"Shanghai in the Night": A Study of Urban Memory on Ballroom Dance Culture in Republican-Era Shanghai Cinema (1920s-1940s)

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Abstract
In the rapid process of modernization, Chinese metropolises like Shanghai have gradually tended towards a homogenization – the city's identity formed by its semi-colonial history, vernacular architecture, and local's 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 the modern qualities of Shanghai deeply influenced by Western lifestyle, which imparted the city with a unique charm of blending culture. This study utilizes filmic materials to explore Shanghai's ballroom dance culture from an urban perspective. More precisely, after having collected all the Republican Shanghai films (1920s to 1940s), a qualitative analysis was conducted to examine the related information embodied in filmic urban images. Through the lens of film, the urban memory on ballroom dancing is deconstructed into two facets: the venues and the participants. The venues are classified according to the architectural features, while the participants are explicated on the character's traits represented. Furthermore, the study interprets the filmmaker's intension and viewpoint as well as the public attitudes on 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, and thus to provide valuable insights for the development of Shanghai by projecting its past to the future.

Keywords: Republican Era, Film, Old Shanghai, Ballroom Dance Culture, Urban Memory

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1. Introduction

During China's rapid urbanization, metropolises including Beijing and Shanghai have witnessed a rapid transformation. However, this urban growth, driven mainly by economic factors, lacks cultural depth. Cities have increasingly adopted similar modern designs that often erase traces of their unique histories, making them less distinguishable from global counterparts. To enhance the vibrancy and appeal of urban spaces, it is crucial to preserve their cultural and local identities. 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, and thereby delve into its cultural essence, and make it a more engaging and attractive place for future generations. This, in turn, will stimulate local economic growth and cultural development, as well as provide valuable insights for the growth of other cities facing similar challenges.

To enhance Shanghai's cultural image, we can trace its rich history back to the Republican era, when ballroom dance was a defining aspect of city life. Following Shanghai's open in 1843, ballroom dance was introduced by foreign residents, initially limited to a few small ballrooms often located within hotels, restaurants, clubs, or cafes, rather than as independent establishments (Ma and Bai, 2007). At this time, traditional Chinese values in the feudal society discouraged close interaction between men and women, and thus confining ballroom dancing to the expatriate community. However, during the Republican era, Chinese society entered a period of modern transformation, with Western values increasingly influencing traditional Chinese culture. Shanghai, as the commercial center of China, with its concessions and large foreign population, fostered a unique ballroom dance culture shaped by a booming commodity economy and entertainment industry. The first Chinese-owned ballroom, the Carlton Ballroom, which opened on Park Road in 1923, made a turning point (Xue, 2000). From then on, ballrooms began springing up throughout Shanghai, embodying the modern spirit of Shanghai; meanwhile ballroom dancing emerged as a favored lifestyle, and "dancing girls" became a popular profession.[1] By the early 1920s, Shanghai earned the moniker 'Paris of the East' renowned for its vibrant ballroom culture (Clifford, 1991).

Currently, research on Shanghai's ballroom dance culture remains limited in architecture and urban studies. The research in the fields of history and sociology generally follows two main directions:

1) Studies on Dancing girls in the Republican Era

Field (1999) explores the rise of the dancing girl profession in the Republican era, drawing on historical sources like magazines, newspapers, novels, and city guides from 1920 to 1949. Ma (2013) examines the lives of local Shanghai dancing girls in the late 1920s, focusing on their backgrounds, income, and public perception. Deng (2022) expands on this research, investigating the livelihoods of Shanghai's dancing girls from 1932 to 1937, analyzing demographics, work conditions, and income based on sources like newspapers and personal diaries. Ren (2017) identifies three roles for dancing girls: independent women, commodified products and objects of sexual fantasy. More

[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."

specifically, Yang and Wan (2011) compare the dancing girls of the Republican era with Shanghai courtesans, arguing that they shared a similar social role. While these studies provide a broad view of the dancing girl community, Sun (2010) adopts a micro perspective by narrating the life of Chen Manli, a well-known dancing girl at the Paramount Hall, which provides deeper insights into the individual lives of prominent dancing girls from that period, and helps illuminate the complexities of their roles in Shanghai's social landscape.

2) Studies on Ballroom Dance Halls in the Republican Era

Scholars like Lee (1999) take ballroom dance culture as a have examined Shanghai's entertainment industry broadly, including, to portray the city's nightlife during that time. Some scholars like Zhang (2014), focus specifically on ballroom dance halls, having analyzed their historical origins, aesthetics, and influences over time. Ma and Bai (2007), from a social management perspective, investigate management practices, operational methods, and government policies of the ballroom dance halls across various administrative regions in Shanghai from 1927 to 1943. Other researchers concentrate on high-end dance halls to offer a more focused view of Shanghai's ballroom culture during this era. Gui (2013) details the evolution of Shanghai's ballroom dance hall industry, including popular songs, dance styles, and the lives of dancing girls, with Paramount Hall as a central example. Similarly, Xue presents a narrative on Paramount Hall covering its history, architectural design, and management systems. Lu (2007), drawing from his experience at Ciro's Dancing Palace in the 1940s, shares firsthand insights into its operations, the lives of dancing girls, and changes that occurred post-1949.

Despite the existing body of research, there remains a gap in analyzing the lived space and consumer groups associated with ballroom dance culture from an architectural perspective. Additionally, most studies focus on a broad, macroscopic perspective, with few exploring the ballroom dance culture through a micro and everyday lens. Furthermore, these studies rely heavily on traditional historical documents–such as newspapers, magazines, personal notes–and traditional social research methods, including interviews. While valuable, these traditional sources and methods often limit researchers from capturing an immersive, spatially aware, and daily perspective on the culture. Addressing these limitations, this study adopts an architectural and urban studies perspective, using old films shot in Shanghai during the Republican era (1920s-1940s) as primary research material to investigate the ballroom dance culture of the time. Films, as a relatively new audiovisual medium, offers several advantages for this research:

Visual Historical Records. Old films from the Republican era serve as invaluable historical resources, which capture the architecture, urban landscapes, clothing, behaviors, and even the accents of people from a century ago. Although some scenes may be staged and thus not entirely authentic, directors often aimed for realism, lending these depictions considerable historical significance. Additionally, the films analyzed in this study were mostly shot on location, which enhances their accuracy. Any scenes or screenshots that are not actual settings will be identified and explained in this article.

Microscopic Perspective. Films offer an intimate glimpse into daily life, and allows us to explore ballroom dance culture from a personal, micro-level perspective. Unlike conventional historical sources, films enable us to immerse ourselves in the lived experiences of

individuals from that era, and thus revealing the nuances of their everyday interactions and social dynamics.

Sense of Space. Film allows us to visually and intuitively explore the spatial environment of Republican-era Shanghai, from intimate room interiors to expansive cityscapes. This medium captures both outdoor spaces—such as buildings, streets, transportation, and public areas—and indoor settings, including leisure venues, residential spaces, interior decor, and furnishings. Through film, we gain a layered understanding of Shanghai's architectural and urban landscape, bringing the spatial and cultural contexts of that era vividly to life.

Audio. As an audiovisual medium, film uniquely captures the musical and auditory landscape of its time, including background music, musical interludes, character voices and accents, and the ambient sounds of the city. Unlike textual sources that may be censored or altered, music is much more difficult to manipulate; its rhythm, melody, and other musical elements convey cultural trends and sometimes reveal ideological undercurrents intended by the director. Dialogues capture accents and speech patterns of the time, and enrich the understanding of the historical context. Since this study focuses on the ballroom dance culture, music plays a particularly crucial role that adds depth and authenticity to the exploration.

Plot. The plot can serve as a lens into cultural attitudes, values, and prevailing ideologies. Through analyzing these narrative choices, we can gain insights into the societal background and underlying social trends of the time, which helps us better understand the character's behaviors.

In summary, film as an emerging audiovisual medium offers valuable new perspectives for this study. It not only provides a personal, daily, and micro-level view of the ballroom dance culture in Republican-era Shanghai, but also delivers a sense of space and auditory elements that enhances our understanding of that historical context—insights often inaccessible through traditional sources. This study deconstructs Shanghai's ballroom dance culture into two focal areas: the spaces where this culture thrived and the primary participants involved. It analyzes the layout, architecture, and social norms of these venues, as well as the characteristics and attire of the people engaged. Additionally, it explores the filmmakers' perspectives and societal views on ballroom dance, offering insights into broader social contexts and trends of the time. Ultimately, this research aims to help Shanghai recovery its urban memory, rediscover its cultural essence, and preserve its identity amid rapid urbanization, thereby enhancing its attractiveness and strengthening its soft power. The findings also provide valuable insights for the development of other cities seeking to balance cultural preservation with modernization.

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

Dance halls were central to the ballroom dance culture in Shanghai. By early 1949, there were 269 dance halls in the city, although only 20 held legitimate operating licenses (Lu and Sun, 2007). These venues were generally categorized as high-end or low-end each with distinct interior designs, clientele, and service styles. Despite these differences, both types carried a degree of erotic undertones. In addition, ballroom dancing was especially popular among the elite and held significant social values. For instance, in upscale restaurants and various public or private spaces, ballroom dance served as a post-dinner pastime that fostered socializing, entertainment, and lively interaction. This study examines the unique

characteristics of different dance hall types by analyzing spatial settings and social behaviors as depicted in films, and thus providing insights into how these spaces shaped Shanghai's ballroom dance culture.

2.1 High-end Dance Hall

During the Republican era in Shanghai, high-end dance halls were opulent venues frequented by the city's elite and foreign visitors seeking leisure and entertainment. Many of these establishments, such as the International Hotel, Paramount Hall, and St. Anna Ballroom, became iconic landmarks in Shanghai (Lee, 1999). For instance, in the film *The Spring River Flows East* (1947), Paramount Hall was referenced, underscoring its association with affluent businessman. These dance halls were known for their lavish architecture and interiors, which showcased Western influences that had permeated Shanghai, a city blending Western modernity with traditional Chinese culture in its semi-colonial context. The St. Anna Ballroom, featured in the film *The New Year's Gift* (1937), is a prime example of a high-end dance hall (Figure 1a). Distinguished by its modern Western style, marble construction, and bilingual signage, it exuded sophistication. Every detail of its interior decoration contributed to a sense of luxury, with elements such as neon lighting, silk drapes, and ornate fixtures, as depicted in *The Spring River Flows East* (Figure 1b). Spacious dance floors were surrounded by tables adorned with flowers and refreshments, while guests enjoyed live music from top orchestras, occasionally featuring foreign bands. These settings illustrate the cosmopolitan atmosphere of high-end dance halls, which symbolized Shanghai's unique fusion of Eastern and Western cultural elements.

Figure 1: (a) The Exterior Architecture of High-end Dance Hall (St. Anna Ballroom).
(b) The Interior Decor of High-end Dance Halls (in Chongqing).
Source: (a) from film *The New Year's Gift* (1937),
(b) from film *The Spring River Flows East* (1947)

The primary clientele of high-end dance halls in Republican-era Shanghai consisted of the city's elite, both local and foreign. These patrons often sought excitement after dining at restaurants or attending theaters. They frequently visit these venues with extramarital partners to enjoy leisure time with a hint of romantic or sexual undertones. For example, in *The New Year's Gift*, the theater manager is shown ballroom dancing with his extramarital partner at St. Anna Ballroom, despite being engaged. Similarly, in *The Spring River Flows East*, Zhang Zhongliang, a department store secretary, conceals his marriage to take the owner's "Sugar Daughter" to a dance hall. Attending these high-end venues required patrons to observe certain social norms (Field, 1999). As outlined in Wang Dingjiu's *Guide of Shanghai* (1932), customers were expected to arrive in cars and wear Western-style suits; it was noted that dancing girls often looked down upon patrons without a car (Wang, 1932). These social cues are echoed in films, where characters like the theater manager and Zhang are shown arriving

at the dance halls in cars, with doormen or security staff opening doors and escorting women into the venue, which exemplify the gentlemanly manners expected at these establishments.

2.2 Low-end Dance Hall

In contrast to the famous high-end dance halls, Shanghai had a larger number of low-end dance halls during the Republican era (Lee, 1999). As depicted in *The New Year's Gift*, these low-end halls were smaller, with modest simple storefronts and signboards displaying their names. Unlike the high-end dance halls, they lacked elaborate decorations and security guards, often marked by simple posters or signs at the entrance (Figure 2a). Catering to a less affluent clientele, these halls frequently relied on discounts and promotions to attract patrons, advertising deals like "Ten dances for One Yuan" or offering "Free Tea and Snacks." Some even used attention-grabbing gimmicks like "Balloon Releases" or "Striptease Performances", which gave these venues a more overtly erotic appeal (Figure 3). Though the interiors of low-end dance halls were simple and unadorned, their layout was similar to high-end halls, featuring a central dance floor surrounded by tables. However, the decor was much more restrained, reflecting the modest means of both the proprietors and their patrons (Figure 2b).

Figure 2: (a) The Exterior Architecture of Low-end Dance Halls.
(b) The Interior Decor of High-end Dance Halls.
Source: from film *The New Year's Gift* (1937)

Figure 3: Posters and Signboards at the Entrance of the Low-end Dance Halls.
Source: from film *The New Year's Gift* (1937)

The clientele of low-end dance halls consisted primarily of middle- and lower-class individuals, including local workers and foreign soldiers (Field, 1999). These patrons frequented the halls seeking entertainment, indulging in drinking, and sometimes looking for potential sexual partners, treating the venue as a preliminary step before visiting a brothel.[2]

[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."

Unlike the refined, unwritten codes of conduct in high-end venues, low-end dance halls had no established social rules guiding interactions between customers and dancing girls. In films, patrons in these low-end halls are portrayed not only as having less money but also as lacking manners, with scenes often involving conflicts. For instance, in *The New Year's Gift*, a construction foreman is enticed by a sign advertising "Striptease Performances" and decides to enter the hall. Unfamiliar with dancing, he accidentally steps on his dancing partner's feet, which sparks an argument. The scene escalates as the foreman slaps the dancing girl and overturns a table, illustrating the more chaotic and rougher environment of these establishments.

2.3 Other Venues

Beyond dance halls with subtle erotic undertones, ballroom dancing also played an important social role among Shanghai's upper class, frequently appearing at private gatherings, celebrations, and events. After a satisfying meal, ballroom dancing often served as entertainment to enhance the atmosphere. In these instances, ballroom dancing was not limited to dance halls but took place in lavish villas and private homes of the wealthy. For example, in *The Spring River Flows East*, characters perform a tango at their wedding, emphasizing ballroom dancing's role in upper-class social rituals (Figure 4a). Besides, ballroom dancing was also popular in upscale restaurants. In *The Spring River Flows East*, after the Word War II, people celebrating their return to Shanghai engage in ballroom dancing at a banquet (Figure 4b). This culture, originating in Shanghai, spread to other cities in China. Following the Japanese occupation of Nanjing, Chongqing became the "Provisional Capital", drawing elites and wealthy merchants who brought the ballroom dancing with them. In the film *Eight Thousand Li of Cloud and Moon* (1947), upper-class individuals are shown dancing in high-end restaurants in Chongqing, highlighting how ballroom dance culture extended beyond Shanghai to other urban centers (Figure 4c).

Ballroom dance events held in upscale restaurants, public venues, and private residences emphasized etiquette similar to that of high-end dance halls. Typically, the host would invite a guest to dance, but social decorum often required the invited person to decline initially out of modesty. To enliven the atmosphere, other guests might suggest piano accompaniment or offer encouraging words, which persuades the invitee to participate. This custom is depicted in *The New Year's Gift*, where a banker invites a lady to sing. Initially, she declines, citing a sore throat, but after someone offers to play the piano as accompaniment, the lady agrees to perform. Likewise, in *The Spring River Flows East*, two characters are invited to perform a tango. One of them initially declines but eventually agrees after gentle encouragement from a store owner. These scenes highlight how ballroom dance in upper-class settings was not only about dancing itself but also about following social rituals that underscored courtesy, grace, and mutual encouragement.

Figure 4: (a) Ballroom Dance Culture in Luxurious Villas of the Upper-Class Individuals.
(b) Ballroom Dance Culture in Upscale Restaurants.
(c) Ballroom Dance Culture in Upscale Restaurants.
Source: (a) from film *The Spring River Flows East* (1947), (b) from film *The New Year's Gift* (1937), (c) from film *Eight Thousand Li of Cloud and Moon* (1947)

3. Singing and Dancing Girls in Ballroom Dance Halll

In addition to ballroom dance halls, singing and dancing girls play a prominent role in representing the ballroom dance culture of Republican-era Shanghai as portrayed in films. During the 1920s, the decline of the feudal system and the influence of Western trends among the commercial and political elite provided urban women with greater social freedom. This shift, along with the rise of magazines, radio broadcasts, and the film industry, spurred the emergence of new professions. The Republican era (1920s–1940s) saw the rise of songstresses, movie stars, singing girls, and dancing girls, each contributing to the vibrant entertainment scene in Shanghai (Field, 1999).

3.1 The Portrayal of Singing and Dancing Girls in Films

The filmic portrayal of singing and dancing girls in Republican-era Shanghai reveals a nuanced mix of traits, which emphasizes not only their modern, Western-influenced style but also their commodified roles. While the broader population struggled for basic needs during this tumultuous period, the luxurious clothing of dancing girls suggested a level of material comfort and a higher standard of living. However, their livelihoods depended on catering to male desire and social expectations, and thus reducing them to objects of entertainment and desire (Ren, 2017). For example, in *The New Year's Gift*, the dancing girl Jiang wears a white skirt or floral dress paired with black stockings, shiny heels, and short, curled hair with a stylish fringe, creating a trendy, sensual look (Figure 5a). Her six-year-old cousin also wears a fluffy skirt and heels (Figure 5b), subtly indicating her vulnerability within a commodity society. Meanwhile, the singing girl Yang Lijuan exudes elegance with her neat hair, jewelry, and a fashionable cheongsam (Figure 5c). These outfits were typical among dancing girls of the Republican era, characterized by chic, modern garment that accentuates their figures. Their elaborate, sensual attire primarily served to appeal to male patrons, whose favor was crucial for their economic survival (Ren, 2017). Consequently, the commodification of their bodies assigned these women a set of social labels that shaped their identities within the ballroom dance culture, blending elegance with the transactional nature of their roles. Their costly, carefully curated looks exemplify Shanghai's trend of commodifying women's bodies, underscoring how female beauty became a marketed asset in service to male fantasy and social status (Lee, 1999). This commodification aligns with the broader cultural shift of the time, where women's fashion and social roles became deeply entangled with the city's identity as a modern, Western-influenced metropolis.

Figure 5: (a) The Character Image of Jiang Xiuxia. (b) The Character Image of He Rongrong. (c) The Character Image of Yang Lijuan.
Source: from film *The New Year's Gift* (1937)

3.2 The Destinies of Singing and Dancing Girls in Films

The lives of singing and dancing girls in Republican Shanghai films embody a complex contradiction. On one hand, they symbolize a modern profession emerging in the 1920s that allowed women a degree of independence and self-sufficiency, a sharp contrast to the limited roles for women in traditional feudal society (Ren, 2017). These roles brought an opportunity to pursue personal choices in love and marriage, and the allure of the dance halls made dancing a glamorous, exciting activity for many young women. This sense of ambition and allure is vividly portrayed in *The New Year's Gift*, where six-year-old He Rongrong dreams of dancing on stage, encouraged by her family's approval and fueled by hopes of gaining fame. On the other hand, these women were still confined by the pressures of a male-dominated society, unable to fully control their fates. Amid the instability of the Republican era, marked by war and economic downturn, their livelihoods relied on the support of male patrons. Without this backing, they often faced severe hardship. For example, in *The New Year's Gift*, Jiang Xiuxia, originally a stage actress, finds herself abandoned by her fiancé and, without male support, is forced to become a singing girl in a high-end ballroom. Over time, economic struggles and societal constraints ultimately push her into a low-end dance hall, illustrating how vulnerable these women were to the broader societal and economic forces of the era. Her story reveals the precarious nature of these women's lives, where moments of glamour could quickly give way to hardship in a volatile, patriarchal society.

The complex and often tragic portrayal of singing and dancing girls in Republican-era films reflects the broader societal conditions of the time. Simone de Beauvoir's perspective that femininity is a social construct rather than an inherent trait highlights the idea that women's identities were largely shaped by societal expectations, with men in dominant roles defining women's place in society (Beauvoir, 1949; Ren, 2017). In dance halls, women were elevated to a unique status, even described in *Guide of Shanghai* as having a more favorable position than men, despite the broader Chinese culture's patriarchal foundation (Wang, 1932). Yet, while these women enjoyed newfound freedom, Republican society also viewed them through a lens of commodification and objectification. Many left-wing filmmakers depicted them as victims of modern consumerism, and use their tragic fates to critique the societal conditions. For instance, in *The New Year's Gift*, Jiang was forced to perform provocatively to meet audience expectations, and her poster portrays her in revealing attire, emphasizing her reduced agency. This degradation extends even to young girls, as shown with six-year-old He (Figure 6). Their experiences underscore the scarcity of viable, respectable work for women in the Republican era. As highlighted in the *Linglong* magazine (1936), although women could pursue livelihoods, they often faced the difficult choice between repetitive manual labor and the alluring yet stigmatized profession of dancing (Field, 1999). Thus, these

films not only depict singing and dancing girls as modern women but also as figures ensnared by societal constraints. Their identities were caught in a conflict between empowerment and exploitation, shaped by the dual forces of modern opportunity and deep-seated patriarchal values.

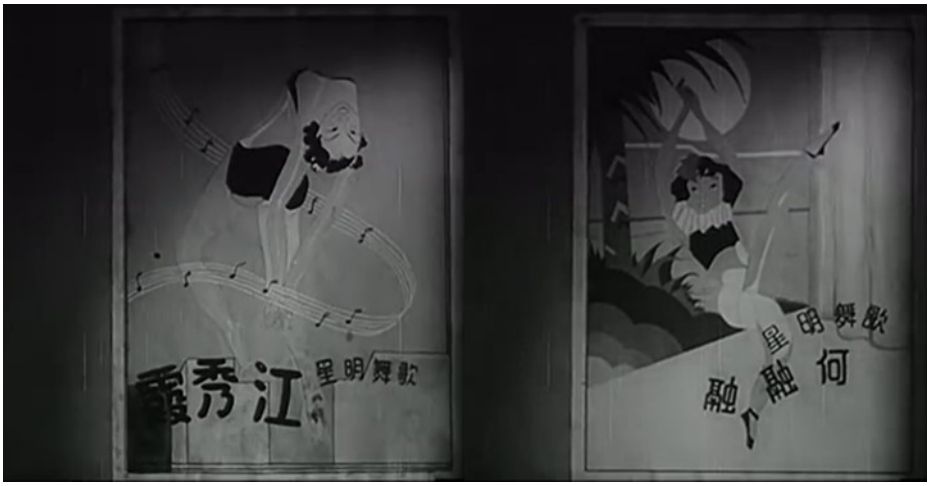

Figure 6: Posters Featuring Jiang Xiuxia and He Rongrong.
Source: from film *The New Year's Gift* (1937)

In conclusion, the singing and dancing girls in Republican-era Shanghai films represented a dual identity: they were both symbols of the new modern woman and commodified objects in a male-dominated society. These women embodied independence and self-sufficiency, moving away from traditional, submissive roles and stepping into positions where they enjoyed financial autonomy. They were also fashionable icons, embodying new gender dynamics as they captivated the male gaze and engaged in Shanghai's rapidly evolving commercial culture. 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, soap, and became the carriers of the city's material culture. At the same time, these women remained vulnerable to the patriarchy, often treated as commodities, with limited control over their lives. Through their presence, they both reflected and shaped the collective urban imagination of Shanghai, which represents the city's glamour, modernity, and material allure. As Shanghai's social landscape changed, these women became cultural mediators that guides residents through modern lifestyle shifts and embodies the moral and cultural values of a city on the edge of modernity. Thus, they were icons of both empowerment and commodification, representing Shanghai's unique urban image in an era of social transformation.

4. Conclusion

This study uses an architectural and urban lens to analyze Shanghai's ballroom dance culture during the Republican era, and draws primarily from films shot on location in Shanghai. By focusing on key dance venues and main participants, this research aims to reconstruct a vivid picture of the ballroom dance culture in early 20th-century Shanghai. include high-end and low-end dance halls, as well as alternative spaces like upscale restaurants and luxurious private villas. Venues explored include high-end and low-end dance halls, as well as alternative spaces like upscale restaurants and luxurious private villas. The films provide a direct visual reference for understanding these locations' architecture, interior designs, and spatial arrangements, and offers an immersive sense of their ambience. Additionally, the plots

reveal norms and etiquette associated with ballroom dancing. The main participants–singing and dancing girls–are examined for their roles, attire, and symbolic portrayals in the films, as well as unpacks the nuanced messages these characters conveyed in the context of their time. By analyzing these depictions, this study sheds light on contemporary attitudes towards and offers insights into the social dynamics and ideologies of the Republican era. Ultimately, this research contributes to preserving Shanghai's urban historical memory, and gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of its ballroom dance culture during a transformative period in the city's history.

During the Republican era, Shanghai was undergoing a profound transformation, transitioning from feudalism to modernity and from an agricultural society to an industrial one. In this context, the city uniquely combined traditional and modern elements, while integrated local culture with Western influences. Japanese writer Muramatsu Shofu referred to Shanghai as the "Magic City" to capture the novel and transformative atmosphere that Republican Shanghai presented to him (Muramatsu, 1924). This backdrop fostered Shanghai's ballroom dance culture, which became an emblem of the city's modernity, and symbolized its harmonious blend of local and global influences. The ballroom dance hall, in many ways, served as a microcosm of Shanghai itself (Ma, 2013). In the 21st century, Shanghai's culture heritage has sparked renewed public interest, reflected in a "nostalgic trend" of products inspired by old Shanghai, such as cosmetics and perfumes adorned with cheongsam-clad dancing girls (Figure 7). This trend underscores the enduring image of these dancing girls as a representation of Shanghai's urban identity. However, nostalgia alone may lack the depth needed to fully appreciate the intricate cultural fusion embodied in this era, reflecting a certain fading of Shanghai's urban spirit today (Yang, 2006). While ballroom dance culture is no longer a central feature in Shanghai's contemporary life, it remains embedded in the city's collective memory. This study utilizes old films as a medium to excavate Shanghai's urban memory, and to preserve its local identity and cultural essence amid ongoing urban transformations. The prosperity of ballroom dance culture in old Shanghai was supported by the period's relatively liberal social atmosphere, the ideological liberation movements of the Republican era, and the vibrant capital and entertainment industries. Although Shanghai's 21st-century social environment and culture differ from those of the Republican era, the enduring spirit of openness, freedom, international integration, and inclusiveness remains integral to the city's identity. By retaining these qualities, Shanghai can continue to cultivate its unique cultural allure on the global stage.

Figure 7: 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

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