-binding, promoting female education, and advocating for marital freedom, significantly elevated the social status of Chinese women and enabled them to participate in social activities (Gui, 2013). Some women chose to become dancing girls to make a living. Particularly, the abolition of foot-binding enabled women to have the physical ability to dance. Thirdly, during urbanisation, a large number of rural residents migrated to Shanghai in search of opportunities. With the increase in urban population, there was a growing demand for social and entertainment activities (Ren, J., 1996). Fourthly, Shanghai during the Republican era was already the sixth largest city in the world and the foremost industrial, commercial, and financial centre in the Far East. As an international metropolis, it was characterised by abundant capital, flourishing commerce, numerous media

outlets, and relatively sound legal systems, and these factors provided the material foundation for the successful commercial operation of ballroom dance halls in Shanghai. Thus, the prosperity of Shanghai's ballroom dance culture resulted from China's liberal political atmosphere and ideological liberation movement at that time, as well as stimulation from developed capital and media, which led to the popularity and prosperity of Shanghai's ballroom dance culture in the last century.

This study focuses on the ballroom dance culture of old Shanghai in a particular historical period within the Republican era. Although the Republican era generally refers to the years 1911-1949, the flourishing development of ballroom dance culture in Shanghai occurred after 1920. As mentioned above, the first ballroom established by Chinese was in 1923. Moreover, after the 1911 Revolution, although the new regime abolished the barbaric custom of foot-binding, women who had previously bound their feet still experienced difficulty moving, and dancing girls had to pace back and forth in the dance hall for hours (Deng, 2022). The ballroom dance industry in Shanghai didn't thrive until after girls who hadn't undergone foot-binding grew up (after 1920) (Xue, 2009). Therefore, although historically the Republican era generally refers to the years 1911-1949, the main scope of this thesis is from 1920 to 1949. Currently, there is limited research in architecture and urban studies on ballroom dance culture. In the fields of history and sociology, research on ballroom dance culture is also in its early stages, with research directions primarily focused on two aspects:

- **Research on Dancing Girls in the Republican Era:** Yang and Wan, from a historical perspective, compare dancing girls of the Republican era with the courtesans of Shanghai at that time, defining the identity of dancing girls at that time and arguing that dancing girls and high-end courtesans fundamentally share continuity (Yang & Wan, 2011). Ren Wenhui, with a dual perspective in dance history and dance culture, also delves into the identity of dancing girls during the Republican era. She argues that dancing girls embody three identities: independent women, commodified products, and objects of sexual fantasy (Ren, 2017). Ma Jun, from a historical perspective, studied the livelihood of native Shanghai dancing girls in the mid to late 1920s, including their backgrounds, sources of income, and the public perception of dancing girls (Ma, 2013). Deng, also from a historical perspective, investigated native Shanghai dancing girls but focuses on their livelihoods from 1932 to 1937. He studied the demographics, work, and income of the dancing girl community during that period using sources such as newspapers, magazines, and dancing girls' diaries (Deng, 2022). The aforementioned studies analyse the dancing girl community from a macro perspective. However, Sun Qinan's study zooms in on a specific individual from a microscopic perspective. She provides a narrative account of the life of Chen Manli, a popular dancing girl at the Paramount Hall at that time, giving us further insights into the lives of prominent dancing girls during that period (Sun, 2010).
- **Research on the Ballroom Dance Halls of the Republican Era:** From a historical and cultural perspective, Lee Ou Fan broadens the scope to encompass the entire entertainment industry in Shanghai, including ballroom dance culture, painting a picture of 'modernity' of Shanghai's nightlife during the Republican era (Lee, 1999). Andrew D. Field, also from a historical and cultural perspective, is more focused on ballroom dance culture. He explored the formation and development of dancing girls during the Republic era by examining historical materials such as magazines, newspapers, novels, and city guides from 1920 to 1949 (Field, 1999). These scholars have relatively broad research scopes. Zhang Lei, on the other hand, focuses on ballroom dance halls. From both historical and artistic perspectives, he explores the historical origins, aesthetic characteristics, and temporal influences of ballroom dance in Shanghai (Zhang, 2014). Ma and Bai, taking a perspective from the field of social management, focused on ballroom dance halls in Shanghai under different administrative regions. ("Three Realms on Both Sides of the Rivers", i.e., public concessions, French concessions, and Chinese areas). They provide insights into the management systems, operational methods, and government policies that regulated the ballroom dance hall industry across different administrative regions from 1927 to 1943 (Ma & Bai, 2007). Xue Liyong, Gui Qiang, and Lu Zhigen, take specific high-end dance halls as their starting point, offering a clear understanding of the high-end dance halls during the Republican era. Among them, Xue Liyong focused on the Paramount Hall,

using a narrative approach to introduce its history, architectural decor, management systems, and more (Xue, 2000). Gui Qiang discussed in more detail the development history of Shanghai's ballroom dance hall industry, including the songs performed, the ballroom dance, and the fate of dancing girls, with a particular focus on the Paramount Hall as a representative case (Gui, 2013). However, these studies remain relatively broad in scope and lack depth. Due to Lu Zhigen's firsthand experience working at the Ciro's Dancing Palace in the 1940s, the information he provided is more detailed and specific. Through oral history provided by Lu Zhigen and interviews conducted by Sun Qin'an, they provide specific details about the Ciro's Dancing Palace during the 1940s, including its history, operational and management systems, operating hours, customers, working and income of the dancing girls, as well as the prohibition of dancing after the founding of the People's Republic of China. This work offers valuable firsthand historical materials and provides us with a clear understanding of the situation in high-end ballroom dance halls at that time (Lu & Sun, 2007).

Nevertheless, there is a gap in research analysing the consumer groups of ballroom dance culture. Secondly, most studies focus on a macroscopic level of analysis, with few exploring the ballroom dance culture from the micro and daily perspective. Moreover, these studies rely on traditional historical documents such as newspapers, magazines, and personal notes, as well as social research methods like interviews. Using these traditional sources and research methods makes it challenging to obtain a daily, micro perspective, and they lack a sense of space and immersive experience. In response to these issues, this study draws on the fields of architecture and urban studies, using old films shot in Shanghai during the Republican era (1920s-1940s) as the main research material to investigate ballroom dance culture in Shanghai during that period. As a relatively new form of audiovisual medium, films offer several advantages for our research:

- **Visual Historical Records:** Old films shot in the Republican era possess an inherent historical value. Through these films, we can gain insights into the architecture, urban landscapes, indoor and outdoor environments, people's clothing and attire, their behaviours, and even the accents and speech patterns of that time, dating back a century. While some scenes may be staged and not represent authentic settings, directors and producers usually aimed for authenticity and made efforts to make the scenes as true to life as possible, so these scenes still have historical value. Furthermore, all the films analysed in this study are shot on location. Any scenes or screenshots that are not actual settings will be identified and explained in this article.
- **Microscopic Perspective:** Films provide us with a personal, daily, micro-level perspective to understand the ballroom dance culture of that era. Conventional historical sources such as books, archives, chronicles, or guides mostly provide a macro-level narrative. They can't immerse us in the historical context of that time, making it difficult for us to intuitively experience the daily life of a micro-level individual.
- **Sense of Space:** We can visually and intuitively explore scenes of Republican-era Shanghai through film, from a room to the entire cityscape, encompassing both outdoor and indoor spaces. Outdoor spaces include buildings, streets, transportation, public areas, and leisure spaces; indoor spaces include living spaces, interior decoration, furnishings, etc.
- **Audio:** As a visual-audio medium, film has an advantage when it comes to music, including background music, musical interludes, the voices and accents of the characters, and the natural background sounds in the city. Textual materials can potentially be subject to censorship or even alteration; music is much more difficult to manipulate. The rhythm, melody, and other musical elements can convey the director's intended ideology and reflect societal trends at that time. Dialogue captures accents and speech patterns of the time, adding depth to the historical context. Moreover, since the subject of our study is the ballroom dance culture of the Republican era, the information conveyed by music is particularly sensitive and holds a unique significance.
- **Plot:** The storyline of a film can reflect the director's preferences, the mindset and ideology of the director and screenwriter. From there, we can further explore the societal background and the underlying societal trends at that time.

In summary, film, as an emerging audiovisual medium, brings us new insights into this study. Films provide a personal, daily, and micro-level perspective for understanding the ballroom dance culture of the Republican era in Shanghai. Furthermore, the sense of space and elements such as audio can convey a stronger impact. These factors can make us feel more immersed in the historical context of that time, enabling us to better comprehend and analyse the ballroom dance culture of the Republican era, which conventional historical sources can't provide. This study primarily utilizes old films shot in Shanghai in a particular historical period within the Republican era (1920s-1940s) as the main research material and, from the perspectives of architecture and urban studies, deconstructs the ballroom dance culture of Shanghai in a particular historical period within the Republican era (1920s-1940s) into two parts: the places where ballroom dance culture occurred and the primary participants of ballroom dance culture. Among these, the places where ballroom dance culture occurred are explored in terms of spatial layout, architectural decoration, and etiquette norms. The participants in ballroom dance culture mainly include dance hall customers and dancing girls. The character traits, attire, and character images of these individuals in the films are analysed. From a third-party perspective, the ideological stance of the filmmakers and society's perception of ballroom dance culture at that time are dissected, along with an analysis of the social context and prevailing societal trends of the era. This deepens our understanding and knowledge of ballroom dance culture. In addition, this study also utilised historical documents, archival records, and oral history interviews as supplementary materials to ensure the comprehensiveness and accuracy of the research. Through this research, we aim to assist Shanghai's recovery of its urban memory, explore cultural essence, maintain its cultural charm and local identity in the future urbanisation process, enhance its attractiveness, and increase its soft power and international competitiveness. Thereby, it offers reference insights and reference points for the development of other cities.

## 2. Classification of Ballroom Dance Culture Venues in Shanghai During the Republican Era

The dance hall is an important place where ballroom dance culture occurs. By the early period of 1949, there were 269 dance halls in Shanghai; however, only over 20 of them possessed legitimate operating licenses (Lu & Sun, 2007). The ballroom dance halls in Shanghai during the Republican era were also divided into high-end and low-end dance halls. While dance halls of different levels exhibit varying interior designs, customer demographics, and hospitality protocols, both high-end and low-end dance halls imply a certain degree of erotic undertones. In addition, ballroom dance was a common hobby and popular recreational activity among the upper echelons of society at that time, with social attributes. For instance, in upscale restaurants, luxury villas, and other public or residential spaces, ballroom dance as a post-dinner pastime serves social, entertainment, and enlivening purposes. This study defines the characteristics of different types of dance halls through the spatial settings and the usage behaviours depicted in films.

### 2.1. High-end Dance Hall

In general, during the Republican era in Shanghai, high-end dance halls referred to luxurious venues catering to the upper echelons of society and foreign guests for leisure and entertainment purposes. Many of these dance halls became iconic landmarks in Shanghai at the time, such as the International Hotel, the Little Club, Paramount Hall, the Metropole Garden & Ballroom, and St. Anna Ballroom, among others (Lee, 1999). For instance, in the film *The Spring River Flows East* (1947), Paramount Hall is mentioned in characters' dialogues, indirectly referencing the residence location of Manager Cui, a business magnate in the automobile industry. Compared to other buildings in the city, the architectural style and interiors of these high-end dance halls are quite lavish and extravagant. They can be seen as material manifestations of the localisation of Western foreign culture in Shanghai or, in other words, Shanghai in the Republican era, a semi-colonial metropolis, bore the influence of Western modern culture. As a result, these dance halls represent the collision between Western modern civilisation and traditional Chinese ways of life and thought. An example of a typical high-end dance hall is St. Anna Ballroom, featured in the film *The New Year's Gift* (1937) (Figure 1a). Its architectural style is modern Western, constructed from marble, and the bilingual signs in Chinese and English gleam brightly due to decorative

lighting. The lavish decorations extend to every corner of the interior. Taking examples from *The Spring River Flows East* (Figure 1b), the interiors of these high-end dance halls feature neon lights, coloured silk fabrics, flowers, balloons, and so on. At the centre of the dance hall is a spacious dance floor, surrounded by tables and chairs. On the tables, there are arrangements of flowers, table lamps, beverages, and refreshments. People dance gracefully to the singing of the singing girls and the accompaniment of the band. The owners of high-end dance halls often spare no expense in creating top-notch orchestras, and they even hire foreign bands.



Figure 1a. The exterior architecture of a high-end dance hall (St. Anna Ballroom). Source: film *The New Year's Gift* (1937)



Figure 1b. The interior decor of high-end dance halls (in Chongqing). Source: from film *The Spring River Flows East* (1947)

As mentioned earlier, the primary clientele of high-end dance halls are Shanghai's elite, both local and foreign. Customers come to these dance halls to seek excitement after dining at restaurants or attending theatres. Normally, they come with their extramarital partner to spend leisure time and strengthen their relationships – with a sexual undertone. For instance, in the movie *The New Year's Gift*, the theatre manager went ballroom dancing with his extramarital partner at the St. Anna Ballroom despite having an engaged fiancée. In *The Spring River Flows East*, the personal secretary of the department store owner, Zhang Zhongliang, conceals his marital status to invite the owner's "Sugar Daughter", Miss Wang Lizhen, to revel at the dance hall. For the upper echelons of society, attending high-end ballroom dance halls entails adhering to certain etiquette (Field, 1999). Wang Dingjiu wrote a laymen's Guidebook titled "Guide of Shanghai", which, from the customers' perspective, outlines some of the hidden rules to follow when dancing at high-end dance halls. First, customers should drive to the high-end dance hall, because the dancing girls often look down upon those who can't afford a car. Additionally, dressing appropriately is essential, preferably in Western-style suits (Wang, 1932). These hidden rules are also reflected in films. For instance, the theatre manager in *The New Year's Gift* and Zhang in *The Spring River Flows East*, when they go dancing to the high-end dance hall with their extramarital partner, are chauffeured in cars. The men or the dance hall's security personnel open doors and escort the women into the car, exemplifying gentlemanly demeanour.

## 2.2. Low-end Dance Hall

Compared to those far-famed high-end dance halls, there were a greater number of low-end dance halls in Shanghai in the Republican era (Lee, 1999). As reflected in *The New Year's Gift*, the spaces of these low-end dance halls are relatively more constrained. A small storefront, bearing a signboard displaying the name of the dance hall on top. Compared to their high-end counterparts, these low-end dance halls also lack ornate decorations, and their entrances are not equipped with security guards (Figure 2a). The entrance of the dance hall is usually affixed with a poster or an election signboard. As the customers who frequented these low-end establishments typically had limited financial means, these low-end dance halls often engage in price wars to attract customers. For instance, they wrote like "Ten dances for One Yuan" or "Twenty dances for One Yuan" on the posters or signboards, along with "Free Tea and Snacks". Some dance halls



use novel gimmicks to attract customers, including “Balloon Releases”, “Secret Gifts”, and even “Striptease Performances”; the erotic implications are more pronounced (Figure 3). Despite the interior space of these dance halls being cramped and compact, their spatial layout is similar to the high-end dance halls: featuring a central dance floor surrounded by tables and chairs. On the tables, there are arrangements of flowers and beverages, etc. (Figure 2b). The interior decoration of these low-end dance halls is relatively minimal, lacking the lavishness of high-end dance halls.



Figure 2a. The exterior architecture of low-end dance halls. Source: from film *The New Year's Gift* (1937)



Figure 2b. The interior decor of high-end dance halls. Source: film *The New Year's Gift* (1937)



Figure 3. Posters and signboards at the entrance of the low-end dance halls. Source: film *The New Year's Gift* (1937)

Unlike high-end dance halls, the clientele of low-end dance halls mainly comprises the middle and lower classes in Shanghai, including workers and various foreign soldiers stationed in the city (Field, 1999). They come here for entertainment and indulge in drinking, sometimes even to select potential sexual partners, treating this place as a prelude to a brothel<sup>2</sup>. These low-end dance halls did not have the hidden rules that govern interactions between the customers and dancing girls, unlike high-end dance halls. Just as portrayed in movies, customers here are not only financially limited but also lack manners, such as getting into arguments. For example, in *The New Year's Gift*, a construction foreman is enticed by the signboard advertising “Striptease Performances” and enters the low-end dance hall. However, he doesn't know how to dance, and accidentally steps on his dancing partner's feet. This leads to an argument between the customer and the dancing girl. Subsequently, the construction foreman slaps the dancing girl and overturns the table.

### 2.3. Other Venues

In addition to places like dance halls with implicit erotic undertones, the ballroom dance culture also carries a social function in higher social circles, appearing in daily activities of upper-class individuals, such as friend gatherings, celebrations, and more. After a good meal, ballroom dancing often becomes an entertainment activity to enliven the atmosphere. At such times,



the venues for ballroom dance are not limited to dance halls but also appear in the luxurious villas of the upper echelons of society. For example, the film *The Spring River Flows East* depicts Zhang Zhongliang and Wang Lizhen's wedding. During the wedding celebration, the newlyweds performed a tango in front of the crowd (Figure 4a). Furthermore, the ballroom dance culture can also be found in upscale restaurants. For instance, in the film *The Spring River Flows East*, after the victory of World War II, people returned to Shanghai to celebrate. Ballroom dancing takes place during banquets (Figure 4b). The ballroom dance culture not only swept through Shanghai but also rapidly spread to other cities in China. After the Japanese army occupied Nanjing, Chongqing served as the "Provisional Capital" during World War II; a large number of elites and wealthy merchants converged there. At that time, they brought ballroom dance culture to this city. In the film *Eight Thousand Li of Cloud and Moon* (1947), there are scenes where upper-class individuals are dancing in upscale restaurants in Chongqing (Figure 4c).



Figure 4a. Ballroom dance culture in luxurious villas of upper-class individuals. Source: film *The Spring River Flows East* (1947)



Figure 4b. Ballroom dance culture in upscale restaurants. Source: film *The New Year's Gift* (1937)



Figure 4c. Ballroom dance culture in upscale restaurants. Source: film *Eight Thousand Li of Cloud and Moon* (1947)

elites and wealthy merchants converged there. At that time, they brought ballroom dance culture to this city. In the film *Eight Thousand Li of Cloud and Moon* (1947), there are scenes where upper-class individuals are dancing in upscale restaurants in Chongqing (Figure 4c).

Similar to high-end dance halls, ballroom dance events held in luxurious villas or in upscale restaurants and other public or residential spaces also require emphasis on etiquette. Usually, the host would invite someone to dance at the gathering. The invited people often modestly decline at first. During this moment, some might also help enhance the atmosphere, such as suggesting piano accompaniment or offering complimentary words to make it livelier. Only after this encouragement do the invited people start their performance. As demonstrated in the film *The New Year's Gift*, the banker invites the singing girl Miss Yang to perform "The Ballroom

Table 1. The similarities and differences between different ballroom dance culture venues.

|                       | High-end Dance Hall                                                                                                                                                                 | Low-end Dance Hall                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | Other Venues                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|-----------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Exterior Architecture |                                                                                                    |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|                       | The architectural style and decoration of such ballrooms are often ornate and flamboyant, mostly in the Western modern architectural style.                                         | The storefront of such ballrooms is often relatively small and lack ornate decorations.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | Ballroom dance takes place in luxurious villas, restaurants or international hotels, with a Western modern decor style.                                                                                                                                                                   |
| Interior Decor        |                                                                                                    |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|                       | The lavish decorations extend to every corner of the Ballroom, including neon lights, colored silk fabrics, flowers, balloons, and so on.                                           | Despite the interior space of these dance halls are cramped and compact, their spatial layout is similar to the high-end dance halls: featuring a central dance floor surrounded by tables and chairs. The interior decoration of these low-end dance halls is relatively minimal, lacking the lavishness of high-end dance halls. | Ballroom dance takes place in villas or upscale restaurants, where the decorations are also luxurious, with both Western and Chinese styles of decor.                                                                                                                                     |
| Customers             |                                                                                                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|                       | The primary clientele of high-end dance halls is Shanghai's elite, both local and foreign.                                                                                          | The clientele of low-end dance halls mainly comprises the middle and lower class in Shanghai, including workers and various foreign soldiers stationed in the city.                                                                                                                                                                | Participants are also upper-class individuals. After satisfying a good meal, they often engage in ballroom dance as an entertainment activity to enliven the atmosphere.                                                                                                                  |
| Etiquette             |                                                                                                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|                       | Customers drive to the ballroom, and attire must be appropriate, preferably Western-style suits. The gentlemen should escort the ladies to the car, displaying gentlemanly manners. | Low-end dance halls did not have the hidden rules that govern interactions between the customers and dancing girls. The customers here not only are financially limited but also lack of manners.                                                                                                                                  | Usually the host would invite someone to dance. The invited people often modestly decline at first. During this moment, everyone applauds or suggest piano accompaniment, etc., to heat up the atmosphere. Only after this encouragement does the invited people start their performance. |

Song". Miss Yang declines initially due to a sore throat, but a lady present suggests that she can provide piano accompaniment for Miss Yang, and it's only after this that Miss Yang Lijuan starts her performance. Similarly, in the film *The Spring River Flows East*, Zhang's friend invites him and Wang to perform a tango. Zhang initially declines, and it's only when the department store owner Pang Haogong steps in and invites the couple that they finally start their performance. This article presents a holistic table to illustrate the similarities and differences of these ballroom dance halls (Table 1).

### 3. The Customers of the Ballroom Dance Hall

With the development of the economy, Shanghai's nightlife has reached new heights. Young people who had experienced the ideological liberation movement gradually squeezed foreigners out of the ballroom dance halls, and these Chinese individuals also began to consume generously in the dance halls (Field, 1999). This study therefore chooses the representative customers of ballroom dance halls depicted in films as the study subject.

#### 3.1. The Image of the Ballroom Dance Hall's Customer in Film

While the venues where ballroom dance culture occurred varied slightly, there was a certain uniformity in the portrayal of ballroom dance hall customers in films from the Republican era. In these films, the "enthusiasts" of the ballroom dance culture usually appeared as antagonistic characters. Most of them are a classic stereotype of the upper class in Republican Shanghai, who are dressed elegantly, shrewd in character, and enjoy pursuing material and sensual pleasures. This feature is demonstrated directly in the film *The Spring River Flows East*, where the transformation of the protagonist Zhang Zhongliang's character portrayal from positive to negative is directly mirrored in whether he frequents dance halls. Initially an upright, patriotic young man, Zhang abandoned his original wife in desperation during World War II and attached himself to Miss Wang Lizhen, the "Sugar Daughter" of the department store owner. He also took on the role of the owner's personal secretary. Unable to resist temptation, Zhang gradually fell into decadence in the flashy world of Chongqing, frequenting dance halls and other entertainment venues, turning into a pleasure-seeking puppet (Figure 5). Following his decadence, Zhang paid more attention to his attire and appearance, transitioning from a simple flat-top haircut to an ostentatious pompadour, complete with ties and a small moustache, smoking cigars, embodying the image of a slick businessman, and stating, "In today's Shanghai, one can't step out without several stylish outfits."

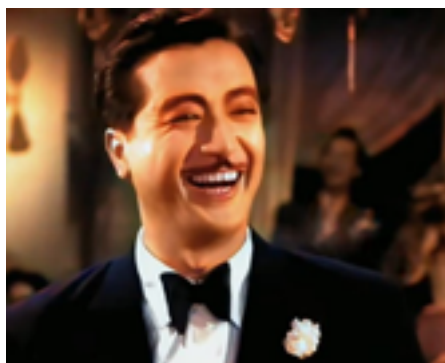


Figure 5. The character image of Zhang Zhongliang, after his decadence. Source: film *The Spring River Flows East* (1947)

In films made in Republican Shanghai, customers of ballroom dance halls consisted not only of male characters but also of female characters, who appeared in antagonistic roles as well. For example, in the film mentioned above, Wang Lizhen was a female worker at the Heshun Silk Factory. After the outbreak of World War II, she sought refuge with the owner of a department store, Pang Haogong, and became his "Sugar Daughter". Her personal life was chaotic, as she was involved in multiple inappropriate relationships with upper-class gentlemen. After Zhang Zhongliang arrived in Chongqing, she gradually lured him into decadence. They started

frequenting dance halls and other entertainment venues together and eventually married. She was ruthless and cunning, using her connection with the company owner as her “Sugar Daddy”, displaying a very dominant personality. When she discovered that Zhang still had his original wife, Sufen, she not only forced him to divorce her but also coerced Sufen into suicide. Wang was also highly intelligent. When she needed something from others, she could also act coquettish, especially in front of her “Sugar Daddy” – the company owner. Wang placed great importance on her appearance. After Zhang returned to Shanghai, she insisted that he buy several quality coats for her, with good fabrics. In the film, she sported a short hairstyle, presenting a confident and assertive image. She adorned herself with valuable accessories such as rings, earrings, necklaces, and more (Figure 6). Sometimes she wore a cheongsam, while at other times, she chose dresses. She applied makeup and wore bold lipstick, exuding an impression of being spirited, daring, and proactive.

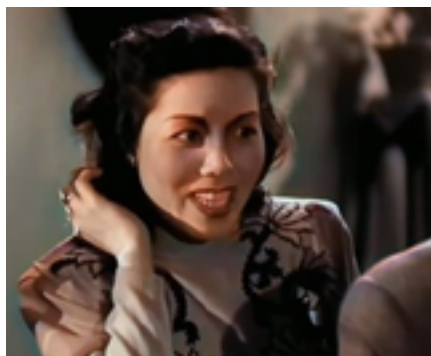


Figure 6. The character image of Wang Lizhen. Source: film *The Spring River Flows East* (1947)

In addition to well-developed protagonists, the film also features many briefly depicted but highly typical supporting characters with negative images. These characters also frequent the dance halls for indulgence. For example, in *Eight Thousand Li of Cloud and Moon*, the cousin of the female protagonist Jiang Lingyu, Zhou Jiarong, serves as an antagonist and is also a regular customer at the ballroom dance hall. During World War II, he engaged in speculative business in Chongqing and usually invited female partners to upscale restaurants for dinner and dancing together. (Figure 7a). After World War II, he used manipulation and deceit to seize property from an old woman in his role as a local official. He is characterised by his oily, ingratiating, frivolous demeanour, smooth-talking manner, chaotic personal life, lack of empathy, and willingness to do anything to achieve his goals. He sports a pompadour and often wears uniforms or suits, complete with ties, presenting a slick-looking appearance in the film. In the film *The Spring River Flows East*, Manager Cui is also a regular customer at the ballroom dance hall with a chaotic personal life. He lives near the Paramount Hall, and even though the female protagonist, Wang Lizhen, is already married, he often flirts with her. His usual outfit is a suit with a tie. He usually wears a hat and smokes a cigar when he goes out (Figure 7b). He is skilled at observing people's words and demeanour; he is brazen, always echoing Pang Haogong's opinions. (The department store owner) In the film *The New Year's Gift*, the theatre manager, despite having a fiancée, takes his extramarital partner to the St. Anna Ballroom for entertainment. He also dresses impeccably in a well-fitted suit with a bowtie. When going out, he wears a coat and a hat (Figure 7c).

### 3.2. The Reflection of Ballroom Dance Hall Customers' Portrayal

Jacques Le Goff employs the term “mentality” to refer to “something beyond history.” He believes that mentality itself is a structure, and “individuals may not necessarily be aware of this structure, as it reveals non-individualised content within their thoughts” (Goff, 1985). Kracauer's reflections on film history are quite similar to Le Goff's insights. Kracauer stated, “Films reflect not obvious beliefs, but psychological tendencies – those deep-seated collective psyches that more or less expand into the unconscious” (Kracauer, 1947). The musings of these cultural scholars provide a new perspective for us to examine the ballroom dance culture of Shanghai during the Republican era through the lens of film. Why do the customers who frequently visited the



ballroom dance halls often appear in a negative portrayal in the majority of films? Or why do directors or screenwriters usually place these antagonist characters in venues like ballroom dance halls when designing scripts?



Figure 7a. The Image of a regular customer of a ballroom dance hall in the film (supporting characters). Source: film *Eight Thousand Li of Cloud and Moon* (1947)



Figure 7b. The Image of a regular customer of a ballroom dance hall in the film (supporting characters). Source: film *The Spring River Flows East* (1947)



Figure 7c. The Image of a regular customer of a ballroom dance hall in the film (supporting characters). Source: film *The New Year's Gift* (1937)

This is related to the socio-cultural context of the Republican era. These films were mostly shot in the 1930-1949, a time when left-wing ideologies were strongly influential in society. The “New Culture Movement” erupted in 1915, followed by the “May Fourth Movement” in 1919. Movies were seen as tools for social education, particularly for educating young people. Early Chinese films did not lag behind the “New Culture Movement”. While entertaining audiences, films also propagated social ideology and modern ideals. In a sense, it served as a unique medium (Zhang, 1999). Especially after the start of the War of Resistance Against Japan in 1931, the newly ignited patriotic sentiments led people to favour films with patriotic educational significance—a trend of “Turning Left” emerged in the wave of Chinese filmmaking styles (Shu, 1994). The films analysed in this paper were created by left-wing filmmakers such as Shi Dongshan, Cai Chusheng, Yuan Muzhi, Xia Yan, and others, working in left-wing studios like “Lianhua Film Company” or “Mingxing Film Company” during the period of 1930-1949. All these films can be labelled as “left-wing films” (Du, 1988). According to Pickowicz’s definition of left-wing films, they involve a “marriage between classic plot drama and elementary Marxism” (Pickowicz, 1993). The “Elementary Marxism” refers to themes centred around the working-class underprivileged masses and expresses sympathy towards them, which aligns well with the themes of the films analysed in this study. For instance, in the film *The Spring River Flows East*, Zhang Zhongliang, revels in a life of extravagance with Miss Wang Lizhen, the “Sugar Daughter” of the department store owner, engaging in ballroom dance and enjoying lavish seafood, such as large lobsters and hairy crabs air-shipped from Calcutta and Yangcheng Lake. In contrast to Zhang’s indulgent, decadent lifestyle, his abandoned wife and his elderly mother are suffering the brutal oppression of the Japanese invaders. Similarly, in the film *Eight Thousand Li of Cloud and Moon*, director Shi Dongshan employs contrast to shape the character Zhou Jiarong, carrying a strong element of criticism. During World War II, when

resources were scarce and famine was rampant, Zhou engaged in profiteering and hoarding goods. While Zhou indulges in lavish dining at upscale restaurants and dances ballroom dance with a female partner, the scene shifts abruptly; his younger female cousin Jiang Lingyu is shown enduring hunger and homelessness. She is part of a drama troupe promoting resistance to the masses on the frontline of the war, spreading the message of resistance amid hardship. The majority of the members within the drama troupe suffer from stomach ailments due to malnutrition. Zhou employs cunning methods to seize properties, including that of an old woman. The old woman, being the victim of oppression, also represents a member of the working-class underprivileged masses. Thus, while criticising capitalists, these films also express sympathy for the working-class underprivileged masses and call for social fairness. This aligns with the concept of “Elementary Marxism” and constitutes the core ideology of left-wing films. It's not difficult to understand why left-wing films of that time tended to portray customers who frequented the ballroom dance halls as antagonistic characters – most of them are wealthy people living an upper-class life. At a time when the country was facing the crisis of Japanese invasion and most of the working-class underprivileged masses were struggling for food and shelter, these wealthy customers showed no patriotic enthusiasm, sympathy, or compassion. They were obsessed with pursuing their own material pleasures and sensory stimulations, without directing their finances towards resisting the Japanese invasion, aiding the country, supporting the underprivileged people and other noble causes. Instead, they chose to indulge themselves in high-consumption places like ballroom dance halls for enjoyment. Thus, at that time, the manner of these wealthy customers who sought entertainment at ballroom dance halls was seen as a selfish act. Therefore, these left-wing films aim to criticise the selfish capitalists, express sympathy for the working-class underprivileged masses and call for social equity. This is the central theme of left-wing film, reflecting the purpose of the directors and screenwriters who created these films. The messages conveyed by these left-wing films were explicit: ballroom dance halls are places of moral corruption. The customers who frequented these dance halls were depicted as morally degraded. Simultaneously, the films also conveyed the message that Western culture, material values, sexual desires, and money were portrayed as corrosive forces within Chinese society (Field, 1999).

#### 4. Singing Girls and Dancing Girls in Ballroom Dance Hall

In addition to the ballroom dance hall's customers, another prominent group that represents ballroom dance culture in films is singing girls and dancing girls. In the 1920s, with the decline of the feudal system and the rise of commercial and political elites embracing Western trends, the social freedom and mobility of urban women began to expand. (Field, 1999) Stimulated by the burgeoning magazine industry, radio broadcasts, and the film industry, the Republican era (1920s-1940s) in Shanghai gave birth to a new set of professions, including songstresses, movie stars, singing girls and dancing girls (Field, 1999).

##### 4.1. The Portrayal of Singing Girls and Dancing Girls in Films

As mentioned above, the majority of the customers of ballroom dance halls were usually portrayed as antagonistic characters. In contrast, the singing girls and dancing girls who worked in the ballroom dance halls were portrayed with a contradictory character image. On one hand, their attire differs from the conservative clothing of traditional women in feudal society. Their attire is influenced by Western culture, accentuating their figures more attractively, making them more sensual, modern, and fashionable. In the tumultuous society of the Republican era, marked by frequent warfare and soaring inflation, many underprivileged lower-class people struggled to afford basic necessities. Meanwhile, the singing girls' and dancing girls' luxurious attire indicated a certain degree of material security and relatively higher living standards. Nevertheless, they were still unable to escape the fate of commodification in the commercial society (Ren, 2017). Singing girls and dancing girls served as dancing partners and entertainers, whose bodies were consumed like commodities, serving as symbols commodified by male desire (Ren, 2017). For instance, in the film *The New Year's Gift*, the dancing girl Jiang Xiuxia's hair is styled in short curls, complemented by a trendy airy fringe. She wears a white fluffy skirt or a floral dress with a lotus collar, and completes the look with black stockings and shiny black high-heeled shoes, creating

a stylish and sensual appearance (Figure 8a). Jiang's cousin, He Rongrong, who is only 6 years old, also has short permed curls and wears a fluffy skirt along with black heeled shoes (Figure 8b). This indirectly reflects that she is also a potential victim of the commodity society. The singing girl Yang Lijuan's attire is also very exquisite: her hair is neatly arranged, adorned with patterned metallic hairpins, and she wears diamond-shaped earrings on both ears. She sports bracelets on both wrists, rings on her fingers, and dresses in a cheongsam and high heels, carrying a small handbag (Figure 8c). These three women share certain similarities in both attire and temperament, conveying an impression of elegant, refined bourgeois women. Their fashionable, modern, sophisticated, and alluring appearances in the film are quite representative of the typical attire of dancing girls during the Republican era. Their attire not only showcases the modern and fashionable aspects of Shanghai dancing girls but also highlights their figures effectively. The high-heeled patent leather shoes and permed waves embodied their chic and modern style, while the cheongsam is crucial in highlighting their figures. They dress up exquisitely and sensually mainly to cater to the needs of male customers, as gaining the favour of male customers was essential for their livelihood. Their commodified bodies have bestowed upon their characters a new set of labels.



Figure 8a. The character image of Jiang Xiuxia.  
Source: film *The New Year's Gift* (1937)



Figure 8b The character image of He Rongrong.  
Source: film *The New Year's Gift* (1937)



Figure 8c. The character image of Yang Lijuan. Source: film *The New Year's Gift* (1937)

The commodification of the image of singing girls and dancing girls in films resulted from the social environment in Republican Shanghai. Being one of China's earliest and most commercially developed international metropolises in the context of modernisation, the city carried a distinctive commercial aura that shaped its culture with a prominent emphasis on commerce. The singing girls and dancing girls were also unable to escape their commodification within this consumer society. They were regarded as commodities in the eyes of men, as victims of modern commercial culture. To maximise their value as objectified commodities, they had to invest more effort in their appearance and attire to make themselves more attractive (Ren, 2017). This is evident in the expensive attire worn by Jiang Xiuxia and Yang Lijuan in *The New Year's Gift*. During the Republican Era, when most people struggled to meet their basic needs, they spent a fortune on perming their hair and wearing pricey dresses, cheongsams, leather shoes, stockings, and



more. The high consumption of clothing not only indicated a prevailing trend of commodification in Shanghai's urban life but also illustrated people's infatuation with certain "commodities" - the presentation of women's bodies as commodities, turning them into objects of male gaze and desire (Lee, 1999).

#### 4.1. The Destinies of Singing Girls and Dancing Girls in Films

The contradiction of the singing girls and dancing girls is also reflected in the destinies of the characters shaped in the films. On one hand, they emerged as a new profession in Shanghai during the 1920s, where they, as self-sufficient women, symbolise a new type of female image representative of the changing era (Ren, 2017). Compared to traditional women in feudal society, they had the opportunity to pursue love and freedom in marriage, embodying a new lifestyle. The girls had their glamorous side; dancing ballroom dances was a trendy and alluring entertainment activity for young people at that time. The vibrant lifestyle of ballroom dance halls, filled with colourful lights and wine, held great allure for them. Many dancing girls even aspired to titles like "Dancing Queen" or "Miss Shanghai", hoping to become renowned and envisioning a career in the film industry as well-known entertainers. For instance, in the film *The New Year's Gift*, the character He Rongrong, who was only 6 years old, had a keen interest in dancing. She obtained her family's consent to perform on stage in a ballroom dance hall. On the other hand, singing girls and dancing girls were still influenced by a male-dominated society and were usually unable to control their own destinies. In the tumultuous and declining society of the Republican era, marked by warfare and economic decline, they were usually swept along by the era's tide, unable to stand alone. If they lost the support of male clients, their fate could plunge into misery. As depicted in *The New Year's Gift*, after being abandoned by her fiancé, a theatre manager, Sun Jiaming, the stage actress Jiang Xiuxia was forced to become a singing girl in a high-end ballroom dance hall, the Garden Ballroom. Jiang lost the support of reliable males and experienced the economic decline of the Republican era, which combined to create her tragic life. Eventually, she descended from a high-end ballroom singing girl to a dancing girl in a low-end ballroom dance hall that advertised "Striptease Performances". A similar fate befell the character Yang Lijuan, another singing girl in the same film: originally invited by a banker to sing at the villa of a bank president, Yang Lijuan lost her male clients' financial support after the bank went bankrupt. Out of economic necessity, she was forced to work as a singing girl at the Garden Ballroom.

The contradictory role image of singing girls and dancing girls with tragic destinies in films also resulted from the prevailing societal conditions during the Republican era. Simone de Beauvoir defined women as "formed" rather than "naturally" feminine (Beauvoir, 1949). This indicates that a woman's identity is not determined by herself, but rather shaped by society and is determined by men who hold dominant positions (Ren, 2017). With the end of the feudal system, the emerging Republican society opened up various job opportunities for women. Dancing girls, as the emerging urban women in the Republican society, appeared with a new demeanour: (1) They were no longer bound by traditional customs and ethics; (2) They obtained job opportunities that granted them a certain level of economic independence and reduced their dependence on men; (3) Compared to the feudal era, the social status of women was highly elevated. Within ballroom dance culture, they formed a new gender relationship with men. They were seen as modern women in the eyes of the public and were pursued by many gentlemen. As mentioned earlier in the guidebook "Guide of Shanghai", it states, "While in Chinese society, men are the ones respected, it's the women who are treated favourably in dance halls" (Wang, 1932). On the other hand, during the Republican era, many left-wing filmmakers regarded singing girls and dancing girls as victims of the modern consumer society. Their suffering received more sympathy in films. The film *The New Year's Gift* provides us with a good example. Jiang Xiuxia complained to her friend, "The theatre audience is far from naive, always yearning for 'provocative dancing'. I'm tired of this kind of life, being looked down upon by others." This indicates that singing girls or dancing girls were a despised profession at that time; these societal biases subjected many of them to unspoken hardships and sorrows. At the entrance of the theatre, the poster shows Jiang Xiuxia wearing a revealing bikini, and even 6-year-old He Rongrong is not exempt (Figure 4-2). The plight of the dancing girls was primarily due to the prevailing societal conditions of that time. During the period of the Republican era, obtaining a decent job was a difficult task, especially for

women. While Republican-era society provided women with more educational opportunities and a certain degree of liberation compared to feudal society, the number of women with access to education was still limited, and there were insufficient suitable job positions in cities for women. In 1936, "Linglong" magazine stated, "Women now have the opportunity to make a living, but they must choose between monotonous manual labour and alluring yet infamous professions like being a dancing girl." The magazine further stated, "Whether a dancing girl or a female labourer, they are both victims of the wicked economic system and captives of malevolently inclined men" (Field, 1999). In an economically advanced and gender-equal society, most women might be able to lead the lives they want. However, during the Republican era, many girls were forced to make a difficult choice between their livelihood and personal dignity—either to maintain their chastity or to succumb to the allure of money and material desires.



Figure 9. Posters featuring Jiang Xiuxia and He Rongrong. Source: film *The New Year's Gift* (1937)

In sum, the group of singing girls and dancing girls in the films of Shanghai during the Republican era constituted a unique entity with the dual attributes of both modern women of the new era and commodified objects (Ren, 2017). On the one hand, they represented the emerging modern woman of the new era who could financially support themselves, symbolising a new way of life. They were fashionable and modern, departing from the traditional image of docile and submissive Chinese women. They were sought-after by numerous men, presenting a novel dynamic in gender relations. They stood as central figures in Shanghai's burgeoning commercial culture, with their personas frequently appearing on the packaging or advertisements for commodities like toothpaste, face creams, and soap—becoming carriers of the city's material culture. As representatives of Shanghai's developed commodity economy and flourishing entertainment industry, they epitomised the city's urban imagery. On the other hand, they still couldn't escape the influence of a patriarchal society. They were commodities in the eyes of men, victims of the modern commodity economy. They find themselves unable to control their own destinies, swept along by the currents of the times. They exist within the collective urban imagination and represent the urban image. As Chinese society transitioned towards modernisation, they guided Shanghai residents and helped them adapt to modern ways of life and moral values.

## 5. Conclusion

Taking an architectural and urban perspective, this study primarily utilises old films shot in Shanghai in a particular historical period within the Republican era (1920s-1940s) as its main research material. It deconstructs ballroom dance culture in Shanghai during the Republican era (1920s-1940s) into two parts: the primary spatial locations where ballroom dance culture occurs and the main participants in ballroom dance culture. Among them, the places where dance culture occurred can be categorised into high-end dance halls, low-end dance halls, and other venues, including upscale restaurants and luxurious villas. We can gain a very intuitive

understanding of the external architecture, interior decorations, and spatial layouts through on-location shooting in old films. In addition, we analyse the etiquette norms that needed to be observed within the space where ballroom dance culture occurred through analysis of the film's plot. The main participants in ballroom dance culture include consumers and the workers (singing girls and dancing girls). We analysed the role characteristics, attire, and character portrayals of these individuals in the films. In addition, we further delved into the underlying logic behind the image construction of these individuals at the heart of ballroom dance culture in the films. This study sheds light on perceptions of ballroom dance culture in the Republican era and dissects the social trends and ideologies of that time. It also utilises textual materials such as historical documents, archival records, and oral history interviews as supplementary materials to corroborate the perspectives analysed from the films, ensuring the comprehensiveness, accuracy, and objectivity of the research conclusions. Through this study, we explore Shanghai's urban historical memory and gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of ballroom dance culture during the Republican era.



Figure 10. The image of old Shanghai cheongsam-wearing dancing girls appears on the packaging of nostalgia-themed cultural products nowadays. Source: Author self-captured at a shop named 'Morden Lady' on Nanluogu Lane, Dongcheng District, Beijing, in 2023

During the Republican era, society was undergoing a transformation, transitioning from feudalism to modernity and from agrarian civilisation to industrial civilisation. Shanghai, as the most open, international, and economically developed metropolis in China at that time, exuded a unique charm through the interplay of traditional and modern elements, as well as the fusion of

Shanghai's own culture with Western foreign culture. Muramatsu Sho'ufu used the term 'Magic City' to describe the unprecedented novelty and impact of Republican Shanghai brought to him (Muramatsu, 1924). Shanghai's ballroom dance culture was born in such an environment, which not only represents a harmonious blend of local and global influences, but also showcases Shanghai's modernity. It serves as a cultural image of the city. One could say that Shanghai is a grand ballroom dance hall, while the ballroom dance hall itself is a miniature version of Shanghai (Ma, 2013). In the 21st century, Shanghai's culture has once again attracted public attention, with the "nostalgic trend" gaining momentum. Various cultural and creative districts, as well as shops centred around nostalgia, have quietly emerged, becoming popular "internet-famous" destinations for people to visit. They offer nostalgia-themed cultural products related to old Shanghai, such as snowflake creams, face creams and perfumes featuring images of cheongsam-wearing dancing girls (Figure 5-1). This indicates that the image of old Shanghai dancing girls is embedded in the collective memory of people and symbolises Shanghai's urban identity. However, the mass appeal driven by the "nostalgic trend" may not necessarily grasp the intricate fusion and diversity within this culture, which also reflects the somewhat faded soul of Shanghai's urban culture nowadays (Yang, 2006).

The ballroom dance culture that thrived in the past is no longer mainstream in today's Shanghai, as it has become a part of the city's memory. As a unique local characteristic and cultural heritage of Shanghai, it should not be forgotten by today's people. This study explores Shanghai's urban historical memory through old films. In order to enhance Shanghai's urban cultural identity and preserve its unique local characteristics, this study proposes the following recommendations: (1) Shanghai has preserved many ballroom dance halls from the Republican era, including the Paramount Hall. These remaining historical buildings serve as cultural heritage sites in today's Shanghai. These buildings should be restored and opened to the public, allowing people to experience Shanghai's rich historical atmosphere and cultural ambience. Moreover, we can install 'introduction QR codes' near these old buildings. People can use their mobile phones to scan the codes and learn about the stories behind these historical buildings through text, audio guides, video playback, VR interactions, etc. These measures can deepen people's understanding of dance culture and allow them to experience the cultural charm of Shanghai. (2) We should promote cultural products related to the Shanghai-style culture, such as selling lipsticks, perfumes, and other daily necessities featuring the old Shanghai ballroom dance culture, or cheongsams labelled with "Shanghai women". These cultural products can gradually integrate the ballroom dance culture of old Shanghai into people's daily lives, making the urban memory of Shanghai a tangible and palpable part of life. (3) Art and cultural exhibitions related to the ballroom dance culture of old Shanghai can be held in the remaining ballroom dance halls built during the Republican era (Such as the Paramount Hall), or in museums, exhibition halls, etc. These exhibitions can showcase and introduce the ballroom dance culture of old Shanghai through films, photographs, etc. We can also provide visitors with ballroom dance culture-related souvenirs or cultural products, allowing people to rekindle their urban memory of Shanghai. These initiatives can help Shanghai create its urban "Cultural IP", preserve its distinctive local characteristics and cultural charm in future development, enhance its soft power, and improve international competitiveness. Furthermore, the prosperity of old Shanghai's ballroom dance culture in the last century was deeply intertwined with China's relaxed social atmosphere and ideological liberation movement of the Republican era, as well as the stimulation from the developed capital and entertainment industry, collectively shaping the popularity and prosperity of Shanghai's ballroom dance culture. In the process of urban evolution, the continuity and unity of culture are crucial. Shanghai set up a platform for the exchange of Eastern and Western ideas very early on, gathering and embracing various emerging elements. Although the social environment and ideological culture of Shanghai in the 21st century have changed compared to the old Shanghai of the Republican era, the spirit of openness, freedom, international integration, and inclusiveness remains unchanged. By continuing these qualities, we can still nurture our own cultural charm in the present world.

## Conflict of Interests

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Biographical notes on authors

Qiyun Tan earned his Bachelor's Degree in Traffic Engineering from Beijing Jiaotong University and his Master of Science Degree in Civil Engineering from Michigan State University. His research interests focus on film, urban culture and urban history. His current research utilises filmic materials made in Republican Shanghai (1920s-1940s) to explore the ballroom dance culture from an architectural and urban perspective.

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## Endnotes

1. Common Sense Newspaper, 1928 "There were over two hundred public and private ballroom dance halls of various sizes throughout Shanghai, employing around two thousand dancing girls. Nightly expenses for dancing in the entire city amounted to about forty to fifty thousand yuan, and on Saturday nights, the expense soared to as much as hundred thousand yuan. Every night, the time spent on dancing exceeded fifty thousand hours, with tens of thousands of customers frequenting ballroom dance halls every night. The assets of all ballroom dance halls in Shanghai totaled five to six million yuan."

2. Jian Guang, "Novel Daily", 1941: "Hunting grounds for romantic encounters and dens of pleasure. Few attend the dance halls to actually dance; rather, it is a pretense to approach the dancing girls and seek intimate connections."

3. This paper has been presented at the SPACE International Conference 2023 on Cities, Architecture and Cinema.

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