UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

The Shadow Network:

Distribution and Exhibition of Chinese Cinema

in the US, 2002–2020

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Film and Television

by

Fengyun Zhang

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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by

Fengyun Zhang

Doctor of Philosophy in Film and Television

University of California, Los Angeles, 2024

Professor Michael Sanford Berry, Co-Chair

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This dissertation examines the politics of Chinese cinema distribution and exhibition in the US between 2002 and 2020, a transformative period marked by the robust growth of China's domestic film industry, tightening state censorship, escalating U.S.-China geopolitical tensions, and the proliferation of online video platforms. It argues that the overseas dissemination of Chinese cinema has been achieved through a "shadow network" of grassroots, bottom-up activities. This network encompasses a wide range of stakeholders—filmmakers, distributors,

critics, academics, and audience communities—who collectively shape how Chinese films circulate internationally. This focus reveals how the specialized, subordinate, and informal initiatives have shaped Chinese cinema's transnational presence beyond state-directed efforts of global expansion.

Previous scholarship has addressed China as a lucrative box-office market for Hollywood and assessed the Chinese film industry as more self-sufficient than export-oriented. This dissertation challenges this political economy perspective by employing a site-specific approach to examine an array of distinct yet interconnected distribution and exhibition outlets. It approaches the transnational circulation of Chinese cinema not merely as a space for artistic rebellion and dissent, nor as indicators of failed cultural exportation, but as a productive network with its own promises, logics, and strategies. The project begins by analyzing the theatrical distribution of Chinese cinema in the US, revealing imbalanced power dynamics between Hollywood executives and Chinese directors and distributors. The next chapter examines the rise of diasporic film festivals following the post-2012 Chinese government crackdown on independent film festivals. The final chapter turns to illicit streaming sites that circumvent geoblocking to operate within opaque transnational digital spaces. Through a cultural-industrial analysis that integrates archival materials and ethnographic fieldwork, the dissertation unsettles the boundaries between arthouse and commercial markets, as well as between industrial distribution infrastructures and grassroots exhibition activities, presenting a comprehensive understanding of Chinese cinema's global circulation.

The dissertation of Fengyun Zhang is approved.

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A Note on Romanization

All Chinese names and titles in this dissertation are rendered in standard Mandarin using the pinyin system. For the reader's convenience, I have provided the pinyin alongside the English translation of each Chinese name or term. It is important to note that the pinyin system places the family name before the given name, which differs from the Western naming convention. For example, the filmmaker's name is written as "Jia Zhangke" in pinyin, with the family name "Jia" preceding the given name "Zhangke." This family-name-first order has been consistently applied throughout the dissertation. For names of Taiwanese, Hong Kong, and other Sinophone filmmakers and film practitioners, I have followed the romanization systems commonly used in those specific regions (e.g., Wong Kar-wai). Additionally, exceptions have been made for proper names where an individual has an established English spelling widely recognized in the field (e.g., Michelle Yeoh, Frant Gwo).

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One of my favorite screenwriters, Phoebe Waller-Bridge, once described the writing process with three words—panic, panic, hope. I could not agree more. While I have experienced my fair share of panic over the years working on this dissertation, I have been incredibly fortunate to have the most wonderful mentors, friends, and family, whose unwavering support has kept hope alive. Many thanks are in order.

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At last, I want to dedicate this dissertation to my parents. I was born and raised in a mountainous town in central China where the closest movie theater was a two-hour boat journey away (not anymore). My mom brought me to a movie theater for the first time, and I am certain that was the start of this project. Looking back, that journey was not just about watching a film—it was about access, about the privilege of experiencing cinema on a big screen, and about how something as seemingly ordinary as going to the movies can reveal deeper questions of power. My dad has been my biggest cheerleader, one who used translation software to read my 20-page-long English essays (and I am sure he will do the same with this dissertation). My parents' unconditional support and the freedom they gave me to discover and pursue my passion—something that may be rare among Chinese parents—have been the foundation of everything I have achieved. I owe my deepest appreciation to them and would not be where I am today without their fierce love.

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Introduction: Beyond Borders

In February 2019, Frant Gwo (Guo Fan), director of *The Wandering Earth*, shared encouraging news on his Weibo social media account. Despite being screened in only 64 theaters across the United States, *The Wandering Earth*, distributed by CMC Pictures (the overseas branch of Chinese film company Huaren yingye), secured the 13th position in its opening week at the US box office. The film also achieved an impressive average revenue of $26,333 per screening—nearly quadrupling the per-screening revenue of that week's box office champion, *The Lego Movie 2*. This unexpected success in the United States presents an interesting counterpoint to Gwo's pre-release stance on international markets. In a January interview with the *Global Times* (Huanqiu shibao, a state-run media outlet), Gwo had explicitly positioned the film as a domestically-oriented project, asserting, "I don't care whether foreign audiences accept it or not; it's not yet time for cultural export. And my priority is to serve Chinese audiences."[1] This bold declaration reflected a pragmatic understanding of the current status of Chinese cinema in the global marketplace, particularly in terms of the science fiction genre. Gwo's prioritization of domestic over international audiences extended into the production process. While working with international special effects teams, Gwo maintained a critical perspective, noting that "only one-fourth of our team was from overseas," cautioning against "excessive faith in foreign teams." He praised the dedication of Chinese crew members, whose commitment he believed pushed their international counterparts to higher standards.[2] In this regard, *The Wandering Earth* was

[1] Frant Gwo, interviewed by *Global Times*, February 2, 2019, https://weibo.com/tv/show/1034:4335285576917064?from=old_pc_videoshow.

[2] Ibid.

conceived as a film made *in* China and made *for* Chinese audiences—or at least, such was the director's stated intention. *The Wandering Earth* indeed resonated powerfully with Chinese audiences: as China's first major sci-fi blockbuster, it garnered 4.6 billion RMB ($690 million) at the domestic box office.

Despite his initial insouciance toward foreign audiences, Gwo was markedly enthused by *The Wandering Earth*'s strong performance in the United States, even embarking on a promotional roadshow in Los Angeles and New York in late February. This initiative was, to some extent, a personal choice, driven less by commercial ambition and more by his desire to engage directly with American audiences, whose feedback he saw as valuable for future creative endeavors.[3] While media reports had touted the box office in the US market, Gwo's firsthand experience revealed a more nuanced reality: approximately 95% of the audiences in the United States were ethnic Chinese, with minimal attendance from other ethnic groups. Nevertheless, Gwo was unfazed by the fact that *The Wandering Earth* substantially catered to overseas Chinese. During the Los Angeles tour, he fondly recalled being mesmerized by James Cameron's *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991) and how Cameron inspired him to create Chinese sci-fi films on par with American blockbusters. Gwo envisioned a gradual development of China's film

[3] Frant Gwo, "Interview with Guo Fan, Director of *The Wandering Earth*: The Driving Forces Behind Chinese Science Fiction," *China Film Foundation Wutianming Film Fund for Young Talents*, May 22, 2019, https://www.cff.net.cn/wtm/Index/show/catid/70/id/150.html.

industry, suggesting that only after a decade or more of strengthening domestic capabilities would Chinese filmmakers be truly prepared to create globally oriented films.[4]

Gwo's seemingly nationalistic rhetoric provides a compelling case to reappraise the contemporary Chinese film industry's relationship with the world. On the one hand, the confidence in domestic talent and audiences, combined with a resistance to both creative and technical foreign dependency, has positioned Chinese films as largely self-sustaining. The sheer size of China's domestic market can generate sufficient box office returns, obviating the need for global market expansion. On the other hand, Chinese filmmakers frequently express aspirations for international exposure and recognition. This outward-looking impulse is driven partly by China's broader ambition to develop robust cultural industries commensurate with its rising global power. At a more personal level, many Chinese directors and executives who grew up watching Hollywood blockbusters harbor ambitions to create works that match their cinematic inspirations. Gwo's apparent ambivalence regarding the international market exemplifies this tension: while Chinese films may not depend on overseas markets for profitability, there remains a widespread yearning for international recognition as validation of achieving Hollywood's industrial and technical standards—still viewed as the epicenter of the international media landscape.

This dissertation explores the escalating imperative of "going out" that has accompanied the breakneck growth of the Chinese film industry. The timeframe (2002–2020) captures a

[4] Michael Berry, *huawaiyin: dangdai huayupian yingren duitanlu* [Voiceover: Contemporary Chinese-Language Filmmakers in Conversation] (Taiwan: Independent Writers-Niang Publishing, 2023), 174–185.

crucial period of transition during which the privatization of finance, production, distribution, and exhibition sectors of the domestic film industry has transformed China into the world's largest film market. It examines the cultural politics surrounding the distribution and exhibition of Chinese cinema in the United States, a cross-border phenomenon often overshadowed by China's burgeoning domestic film industry and Hollywood's global dominance. While the term *going out* is generally examined as part of China's national strategy for expanding its overseas presence and influence (*Zouchuqu zhanlüe* 走出去战略), this project diverges from a predominantly political economy perspective.[5] Instead of viewing the global mobility of Chinese cinema as a government-led expansion initiative, this dissertation highlights the heterogeneous routes and the divergent constraints, obstacles, and opportunities involved under China's neoliberal postsocialist regime. I argue the overseas dissemination of Chinese cinema has been achieved through a shadow network of grassroots, bottom-up activities. This network encompasses a wide range of stakeholders—from filmmakers and distributors to critics, academics, and diverse audience communities—who collectively shape how Chinese films circulate internationally. This focus thus defies the overarching narrative of China's global

[5] See, for example, Huailiang Li, "Chinese Culture 'Going Out': An Overview of Government Policies and an Analysis of Challenges and Opportunities for International Collaboration," in *The Handbook of Cultural and Creative Industries in China*, edited by Michael Keane (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2016), 129–43; Chris Berry. 2021. "What Is Transnational Chinese Cinema Today? Or, Welcome to the Sinosphere," *Transnational Screens* 12, no. 3 (2021): 183–98.

ambitions and reveals how shadow networks and individual actors shape the transnational presence of Chinese cinema beyond state directives.

The global outreach of Chinese cinema is not new. Scholars have written extensively about Chinese arthouse and independent films prominent in the international festival circuit since the 1980s.[6] Indeed, the emergence of nomenclature such as "the Fifth Generation" owes much to its transnational exposure. When mainstream critics in China were still grappling with the rebellion against socialist realist orthodoxy in films like *Yellow Earth* (Chen Kaige, 1984), critical acclaim from the international arthouse circuit effectively validated these artistic innovations.[7] However, as China's film industry underwent a marketization turn after the 1990s, a different dynamic emerged. Commercial cinema, which gained unprecedented domestic visibility during this period, has often been stigmatized as middlebrow or dismissed as "main melody" propaganda, leading to limited critical reflection on the broader implications of its circulation and consumption.[8] While the negligible overseas box office performance of these

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[6] See, for example, Rey Chow, *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (Columbia University Press, 1995); Rey Chow, *Sentimental Fabulations, Contemporary Chinese Films: Attachment in the Age of Global Visibility* (Columbia University Press, 2007); Paul Pickowicz and Yingjin Zhang, eds., *From underground to independent: Alternative film culture in contemporary China* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).

[7] Bonnie S MacDougall, *The Yellow Earth: a Film by Chen Kaige with a Complete Translation of the Filmscript* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1991).

[8] See, for example, Wendy Su, "It is not Just Propaganda—'Main Melody' film between the State and Market," *American Review of China Studies* 17, no. 1 (2016): 21–38; Xiao Yang, "The

commercial films might suggest a failure of state-driven globalization efforts, such a conclusion oversimplifies the complex forces shaping Chinese cinema's transnational circulation. This project reconsiders the binaries of censored (commercial)/uncensored (independent) in researching contemporary Chinese cinema. It approaches transnational distribution and exhibition not merely as platforms for artistic rebellion and dissent, nor as indicators of failed cultural exportation, but as a comprehensive network with its own distinct promises, logics, and strategies.

Furthermore, this project diverges from previous scholarship by elevating non-theatrical distribution pipelines and exhibition sites beyond their traditional status as mere alternatives to mainstream channels. Building on Ramon Lobato's concept of shadow film economies, where unmeasured, unregulated activities become central to studying film as an economic commodity, I expand the concept of shadow as a metaphor that encompasses specialized, subordinate, and informal aspects of transnational film distribution and exhibition. Like the principles of *yin* and *yang* in Chinese philosophy, the shadow network and mainstream channels exist as interdependent yet contradictory opposites—neither superior to the other, but mutually constitutive and transformative. Rather than simply equate this shadow network with informal distribution channels, I understand it as a fluid interchange between formal and informal systems. My analysis thus examines this network not in isolation but through its dynamic interconnection with mainstream channels—from theatrical distribution to established festival circuits and corporate streaming platforms. Within this framework, the shadow network has

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'Wolf Warrior Cycle': Chinese Blockbusters in the Age of the Belt and Road Initiative," *The China Quarterly* 256 (2023): 1053–67.

evolved to encompass an increasingly diverse range of routes and platforms. This project examines three key scenarios: ethnic theatrical distribution of Chinese cinema on a community scale, independent film festivals in major US cities, and illegal streaming platforms. While not aiming to provide an exhaustive typology, these case studies serve as critical entry points for understanding the pervasiveness and significance of shadow networks in contemporary media circulation.

This project approaches the term "Chinese cinema" with critical reflexivity, acknowledging its contested nature in both academic discourse and industrial practice. While scholars have proposed various alternatives such as "Chinese-language cinema" or "transnational Chinese cinemas," I deliberately retain "Chinese cinema" not as a marker of national cinema confined by state borders, but as a dynamic category that encompasses multiple modes of production, circulation, and reception. [9] This conceptualization recognizes that contemporary Chinese cinema operates within an increasingly complex web of multinational productions,

[9] For the discussion on Transnational Chinese Cinemas, see Sheldon H Lu, *Transnational Chinese Cinemas : Identity, Nationhood, Gender* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997); Li Daoxin, "Chongjian zhutixing yu chongxie dianyingshi: yi Lu Xiaopeng de kuaguo dianying yanjiu yu huayu dianying lunshu wei zhongxin de fansi yu pipan" [Rebuilding Subjectivity and Rewriting Film History: Reflections and Critiques Centered on Sheldon Lu's Transnational Film Research and Chinese-Language Film Discourse], *Dangdai dianying* (*Contemporary Cinema*) no. 8 (2014): 53–58. For the discussion on Chinese-Language Film, see Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu and Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh, *Chinese-Language Film: Historiography, Poetics, Politics* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005).

cross-border collaborations, and diverse audience encounters. Rather than attempting to resolve definitional debates, this project examines how "Chinese cinema" functions as a historically contingent and politically charged category shaped by interactions between national and transnational forces. While recent scholarship, particularly in Chinese film studies and media industry studies, has thoroughly explored transnational co-productions, less attention has been paid to the dimensions of transnational distribution and exhibition.[10] This project, therefore, builds on the transnational perspective of researching Chinese cinema, constructing a parallel history from an external viewpoint to examine the ongoing transformations within the Chinese film industry.

Cinema as Industry: Regulatory Reforms and Market Expansion

The widespread academic interest in Chinese cinema can be traced back to the 1980s, when the Fifth Generation, a group of young filmmakers from the Beijing Film Academy's class of 1982, gained international prominence in the film festival circuit. Esther C.M. Yau describes the birth of "New Chinese Cinema" as a confluence of Western film critics' eagerness for fresh varieties of art cinema and the strategic exhibition of artistic talent by the People's Republic of China (PRC) government in support of its open-door policy, as well as a rewriting of China's political

[10] See, for example, Weiying Peng, "Sino-Us Film Coproduction: A Global Media Primer." *Global Media and China* 1, no. 4 (2017): 295–311; Aynne Kokas, *Hollywood Made in China* (University of California Press, 2017).

and cultural intricacies by a new generation of filmmakers.[11] The increased openness of the PRC not only led to global acclaim on the art cinema circuit but also increased the accessibility of archival materials, engendering a substantial body of publications on Chinese cinema by academics and film critics. Since Paul Clark's *Chinese Cinema*, one of the earliest English monographs on the subject, was published in 1987, there has been a growing number of scholars writing and publishing on Chinese cinema.[12] The international acclaim of China's Fifth

[11] Esther CM Yau, "International Fantasy and the 'New Chinese Cinema,'" *Quarterly Review of Film & Video* 14, no. 3 (1993): 95–107.

[12] See, for example, Chris Berry, *Postsocialist Cinema in Post-Mao China: The Cultural Revolution After the Cultural Revolution* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Chris Berry and Mary Ann Farquhar, *China on Screen: Cinema and Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); Dai Jinhua, *Cinema and Desire: Feminist Marxism and Cultural Politics in the Work of Dai Jinhua* (London: Verso, 2002); Tonglin Lu, *Confronting Modernity in the Cinemas of Taiwan and Mainland China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Xudong Zhang, *Chinese Modernism in the Era of Reforms: Cultural Fever, Avant-Garde Fiction, and New Chinese Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997); Sheldon Lu, *Chinese Modernity and Global Biopolitics: Studies in Literature and Visual Culture* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007); Jason McGrath, *Postsocialist Modernity: Chinese Cinema, Literature and Criticism in the Market Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

Generation filmmakers also revitalized domestic film criticism, prompting the establishment of film studies as an academic discipline.[13]

With the expansion of China's film market, both local and international scholars have approached Chinese cinema with an industrial focus. To begin with, scholars have rightfully emphasized the crucial nature of China's film industry reforms in the 1980s and 1990s. For instance, Ying Zhu observed how a series of internal institutional reforms that began in the mid-1980s gradually transitioned the industry from a state-controlled, centrally planned model to a market-oriented system, granting studios and distributors greater autonomy. Among the earliest changes was a 1984 reform that made distributors responsible for the costs of additional film prints, an expense previously covered by the Central China Film Corporation. Chenshu Zhou pinpointed the year 1992, marked by Deng Xiaoping's southern tour, as a symbolic end to China's socialist cinema period in terms of distribution and exhibition. For decades prior, the cinematic experience in China had been dominated by mobile projection and open-air screenings rather than movie theaters, reflecting the nation's view of cinema as an ideological apparatus for uniting and educating the people. Deng's southern tour, which reaffirmed the need for continued reforms and the establishment of a socialist market economic system, led to new regulations

[13] In 1985, the Chinese Film Art Research Center, affiliated with the China Film Archive, began offering graduate education in film studies, marking a critical institutional step in the field. Later, in 1992, Beijing Normal University established its own film studies department, becoming the first comprehensive Chinese university to create a dedicated program for film and media studies.

aimed at stimulating reforms in the film industry.[14] Key provisions included breaking the monopoly of China Film Corporation (CFC, later merged as China Film Group Corporation CFGC in 1999) over the distribution rights of domestic films, allowing studios to directly negotiate revenue-sharing agreements with provincial and municipal distributors, as well as liberating movie ticket prices.

Nevertheless, the reforms from the 1980s through the 1990s were primarily internal restructuring and tentative market experiments. Both state-owned film studios and distributors were still classified as public services (*shiye* 事业), rather than as commercial enterprises (*chanye* 产业). The state-controlled status of the film industry remained largely unchallenged; only state-run studios were allowed to produce films, and distributors could only distribute films from these studios. Moreover, the partial implementation of decentralization and marketization reforms exacerbated studios' financial difficulties. During the socialist era, there were 29 film studios across the country, 16 of which were authorized to produce feature films (gushi pian), while the rest were restricted to producing agitprop newsreels. Since 1996, the government expanded the right to shoot feature films to the 13 provincial-level studios. Accustomed to state subsidies and central planning, these studios struggled to adapt to a market-oriented environment and to manage their own profits and losses. To alleviate financial strain, some studios began to rely on private capital. Under the guise of "co-production," studios charged a "management fee" of approximately 300,000 yuan and traded production licenses to private production

[14] In 1993, the Ministry of Radio, Film, and Television issued the "Opinions on Deepening the Current Reform of the Film Industry Mechanism" and its "Implementation Rules" (known as No. 3 Document, *sanhao wenjian* 三号文件).

companies.[15] For example, *Farewell My Concubine* (Chen Kaige, 1993) was produced by Beijing Film Studio in collaboration with Hong Kong's Tomson Film. Another example is Zhang Yang's *Spicy Love Soup*, a major box-office success in 1997, produced by Imar Film, founded by American producer Peter Loehr in Beijing, in partnership with Xi'an National Film Studio to obtain its domestic release license. Indeed, some of China's most prominent media conglomerates in the private sector—Huayi Brothers (huayi xiongdi 华谊兄弟), Enlight Media (guangxian chaunmei 光线传媒), and Bona Film Group (bona yingye 博纳影业)—were established by the late 1990s. Private capital began to participate in film production through co-production with state-owned studios.

In the early 2000s, China phased out the film industry's dual-track system, which had combined elements of a command economy with market mechanisms. Wendy Su encapsulated this shift in the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) stance on culture—from "culture for the people" to "culture for profit." Su attributed this transformation to the CCP's desire to strengthen cultural exports and build soft power; however, the primary driver was the focus on domestic economic growth.[16] Despite structural reforms in the 1990s, including the restructuring of state-owned studios and distribution departments and increased openness to private investment, China's film industry faced significant challenges. Domestic movie admissions, which had

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[15] Ying Zhu, "Chinese Cinema's Economic Reform from the Mid-1980s to the Mid-1990s," *Journal of Communication* 52, no. 4 (2002), 911.

[16] Wendy Su, "From Culture for the People to Culture for Profit: The PRC's Journey toward a Cultural Industries Approach," *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 21, no. 5 (2015): 513–28.

peaked at 29.3 billion in 1979 amid a cultural vacuum following the Cultural Revolution, suffered as DVDs, VCDs, cable TV, and video halls became more accessible in the 1990s. By 1991, box office revenue had risen to 2.365 billion yuan due to higher ticket prices, but admissions had declined to 14.4 billion, and by 1993, dropped further to 4.236 billion.[17] By 1999, box office revenue had fallen to 810 million yuan, and domestic film production had plummeted to 82 feature films in 1998, with fewer than 50 by 2000.[18] Reformers recognized that fostering a dynamic film market required the involvement of private enterprises across production, distribution, and exhibition. It was no longer sufficient for only state-owned studios and distribution departments to adopt entrepreneurial practices; the government sought private enterprises to take on major roles within these sectors.

I selected the early 2000s as a starting point for this project for several reasons. First, a 2003 amendment allowed any financially capable citizen to apply for a film production permit, although censorship approval remained mandatory.[19] This new regulation revitalized domestic

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[17] Bo Chen, *Zhongguo dianying biannian jishi: faxing fangying juan* [Chronicles of Chinese cinema: Volume on distribution and exhibition] (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chuban she, 2005).

[18] Hong Yin, "Shiji zhi jiao: 90 niandai zhongguo dianying beiwang" [At the Turn of the Century: A Memoir of Chinese Cinema in the 1990s], *Dangdai dianying* (*Contemporary Cinema*), no. 1 (2001): 23–32.

[19] In October 2003, the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT) issued the *Interim Provisions on the Qualification Requirements for Film Production, Distribution, and Exhibition* (Order No. 20), which effectively opened the production and exhibition sectors to

film production in response to increased foreign competition following China's entry into the World Trade Organization, which opened the market to more Hollywood films. Second, the government established Huaxia Film Corporation to end the foreign film import monopoly. Although protectionist policies limited the number of foreign film imports and reserved release windows for domestic films, China strategically used Hollywood films to cultivate audience habits, ultimately building the foundation for the world's largest film market. As theater chains expanded and screens proliferated across urban and rural areas, China created a fertile environment for both Hollywood films and domestic blockbusters. Finally, the government reformed the theater chain system, dismantling long-standing regional protectionism that had persisted since the command economy era. As a result, state-owned entities such as China Film Group Corporation, regional media groups like SMG (Shanghai Media Group), private companies including Huayi Brothers and Enlight Media, and even foreign firms have all become integral to China's film industry, participating in financing, production, distribution, and exhibition.

It is worth noting that as these government reforms helped revitalize the film industry from one of its lowest points, the state has consistently maintained censorship power and ideological control. Indeed, film censorship has been one of the most widely discussed topics in both popular media outlets and academic scholarship concerning Chinese cinema.[20] This project

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private enterprises. Order No. 20 encouraged private capital to engage in joint ventures, partnerships, or to independently establish production companies.

[20] See, for example, Matthew D. Johnson, "Propaganda and Censorship in Chinese Cinema," in *A Companion to Chinese Cinema*, ed. Yingjin Zhang, 151–78 (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons,

challenges the monolithic view that censorship in China operates as a rigid, all-encompassing machine, with industry professionals uniformly complying with and internalizing its standards. Instead, I propose viewing film censorship in China as porous rather than impermeable. The establishment of censorship often lags behind market development, creating window periods during which the industry experiences untamed growth. For example, although government approval is required before films can be exhibited at home and abroad, some defiant directors have "accidentally" or "unknowingly" submitted their works to international festivals since the 1980s. Jiang Wen, for instance, submitted *Devils on the Doorstep* to the Film Bureau for review but failed to pass censorship. The review panel argued that the film exaggerated Chinese people's ignorance, apathy, and submissiveness during the Second Sino-Japanese War. Despite this, Jiang Wen sent the film to the Cannes Film Festival and won the Grand Prix in 2000. Such practices diminished only after stricter regulations and harsher penalties were introduced around 2002.[21]

Ltd, 2012); Beina Xu and Eleanor Albert, "Media censorship in China," *Council on Foreign Relations* 25, no. 1 (2014): 243-249. For popular media outlet and trade magazines, see, for example, Jonathan Landreth, "China Bans Time Travel Films and Shows, Citing Disrespect of History," *The Hollywood Reporter*, April 13, 2011, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/china-bans-time-travel-films-177801/; Pei Li and Christian Shepherd, "China Tightens Grip on Media with Regulator Reshuffle," *Reuters*, March 21, 2018, https://www.reuters.com/article/world/china-tightens-grip-on-media-with-regulator-reshuffle-idUSKBN1GX0JJ/.

[21] The practice of submitting films to international festivals without official approval operated in a grey zone of tacit tolerance and secrecy throughout the 1990s and 2000s. Notable examples

Similarly, as discussed in the second chapter, the early 2010s boom in video websites flourished largely because censorship frameworks had yet to extend to web-based movies and series. Additionally, China's complex and often redundant administrative structure complicates state control; the regulatory authority has shifted from SARFT (State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television, 1998) to SAPPRFT (State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film, and Television, 2013) to CFA (China Film Administration, 2018). Censorship regulations are also notably vague and subject to individual interpretation, with acceptance criteria varying on a case-by-case basis. This ever-shifting nature of the censorship system forms a central focus of this study.

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include: *Beijing Bastards* (北京杂种, Zhang Yuan, 1993), *The Blue Kite* (蓝风筝, Tian Zhuangzhuang, 1993), *To Live* (活着, Zhang Yimou, 1994), *East Palace, West Palace* (东宫西宫, Zhang Yuan, 1996), *Xiao Wu* (小武, Jia Zhangke, 1997), *So Close to Paradise* (二弟, Wang Xiaoshuai, 1998), *Seventeen Years* (过年回家, Zhang Yuan, 1999), *Devils on the Doorstep* (鬼子来了, Jiang Wen, 2000), *Suzhou River* (苏州河, Lou Ye, 2000), *Beijing Bicycle* (十七岁的单车, Wang Xiaoshuai, 2001), and *Summer Palace* (颐和园, Lou Ye, 2006). The consequences varied significantly: while Zhang Yimou continued his commercial filmmaking career, Tian Zhuangzhuang and Lou Ye faced severe punishments for their portrayals of the Cultural Revolution, receiving ten-year and five-year filmmaking bans respectively. By 2004, the government had lifted its restrictions on both Jia Zhangke and Wang Xiaoshuai, allowing them to work within the official system.

Throughout this project, I will take into consideration the astronomical growth of the Chinese film industry from 2002 to 2020, evolving from a modest sector into the world's largest film market, and further explore how this influences its overseas distribution and exhibition. During this era, box office revenues soared from just 900 million RMB in 2002 to a staggering 64.3 billion RMB in 2019. By 2020, despite the pandemic disrupting moviegoing, China had emerged as the largest film market in the world, surpassing the United States in annual box office revenue.[22] This growth was driven by an influx of capital, massive theater construction, the emergence of digital ticketing platforms, and increased urban disposable income. The period also saw the rise of domestic productions that could compete with Hollywood imports. Though the annual import quota for foreign films has held at 34 since 2012, domestic productions have increasingly dominated, accounting for over 60% of box office revenue by the late 2010s.[23] Locally produced blockbusters now lead the domestic market, with the top five highest-grossing films in China in 2020 all being local releases. Consequently, the Chinese film industry is widely seen as self-sufficient rather than export-oriented. Yet this doesn't mean its global reach is

[22] The effective control of the COVID-19 pandemic was another reason that China surpassed North America as the largest box office territory in 2020. As COVID-19 caused widespread theater closures in other parts of the world, China was able to effectively manage the virus and reopen its cinemas, leading to a significant surge in domestic film viewership compared to other markets where theaters remained closed.

[23] "Domestic Film Industry Booms in China," *People's Daily Online*, accessed June 27, 2024, http://en.people.cn/90782/8292474.html.

absent—it simply requires us to look beyond theaters and box office numbers to understand how Chinese cinema circulates both domestically and internationally.

Film Circulation Within and Beyond Theaters

This project reflects on the prominent production-distribution-exhibition-audience cycle central to researching the film industry. Early film scholarship primarily analyzed distribution through a media economics lens, focusing on Hollywood studios' vertical integration. A seminal work in this area is Thomas Guback's *The International Film Industry: Western Europe and America since 1945*, which provides a comprehensive economic analysis of the film industry's distribution and exhibition segments. Drawing on empirical data and trade publications as primary sources, Guback documented two decades of interaction between the United States and Western Europe—the two leading film economies in the capitalist Western bloc. He observed a post-war dynamic in which Western European countries sought to protect their domestic film industries from Hollywood exports. While the US promoted its films for both financial gain and ideological influence, Western European countries responded with protective measures such as increased taxation and screen quotas.[24] Another key scholar, Douglas Gomery, uses industrial surveys and historical data to analyze major US theater chains, examining how they continually adapted business models and marketing strategies to attract audiences and maintain profitability. Gomery's work presents a systematic history of the studio system, broadcasting, and theater

[24] Thomas Guback, *The International Film Industry: Western Europe and America since 1945* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969).

operations in the US.[25] Similarly, Philip Drake explores distribution and marketing strategies in contemporary Hollywood, focusing on distribution agreements and profit calculation mechanisms. Drake highlights significant trends, such as the shift to saturation release strategies, substantial promotion costs on network television, and the growth of video industries as an ancillary market.[26] This body of work effectively delineates the history of Hollywood as both a national industry and a global hegemonic force.

From a similar top-down perspective, many scholars have attended to the flow of media capital and labor, as well as questions of institutions and regulations from a critical political economy viewpoint. This spectrum anticipates the great potential of distribution as a vital process in the media industry cycle, which has been largely understudied in academia and is still in its early stages. Sean Cubitt is one of the key figures who advocate that distribution should be more thoroughly scrutinized to fill a lacuna. By revisiting Marx's initial argument about exchange value, Cubitt claims that today's distribution has become increasingly central in comparison with the production-centered economy in the nineteenth century.[27] He explores the informational, technological, and political dimensions of distribution in a broad sense, viewing it as more than a passive conduit connecting production and consumption. Instead, distribution

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[25] Douglas Gomery, *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992).

[26] Philip Drake, "Distribution and Marketing in Contemporary Hollywood," in *The Contemporary Hollywood Film Industry*, ed. Paul McDonald and Janet Wasko, 63–81 (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008).

[27] Sean Cubitt, "Distribution and media flows," *Cultural Politics* 1, no. 2 (2005): 193-214.

organizes media flows across time and space and thus plays a role in constructing audiences. Cubitt's work lays a foundation for further inquiry into distribution, presenting a compelling framework for understanding its material aspects.

Such Marxist frameworks also offer more nuanced and complex accounts of media circulation and dissemination, helping to demystify Hollywood's hegemonic power in the age of globalization. Scholars like Toby Miller, David Hesmondhalgh, and Michael Curtin, have examined the global flow of media capital and labor, as well as institutional and regulatory issues from a critical political economy viewpoint.[28] A notable example is *Global Hollywood*, a 2001 study by Toby Miller, Nitin Govil, John McMurria, and Richard Maxwell, which probes the political economy of labor division on a global scale, illustrating how Hollywood has achieved its global reach.[29] Michael Curtin, meanwhile, shifts his focus from North America across the Pacific, acknowledging the burgeoning Chinese market as "the world's biggest audience." As Curtin reminds us, "globalization of media therefore should not be understood reductively as cultural homogenization or Western hegemony. Instead, it is part of a larger set of processes that operate translocally, interactively, and dynamically in a variety of spheres: economic,

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[28] See, for example, David Hesmondhalgh. *Media Production* (Maidenhead, England: Open University Press, 2006); David Hesmondhalgh and Sarah Baker, *Creative Labour: Media Work in Three Cultural Industries* (London: Routledge, 2011); David Hesmondhalgh, *The Cultural Industries* (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2019)

[29] Toby Miller, Nitin Govil, John McMurria, and Richard Maxwell, *Global Hollywood* (London: British Film Institute, 2001).

institutional, technological, and ideological."[30] By venturing into the history and operations of the commercial Chinese media enterprises, Curtin examines the spatial logic of media capital expansion and creative migration, rejecting a simplistic account of the one-way flow from the West to the rest of the world.

Although the critical political economy spectrum offers a compelling way of examining media dissemination, more scholars have sought to comprehend media industries by recasting ideas and concepts of cultural studies. One influential strand of cultural studies can be traced to the University of Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. Stuart Hall, the director of the Centre during the 1970s, sought to move beyond the culturalist/structuralist divide by putting himself in conversation with Marxism and Gramsci. Drawing on a Gramscian notion of hegemony and counterhegemony—which reveals a tension between incorporation and resistance of subordinate groups—Hall undermined the assumption of a passive audience.[31] Hall's influential "Encoding/Decoding" essay has had a profound impact on subsequent cultural studies, as it introduced a framework for examining the contested relationship between encoding (production) and decoding (interpretation). The perspective thus points toward new directions for media industry scholars to interpret the flow of cultural power in a more critical way.[32] The

[30] Michael Curtin, *Playing to the World's Biggest Audience: The Globalization of Chinese Film and TV* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

[31] Stuart Hall, "Cultural studies: two paradigms," *Media, Culture and Society* 2, (1980): 57–72.

[32] Stuart Hall, "Encoding/decoding" in *Culture, Media, Language*, (London: Hutchinson, 1980), 128–38.

cultural studies approach thus urges scholars to examine how race, gender, and class shape distribution and exhibition networks.

Indeed, more scholarship has aimed to restore cultural significance to the specialized, subordinate, and informal aspects of distribution and exhibition. An early example is Barbara Wilinsky's *Sure Seaters: the Emergence of Art House Cinema*, which provides a detailed historical account of the specialist theater circuit in the postwar 1940s. Wilinsky highlights how arthouse theater managers and owners intentionally distanced their business from the mainstream, creating an environment marked by distinction and exclusivity. This work thus builds on socioeconomic, cultural, and industrial discourses surrounding alternative cinema in America's postwar era. Besides, Tino Balio's monograph, *The Foreign Film Renaissance on American Screens, 1946–1973*, is one of the few studies that closely examine the distribution and critical reception of foreign films in American society. Balio identifies Roberto Rossellini's *Open Ci*ty (1946) as an entry point exploiting the postwar art film market in the United States and argues that the subindustry had been subsumed by Hollywood in the 1960s and eventually transformed into a niche business in the mid-1970s. In this analysis, Balio investigates the roles of distributors, curators, and film critics, as well as the impact of censorship on the import of foreign films. Balio also brings a geographical accentuation of New York City as the gateway for introducing foreign films to the domestic market. Similarly, in Chapter Two, I explore how Los Angeles—as the center of global media capital—has symbolized not only a gateway but also an "asylum" of Chinese independent cinema after the government crackdown.

While movie theaters have been regarded as primary destinations for film distribution and exhibition, scholars have begun to explore a broader array of distribution channels and exhibition venues, moving beyond the vertically integrated industry model. Haidee Wasson has been a

leading voice in reorienting film history to encompass diverse exhibition practices. In *Museum Movies: The Museum of Modern Art and the Birth of Art Cinema*, Wasson explains how the film library of the Museum of Modern Art set the norm for documenting, archiving, and exhibiting films in museums in the 1930s. She examines the roles of museum directors, curators, and philanthropic foundations in this historical moment, showing how their collective efforts reshaped our understanding of film from mere entertainment to a form of "modern art." Wasson's work is instrumental in understanding the function of film libraries, archives, and museums and how non-commercial institutions have cultivated an alternative network for film distribution and exhibition.[33] In her latest book, *Everyday Movies*, Wasson further advocates a comprehensive assessment of film exhibition by moving away from "the magic of theaters" and instead emphasizing portable projection, a largely overlooked aspect of exhibition.[34] In a similar vein, Jasmine Trice looks into specialized exhibition locales towards minority communities in the United States. Trice surveys the Echo Park Film Center, a local exhibition site in the Latino community of northeastern Los Angeles, and explores the discourse surrounding microcinema. Through this case, Trice demonstrates how small-scale local exhibitions can effectively engage

[33] Haidee Wasson, *Museum Movies : The Museum of Modern Art and the Birth of Art Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

[34] Haidee Wasson, *Everyday Movies : Portable Film Projectors and the Transformation of American Culture* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2020), 13.

with themes of activism, temporality, and film education.[35] This project intends to build on this strand of scholarship by examining exhibition sites on a community scale.

It is important to consider how the emerging business of streaming platforms, as disruptors, interacts with the culture of on-demand media consumption in complex and often ambiguous ways. This dynamic introduces a new degree of instability and complexity within distribution networks. For instance, Ramon Lobato charts a division of formal and informal distribution, proposing the notion of "subcinema" to refer to informal distribution networks.[36] Lobato later coined the term "shadow economies" and argues that the "unmeasured, unregulated and extra-legal audiovisual commerce" is the center of shadow economies of distribution.[37] This configuration aligns with a rich amount of scholarship on piracy in other marginal economies and prompts reflection on piracy and illegal file sharing in a contemporary milieu.[38] Along with Lobato, British scholar Virginia Crisp explores the radical potential of distribution by examining

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[35] Jasmine Trice, "The Echo Park Film Center: Microcinemas, Production Subcultures, and the Politics of Urban Space." *The Projector: A Journal on Film, Media, and Culture* 18, no. 2 (2018), https://www.theprojectorjournal.com/jasmine-nadua-trice.

[36] Ramon Lobato, "Subcinema: Mapping Informal Film Distribution." (PhD diss, University of Melbourne, 2009).

[37] Ramon Lobato, *Shadow Economies of Cinema: Mapping Informal Film Distribution* (London: BFI Publishing, 2012), 1.

[38] See, for example, Shujen Wang, *Framing Piracy: Globalization and Film Distribution in Greater China* (Lanham: Rowan & Littlefield, 2003); Ravi Sundaram, "Uncanny Networks: Pirate, Urban and New Globalisation" in *Economic and Political Weekly (India)*, January 3 2000.

interactions between formal and informal networks, focusing on the shifting dynamics between distributors as gatekeepers and audiences.[39] In doing so, Crisp mounts a nuanced observation towards online filesharing as a re-distribution process, providing glimpses of the evolving landscape of film circulation. As audience members gain more freedom to decide where, when, and how to consume media products, how does this reshape the power dynamics between cultural production and distribution and audiences? The debate on this loop by no means closed. Nevertheless, this complex relationship suggests a more autonomous role for distribution beyond an often take-for-granted industrial cycle, which I will touch upon throughout this project.

Methodology

The primary aim of this project is to present a comprehensive account of the distribution and exhibition of Chinese cinema in the US. To achieve this goal, I utilize an integrated cultural-industrial analysis, supplemented by archival research. Drawing from "critical media industry studies" proposed by Timothy Havens, Amanda Lots, and Serra Tinic, I view ground-level observations and interactions with media practitioners as essential components of this project.[40] The advocacy for critical media industry studies echoes a growing consciousness of establishing

[39] Virginia Crisp, *Film Distribution in the Digital Age : Pirates and Professionals* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); ibid, "Access and Power: Film Distribution, Re-intermediation and Piracy" in *The Routledge Companion to World Cinema*, eds. Stephanie Dennison, Paul Cooke, Alex Marlow-Mann, and Rob Stone (London: Routledge, 2017).

[40] Timothy Havens, Amanda D Lotz, and Serra Tinic, "Critical Media Industry Studies: A Research Approach." *Communication, Culture & Critique* 2 (2009): 234–253.

a field of media industries studies that incorporates cross-disciplinary influences and diverse analytical frameworks.[41] In this regard, the cultural studies perspective provides a nuanced, grounded understanding that complements media economics and industrial analysis as well as political economic approaches. I regard the process of Chinese cinema circulation to be generative for the production of transnational taste cultures, which are shaped by class, race, xenophobia, nationalism, and shifting political contexts. This project thus views distribution and exhibition outlets as sites of contestation and negotiation, filling a gap in discussions on the Chinese film industry from a critical media industry perspective.

My approach also resonates with the production studies methodology proposed by John T. Caldwell, which emphasizes close readings, on-site interviews, and ethnographic engagement.[42] Distributors and exhibitors, traditionally viewed as constraints on media production, are re-evaluated in this project as vital intermediaries between producers and audiences. Chapter 1 includes interviews with distributors and publicists as "gatekeepers" from companies such as Sony Pictures Classics, WellGo USA, and China Lion Entertainment. These interviews provide empirical insights for interrogating the industrial structure of distributing Chinese cinema in American theaters. The fieldwork further includes participant observation at screenings in museums and universities, as well as at specialized film festivals. My role as a programmer at the Los Angeles Chinese Film Festival (LACFF) from 2019 to 2021 has also

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[41] Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren, eds. *Media Industries: History, Theory, and Method* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

[42] John Caldwell, *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

profoundly informed this project. Findings from this ethnographic fieldwork are enriched by journalistic coverage and academic literature, which together support the analysis within this dissertation.

Archival materials are likewise essential to this project. My dataset includes resources from the UCLA Film & Television Archive, Academy Film Archive, China Film Archive, and digital databases such as Box Office Mojo, IMDb Pro, and Studio System. Given that my project examines a transitional period beginning in the early 2000s, some records and statistics are not fully digitalized, necessitating visits to specialized archives. Additionally, I analyze documents from trade magazines like *The Hollywood Reporter, Variety, Deadline, Indiewire, The Chinese Film Market*, and the like. However, I critically assess these secondary sources, mindful of their potential biases favoring privileged groups and hegemonic ideologies. The rise of digital media in the last decade has also increased access to information on distribution and promotion practices, enabling the use of dynamic digital sources, including official websites, social media, and online journalism. The Internet Archive's Wayback Machine has proven invaluable for tracking the development of streaming platforms and video websites.

Finally, I incorporated limited textual analysis to highlight case studies of select Chinese films. Of the thousands of films released annually in China, only a small fraction reaches US audiences. Distributors and exhibitors, as gatekeepers and tastemakers, play key roles in shaping public culture and shared imaginaries. This textual analysis reveals why certain genres or auteurs gain prominence, examining their sociocultural implications. By investigating transnational distribution and exhibition, this project brings a more nuanced understanding of the contemporary Chinese media industry and engages in critical debates about the emergence of China as a global power.

Structure of the Project

This dissertation examines the shadow network of Chinese cinema's transnational circulation from 2002 to 2020, a period marked by China's emergence as the world's largest film market and its contested rise as a global power. While scholars like David Shambaugh have labeled China as a "partial power" with limited cultural influence abroad, I argue that informal distribution networks reveal more nuanced dynamics of Chinese media globalization.[43] This project asks: How do Chinese films reach American audiences through both official and unofficial channels? Where and how do diverse audiences—from art house cinephiles to diaspora communities—access and engage with Chinese cinema? How do distributors and exhibitors navigate the complex web of domestic legislation, market demands, and cultural expectations? By analyzing how the shadow network negotiates and reformulates discourses of authenticity, censorship, and piracy, this dissertation demonstrates how these alternative circuits shape not only how Chinese cinema moves globally but also how it generates new forms of knowledge about Chinese media and culture.

Chapter 1, "Navigating Authenticity in Multiplexes: From *Crouching Tiger*, *The Grandmaster* to *Youth*," investigates how distributors position Chinese films for American theatrical release through three pivotal cases spanning two decades. This chapter starts with a historical account of Chinese films in American theater. Beginning with *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), I examine how Sony Pictures Classics crafted marketing strategies that balanced

[43] David Shambaugh, *China goes global: The partial power*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

"authentic" Chinese culture with universal accessibility. The controversial US release of *The Grandmaster* (2013) reveals tensions between artistic vision and market demands through the Weinstein Company's extensive re-editing. Finally, an analysis of China Lion's release of *Youth* (2017) demonstrates how ethnic-oriented distribution leverages emotional transnationalism to engage diaspora audiences. Through these cases, I argue that "authenticity" emerges as a central discourse that shapes not only marketing approaches but also editing decisions, subtitle choices, and audience reception.

Chapter 2, "Film Festivals in Exile: Remaking Chinese Independent Cinema," traces how the post-2012 crackdown on independent film festivals in China has led to their reimagining in diasporic contexts, particularly in the United States. The chapter begins by detailing the rise and suppression of key festivals like BIFF, Yunfest, and CIFF to establish the historical context. Through extensive ethnographic research at the Los Angeles Chinese Film Festival (LACFF), including interviews with organizers and analyses of programming choices, I show how these overseas festivals preserve the spirit of independence while adapting to new transnational landscapes. The chapter argues that these diasporic festivals serve not only as exhibition spaces but as crucial nodes mediating Chinese independent film cultures. Their programming choices and organizational structures reveal an evolving definition of independent cinema beyond its traditional opposition to state control.

Chapter 3, "Digital Piracy in the Streaming Era: Border Crossing and Diasporic Connections," investigates how informal streaming platforms navigate censorship and licensing restrictions in the age of legitimate streaming services. The chapter begins by analyzing how major Chinese platforms like Sohu Video and Tencent Video have transformed the online video landscape through legal streaming while simultaneously creating new niches for piracy due to

geo-blocking and self-censorship. Through a detailed case study of Danube Video (2009–2019), I examine how pirate streaming sites serve diasporic audiences by circumventing both technological restrictions and cultural borders. Drawing on platform studies and theories of emotional transnationalism, I argue that these illegal services function not merely as content providers but as vital infrastructure for maintaining cultural connections across borders.

Beyond tracing distinct channels of distribution and exhibition, this project ultimately speaks to fundamental questions about cultural access and connection in the age of intensifying geopolitical tensions. The shadow networks I trace throughout this dissertation—whether through community theaters, exiled film festivals, or pirate streaming sites—demonstrate how cultural exchange continues to flourish in unexpected ways, even as official channels become increasingly regulated and restricted. Through close examination of these networks, we gain crucial insights into not just the circulation of Chinese cinema, but also broader questions of how culture moves and transforms in our contemporary mediascape.

Navigating Authenticity in Multiplexes: From Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon, The Grandmaster to Youth

The transnational distribution of Chinese cinema has undergone significant transformations in the 21st century, marked by the shifting dynamics between Hollywood distributors, Chinese filmmakers, and global audiences. This chapter examines the interplay of cultural, economic, and political factors that shape the overseas dissemination of Chinese films in movie theaters. Through case studies ranging from the groundbreaking success of Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) to the controversial release of Wong Kar-wai's *The Grandmaster* (2013), and the emergence of China-based distribution companies like China Lion and CMC Pictures around the 2010s, this chapter outlines the shifting practices for the theatrical distribution of Chinese films in the United States.

I argue that authenticity has emerged as a central discourse in the distribution of Chinese films abroad in the process, manifesting in different ways. The case of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* illustrates how a carefully crafted marketing campaign can frame a foreign-language film as both an authentic representation of Chinese culture and as a universally accessible cinematic experience. Conversely, the controversy surrounding the American cut of *The Grandmaster* reveals the tensions between artistic vision, commercial imperatives, and audience expectations. Moreover, the rise of diasporic distribution companies like China Lion and CMC Pictures highlights the importance of cultural authenticity in engaging overseas Chinese communities, leveraging emotional transnationalism to foster a sense of connection with the homeland. This chapter draws on a wide array of interdisciplinary resources, including trade journals and box office statistics, as well as knowledge generously shared by several distributors during interviews. As the Chinese film industry continues to make a conspicuous presence in

movie theaters around the world, understanding these dynamics becomes increasingly crucial for filmmakers, distributors, and audiences alike.

Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon: Not a Typical Chop-socky Actioner, but a Wuxia Epic

Martial art films in the United States have long been associated with the derogatory term "chop-socky," coined by Variety magazine in the 1970s to describe low-budget Hong Kong genre films that gained popularity during the kung fu craze.[44] Chop-socky kung fu films—as the Americanized Chinese dish chop suey—mix the ingredients of disjointed storylines, high-kicking action elements, dodgy dubbing, and exaggerated special effects. Because of the popularity of the TV show *Kung Fu* (1972-1975), Warner Brothers decided to pick films from Hong Kong to capitalize on the success. Shaw Brothers' *Five Fingers of Death* (天下第一拳, also known as *King Boxer*) became the first Hong Kong martial arts film to break into mainstream US theater chains. Subsequently, *Fists of Furry* (唐山大兄, originally titled *Big Boss*) and *Lady Whirlwind* (铁掌旋风腿, retitled *Deep Thrust*) were showcased in New York theaters (see Figure 1.1).[45] On May 16, 1973, these three films topped Variety's weekly box

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[44] "U.S. Rage of Chop-Socky Films: Karate Breaks Out of Chinatown," *Variety*, January 9, 1974, 72; "$11,106,237 to Chop Socky Pics in U.S. Playoff," *Variety*, May 8, 1974, 68; Matthew Levie, 'Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon: The Art Film Hidden Inside the Chop-Socky Flick', *Bright Lights*, issue 33, July 2001, https://brightlightsfilm.com/crouching-tiger-hidden-dragon-art-film-hidden-inside-chop-socky-flick/ (accessed on October 2020).

[45] "Pictures Grosses: N.Y. Nourished On Chop-Socky Pix; 'Tom Sawyer' & Rockettes 228G, 7th; 'Tango' Softens, Under Capacity," *Daily Variety* 270, no. 13 (1973): 15. There were mix-

office chart.[46] The popularity of these films led to a surge of kung fu movies in the US, with over 30 films released in 1973 alone. However, this craze was short-lived, and by the mid to late 1970s, kung fu films had largely disappeared from mainstream American cinemas, though they maintained a dedicated following among the black community and martial arts enthusiasts.

ups in the translations of movie titles. *The Big Boss* (唐山大兄, 1971) took the name *Fists of Fury* when it was released in the US. While Bruce Lee's next film *Fist of Fury* (精武门, 1972) was also released in New York theaters in November 1972 and later picked up for national distribution, it was released under the title of *The Chinese Connection*.

[46] David Desser, "The Kung Fu Craze: Hong Kong Cinema's First American Reception," in *The Cinema of Hong Kong: History, Arts, Identity*, eds. Poshek Fu and Desser, 19–43 (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 20.

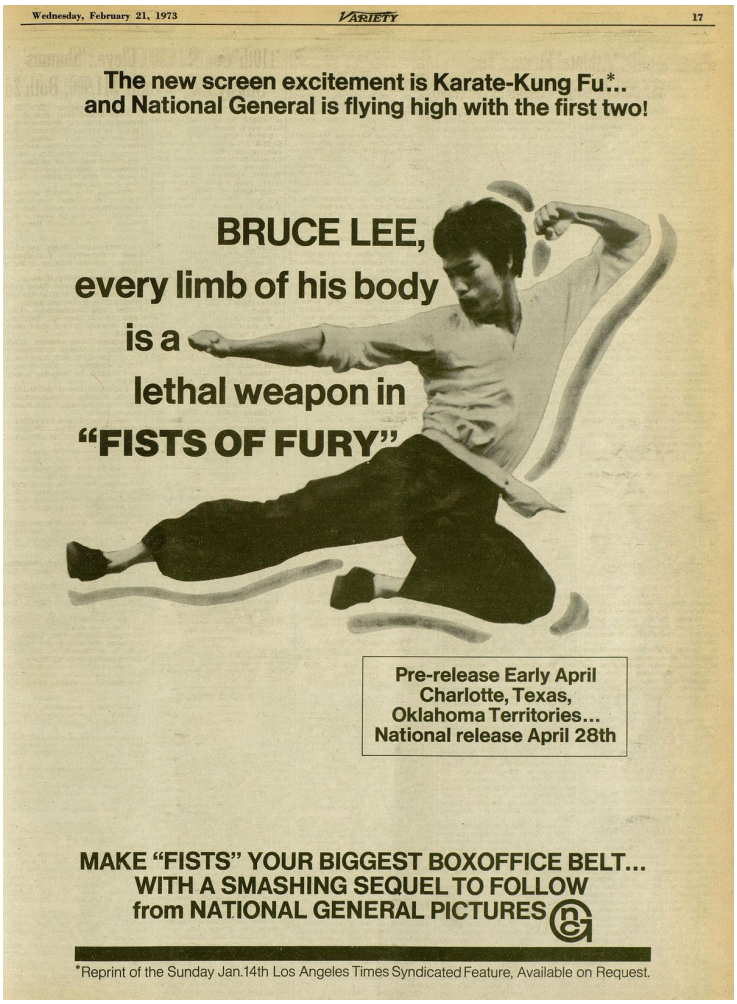


Figure 0.1 The poster of *Fists of Fury* in *Variety*, February 21, 1973.

The 1980s and 1990s saw a remarkable resurgence of the kung fu genre in the US, a revival that was fueled by a new generation of martial arts stars and filmmakers, and a growing appreciation for Hong Kong cinema within the subculture community, critics, and filmmakers. A key figure in this resurgence was Jackie Chan, who had already established himself as a major star in Hong Kong. Chan's unique blend of martial arts, comedy, and daredevil stunts captured the attention of American audiences with films such as *Police Story* (警察故事, 1985) and *Armour of God* (龙兄虎弟, 1986). John Woo's *The Killer* (喋血双雄, 1989) ignited cult interest among subculture fans and critics. Roaring Hollywood action films in the 1990s were heavily

influenced by Hong Kong films as well. Quentin Tarantino, for example, borrowed from John Woo on both *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) and *Pulp Fiction* (1994). With the fan communities for Hong Kong films and stars steadily growing, distributors such as Miramax recognized the opportunity to distribute these films on both the big screen and home video. Lisa Dombrowski observes Miramax's model of making the "crossover hit" in regard to action genre films during this era. Having acquired action films with notable genre conventions and stars such as Jet Li, Jackie Chen, and Stephen Chow, Miramax dubbed, re-edited, re-scored, and re-titled films, trimming down their cultural specificity and foreignness and instead highlighting the exotic appeal of the action genre.[47]

In the 1990s, Sony Pictures Classics (SPC) also emerged as a prominent player in the acquisition and distribution of Chinese-language films. While Miramax focused on manufacturing crossover action hits, SPC has prioritized the consistent acquisition of high-quality arthouse films. Established in 1992 as a quasi-autonomous division of Sony Pictures, SPC is responsible for financing, producing, distributing, and acquiring niche-targeted films. Notably, SPC's origins can be traced back to the independent cinema and culture movement of the 1980s, a period during which nearly all major media corporations developed independent divisions or acquired niche-oriented cable and broadcast networks. Among the influential subsidiaries were Fox Searchlight (News Corporation), Universal Focus (Vivendi Universal), New Line and Fine Line (Time Warner), SPC and Screen Gems (Sony), and Miramax, which

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[47] Lisa Dombrowski, "Miramax's Asian Experiment: Creating a Model for Crossover Hits," *Scope: An Online Journal of Film and TV Studies* 10 (2008), https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/scope/documents/2008/february-2008/dombrowski.pdf.

was later acquired by Disney. These specialty labels, operating under the umbrella of major studios, received substantial financial support and marketing resources to produce and distribute niche films catering to a wide range of demographics. Simultaneously, Hollywood conglomerates sought to take creative risks through these subsidiaries, aiming to bring fresh perspectives to American audiences in the new millennium.

SPC's experience with Chinese films dates back to its establishment in the early 1990s. The consecutive breakthroughs of China's Fifth Generation in the international film festival circuit brought them to American distributors' attention. SPC handled the North American distribution of Zhang Yimou's *The Story of Qiu Ju* (秋菊打官司, 1992) and *Shanghai Triad* (摇啊摇，摇到外婆桥, 1995), as well as Chen Kaige's *The Emperor and the Assassin* (荆轲刺秦王, 1998). However, these auteur-driven films were only shown to an elite circle in specialty theaters, targeting affluent audiences in urban centers and college towns. For SPC, distributing foreign-language films was a low-risk business that tended to bring steady returns, provided that the company maintained a consistent number of distributions per year. Its rollout strategy—meaning when to expand a film to more theaters and to how many theaters—was also rather conservative in order to save on its marketing budget. Thus, even some of the most critically acclaimed titles from SPC received moderate box office success.[48]

Sony Pictures Classics' distribution approach and expectations for *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (卧虎藏龙) differed from its previous Chinese-language titles for several reasons. First, director Ang Lee had already achieved a certain level of recognition in the US

[48] Before the historical success of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, no foreign-language films distributed by SPC exceeded 10 million box office.

with his award-winning "Father Knows Best" trilogy and three English-language projects, including *Sense and Sensibility* (1995), *The Ice Storm* (1997), and *Ride with the Devil* (1999).[49] Second, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* was a multinational collaboration involving financing, production, distribution, and promotion, with a relatively high budget. The film was co-produced by SPC (US), Good Machine (US), Central Motion Picture Corporation (Taiwan), Edko Films (Hong Kong), and China Film Co-production Corporation (mainland China). SPC had acquired the film's domestic theatrical distribution rights in the pre-production stage. Notably, both Good Machine, established by producer and screenwriter James Schamus, and Central Motion Picture Corporation, the Taiwanese state-owned studio, had partnered with Ang Lee since his first feature, *Pushing Hands* (1991). By combining a variety of distribution output deals, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* eventually raised approximately $15 million for production. While this amount was considered moderate for a Hollywood blockbuster, it was the highest budget ever allocated for a Chinese film at the time.

In this regard, SPC intended to draw a connection with the mass appeal of the martial arts genre and, at the same time, highlight the aesthetic and cultural distinctions as a prestigious arthouse film. *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* premiered earlier that year at Cannes but was

[49] Ang Lee made his feature debut *Pushing Hands* (推手), a dramatic comedy reflecting on generational conflicts and cultural adaptation, in 1991. Lee later directed *Wedding Banquet* (喜宴, 1993) and *Eat Drink Man Woman* (饮食男女, 1994), and these three films are known as Lee's "*Father Knows Best*" trilogy. The trilogy garnered a few Golden Globe and Oscar nominations, and *Wedding Banquet* won a Golden Bear at the Berlin Film Festival, all of which have laid the foundation for his career in Hollywood.

intentionally screened out of the competition. SPC did not want to confine its box office performance within an arthouse niche. Nevertheless, until the US premiere in December, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* accumulated many positive reviews from the European film festival circuit and major North American showcases, including the Toronto International Film Festival and the New York Film Festival. Meanwhile, Lee had begun a media campaign to increase his exposure in the United States, landing a Silver Medallion Award at the Telluride Film Festival. The imprimatur of film festivals added to the curiosity towards the director and the film itself. It was also used to generate word-of-mouth publicity for the commercial release at the end of the year.

The concept of authenticity plays a crucial role in appealing to potential audiences. As Michael Z. Newman has discussed, American independent cinema and culture are characterized by oppositional rhetoric. On the one hand, indie culture opposes and criticizes mainstream commercial culture, positioning itself as an authentic alternative. On the other hand, an indie film also serves as a taste culture that allows its audience to assert their distinction and cultural capital in opposition to the mainstream.[50] In a similar vein, while SPC highlighted the action genre conventions that had been popular since the kung fu craze, it distinguished *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* from pulpy B-movies. As Stephen Teo informs us, *wuxia* and *kung fu* are two intersecting cinematic genres within the broader category of martial arts cinema. Wuxia, often associated with a cult of the sword, emphasizes chivalry and the pursuit of righteousness, while

[50] Michael Z. Newman, "Indie Culture: In Pursuit of the Authentic Autonomous Alternative," *Cinema Journal* 48, no. 3 (2009): 16–34.

kung fu places greater emphasis on martial arts techniques.[51] *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* was such a wuxia epic with dazzling sword fights, poetic aesthetics, and romantic underpinnings. The themes echoed traditional virtues of loyalty and chivalry, and its radiant choreography inherited wuxia conventions from King Hu's films, such as *Come Drink With Me* (大醉侠, 1966), *Dragon Inn* (龙门客栈, 1967), and *A Touch of Zen* (侠女, 1971). Adapted from a novel published in the 1930s, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* paid homage to the wuxia tradition while pushing the boundaries with its feminist twist in a modern way.[52]

When *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* was released in Greater China, including Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan, China, and Hong Kong, the film received a lukewarm reception from both critics and audiences. A central point of contention was the use of Mandarin with various regional accents by the actors, which local audiences perceived as "inauthentic."[53] For most martial arts films or foreign-language films imported to the US, distributors have generally dubbed the films to minimize their perceived foreignness. In contrast, Sony Pictures Classics (SPC) made the bold decision to retain the original audio track with subtitles for the US release, rather than dubbing the film. The diverse accents of the all-Chinese cast did not hinder the film's verisimilitude; instead, they contributed to its "authentic" Chinese identity. SPC co-president

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[51] Stephen Teo, *Chinese Martial Arts Cinema: The Wuxia Tradition* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 5.

[52] Ken-fang Lee, "Far Away, so Close: Cultural Translation in Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 4, no. 2 (2003): 281–95.

[53] Erika Junhui Yi, "Globalizing the Locality: A Cultural Comparison of Ang Lee's Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon," *Relevant Rhetoric: A New Journal of Rhetorical Studies 2* (2011): 1–12.

Tom Bernard explained, "We do have a dubbed version, but the fact is that the public in English-speaking territories does not like it when actors' mouths are not matching the words." Moreover, Bernard asserted that the Mandarin language "is part of the authenticity of the film."[54]

Upon the film's North American release in December 2001, SPC's primary challenge was to make *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* appealing to mainstream audiences. SPC deployed three main distribution teams across the nation: two based in New York, focusing on the theatrical release, and one in Los Angeles, dedicated to the Oscar campaign.[55] The theatrical distribution teams implemented a platform release strategy, starting with limited engagements during the opening weekend. The marketing team strategically drew parallels to English-language predecessors like *The Matrix*, highlighting similarities in artistic talent, choreography, and visual spectacle. Notably, Yuen Woo-ping, the martial arts choreographer behind *The Matrix*, designed the stunning fight scenes in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* just one year later. *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* debuted in 16 theaters and gradually expanded to 700 theaters nationwide, eventually reaching over 2,000 theaters at its peak, spreading from urban centers to rural areas (see Figure 1.2). This gradual rollout from a limited Christmas release proved to be an effective way to manage distribution costs, as the marketing budget for

[54] Charles Lyons and Dana Harris, "Sony Classics Lifts Split of Champagne," *Variety*, February 14, 2001, https://variety.com/2001/film/awards/sony-classics-lifts-split-of-champagne-1117793715/.

[55] Karen Larsen, interview with Fengyun Zhang, Los Angeles, June 13, 2020.

Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon was $7 million, significantly lower than the typical $20 million spent by major studios on blockbuster films.[56]

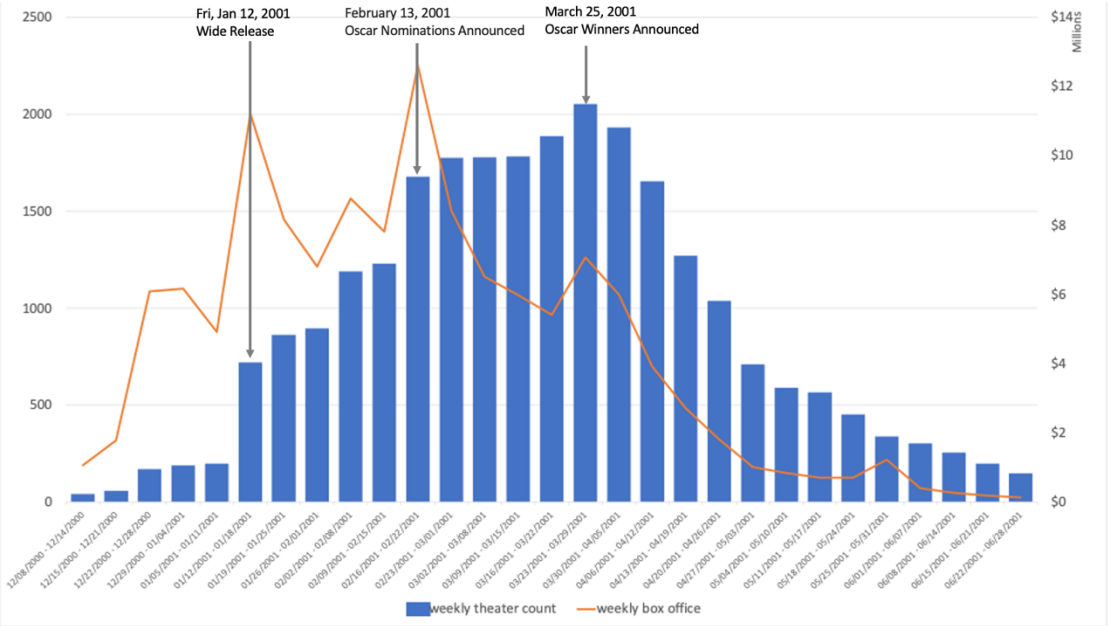


Figure 0.2 Weekly box office and theater count of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000, Ang Lee).

To generate nationwide buzz for a film featuring a cast of largely unknown foreign actors, SPC meticulously segmented the audience market and targeted each group individually. Initially, the distribution team promoted *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* as a high-profile arthouse film to upper-middle-class audiences and foreign film enthusiasts, using slogans such as "the most popular film at Cannes" and "TIFF People's Choice" and showcasing reviews from acclaimed critics. They also leveraged director Ang Lee's previous three English-language features to reinforce the film's arthouse pedigree. As Bourdieu suggests, consuming cultural

[56] Interview with Larsen.

products is an essential means of maintaining social hierarchical distinctions.[57] By appealing to discourses of arthouse cinema and independence, SPC targeted elite audiences with greater cultural capital it believed would recognize and appreciate authentic forms and share this information within their communities.

As the film moved into wide release, the distribution team shifted its focus to a range of specialized audience groups, including martial arts aficionados, teenagers, and female audiences, aiming to generate enthusiastic word-of-mouth. SPC employed grassroots stealth marketing tactics, such as purchasing television advertisements in the Tiger Schulmann karate center chain, featuring the iconic fight scene between the two female protagonists, Yu Shu Lien (Michelle Yeoh) and Jen (Zhang Ziyi). The advertisements offered discounts on karate classes for customers who presented *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* movie tickets. Additionally, the distribution team invited members of the hip-hop group Wu-Tang Clan to participate in promotional campaigns, generating interest among hip-hop fans.

SPC also leveraged unique promotional opportunities, such as hiring 13-year-old prodigy John Otrakji to design the film's homepage and publicizing the story in journals and newspapers. Moreover, the company organized test screenings with influential local tastemakers in San Francisco and New York City, targeting film club leaders, academy members, college students, women athletes, and even Wall Street executives. These screenings aimed to stimulate discussions about the film within various subgroups. SPC invested approximately $40,000 in

[57] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Translated by Richard Nice (London: Routledge, 2015).

these promotional screenings, allocating $5,000 per screening, and even installed state-of-the-art Dolby audio equipment in theaters to enhance the viewing experience.[58]

Media coverage played a crucial role in the success of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, with features, interviews, reviews, and clips disseminated through multiple channels. Transnational and national media networks (e.g., *CNN*, *ABC*, *New York Times*), professional critical outlets (e.g., *American Cinematographer*, *Film Comment*), and specialized lifestyle publications (e.g., *MTV*, *Rolling Stone*, *GQ*) all contributed to the film's publicity. Key journalists, critics, and reporters conducted interviews with Ang Lee and the main actors, resulting in over 4,000 articles in the New York Times database alone by the end of the award season. This extensive media coverage generated significant buzz and provided critical support for the film's marketing campaign.

Ultimately, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* became a massive hit in 2000, grossing over $128 million at the US box office and cementing its status as one of the most successful foreign-language films in American history. SPC's innovative distribution strategies had a lasting impact on the foreign-language film market, challenging the prevailing xenophobia towards subtitled films in multiplexes and Hollywood's dominance in representing Eastern culture. The film's success prompted international sales agents, independent distributors, and major studio subsidiaries to invest in foreign-language imports, leading to increased exposure for Chinese-language films in the US. International sales agents, independent distributors, and other

[58] John Lippman, "Sony's Word-of-Mouth Campaign Creates Buzz for Crouching Tiger," *The Wall Street Journal*, January 11, 2001, https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB979167834520030719 (accessed August 7, 2020).

major studio subsidiaries, including Sony Classics and Warner Independent Pictures, and sales agents as Disney, Sony Pictures, Miramax, IFC Films, and Lionsgate, have invested in foreign-language imports as a consequence of the popularity of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. Ever since then, more and more Chinese-language films have garnered a moderate scale of exposure in the US.

The triumph of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* also had a profound impact on mainland Chinese filmmakers. Zhang Yimou, a pioneer of the Fifth Generation directors known for his intimate, low-budget dramas, ventured into the realm of epic martial arts films with *Hero* (英雄, 2002). *Hero* became the most expensive Chinese film ever made and marked the beginning of the Chinese film industry's blockbuster era. Miramax acquired the distribution rights for *Hero*, which became the first Chinese film to achieve global box office success and penetrate Hollywood's distribution network upon its North American release in 2004.[59] This series of events highlights the substantial influence of the transnational circulation of Chinese-language films on the resurgence of the Chinese film industry.

Harvey Scissorhands and *The Grandmaster*

As I mentioned in the previous section, Sony Pictures Classics (SPC) and Miramax, two major distributors of foreign-language films in North America, have distinct approaches to handling the release of these films. SPC respects directors' artistic integrity by releasing the original versions of their work, while Miramax often takes a more hands-on approach, engaging in aggressive re-

[59] Dai Jinhua and Lisa Rofel, *After the Post-Cold War: the Future of Chinese History*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 47.

tooling and re-editing of the films they distribute. The distinction between Miramax and SPC is rooted in their negotiation of the foreignness of foreign-language films. Miramax's approach suggests that cultural specificity and foreignness must be reduced to make these films more accessible to the domestic market.

Despite the cultural insensitivity evident in post-production manipulation, Miramax's release strategy brought a series of critical and commercial successes, such as *Cinema Paradiso*, *Like Water for Chocolate*, *Il Postino*, and *Life is Beautiful*. Paul McDonald has described the way in which Miramax pushed for mainstream success as the "indiewoodization" of foreign-language films.[60] During this process, Harvey Weinstein, the former film producer and co-founder of Miramax Films and The Weinstein Company, earned the nickname "Harvey Scissorhands" due to his reputation for heavily editing films that his companies acquired or produced. When working with established foreign auteurs, the "Harvey Scissorhands" approach often involved drastically recutting their work. For instance, Miramax distributed a version of Zhang Yimou's *Hero* that was 20 minutes shorter than the original, yet it still opened at number one at the US box office. In a more recent example, Weinstein insisted on cutting 25 minutes from Bong Joon-Ho's *Snowpiercer* (2012) for American distribution, a decision that was vehemently opposed by Bong himself.

[60] Paul McDonald (2009) "Miramax, Life is Beautiful, and the Indiewoodization of the foreign-language film market in the USA," *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 7, no. 4 (2009): 353–375.

Regarding the collaboration between Harvey Weinstein and Wong Kar-wai, Weinstein was credited by Wong for playing a crucial role in introducing his films to American audiences.[61] Initially, it was the renowned director and Asian film connoisseur Quentin Tarantino who discovered the brilliance of *Chungking Express* (重庆森林, 1994)), a film that follows two Hong Kong policemen as they navigate love and heartbreak through fleeting encounters with enigmatic women. In 1995, with Weinstein's backing, Tarantino started a new label under Miramax called Rolling Thunder, which specialized in distributing Blaxploitation and foreign art films. As *Chungking Express* was initially released in Hong Kong in 1994, Rolling Thunder brought a limited theatrical release and DVDs to North America in 1996. This marked the first film distributed by Rolling Thunder and Wong's first film ever released in the US. However, despite Tarantino's validation of *Chungking Express*, the film did not generate significant box office interest that year. In his review article, renowned American film critic Roger Ebert appreciated the artistic achievement but believed that Tarantino "would weep again" upon seeing the box office receipts, referring to Tarantino's emotional response when he first viewed *Chungking Express*.[62] The film opened in March 1996 on 20 screens and grossed only $600,000. The Rolling Thunder label itself was short-lived and closed in 1999.

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[61] Gregg Goldstein, "Weinstein Co. picks 'Blueberry'," *The Hollywood Reporter*, November 10, 2006, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/business/business-news/weinstein-picks-blueberry-142801/ (accessed November 5, 2022).

[62] Roger Ebert, "Chungking Express," 1996, http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/ chungking-express-1996 (accessed November 5, 2022).

Over time, Wong Kar-wai has emerged as a contemporary auteur in the arthouse film scene. David Desser contextualizes the development of Wong's auteur identity within the international film festival circuit ever since *Chungking Express*. By drawing comparisons between Wong's artistry and that of Jean-Luc Godard, critics, and cinephiles became enamored with Wong's work, making him a cult favorite from the late 1990s onwards.[63] While such comparisons could be viewed as an attempt to legitimize Wong's work within a world cinema framework of reference, they also reflect genuine stylistic affinities that Wong himself readily acknowledged.[64] Wong's standing as one of the most critically acclaimed filmmakers was further consolidated when he won the Best Director award at the Cannes Film Festival for *Happy Together* (春光乍泄, 1997).[65] Subsequently, Wong's films were consistently picked up by American distributors, including Kino, USA Films, and Sony Pictures Classics. In 2006, when Wong made his English-language feature debut with *My Blueberry Nights*, the Weinstein Company acquired the film's distribution rights for the US, Australia, and New Zealand. Wong enthusiastically described the collaboration as a reunion with an old friend in the new phase of

[63] David Desser, "Chungking Express, Tarantino, and the Making of a Reputation," in *A Companion to Wong Kar-wai* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc. 2015), 334.

[64] Wong Kar-wai, *Wong Kar-wai : Interviews*, edited by Silver Wai-ming Lee and Micky Lee (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2016).

[65] Julian Stringer, "Wong Kar-wai" in *Contemporary Filmmakers*, edited by Yvonne Tasker (London: Routledge, 2002), 397.

his directing career.[66] Despite *My Blueberry Nights*' underwhelming box office performance, Wong and Weinstein continued to intensify their longstanding collaboration.

When seeking a US distributor for his next film, *The Grandmaster* (一代宗师, 2013), it came as no surprise that Wong Kar-wai turned to Weinstein. The Weinstein Company, widely known for its success in bringing foreign films to the American market, had already helped Wong reach international audiences with *My Blueberry Nights* and possessed the financial resources and strategic influence necessary to secure broad distribution and visibility within the US market. Additionally, Weinstein's established reputation for championing international auteurs offered Wong a reliable pathway to Hollywood recognition, a critical factor in expanding his reach beyond the arthouse circuit. Wong had initially conceived the idea for a biopic about Ip Man, the legendary martial artist of the Wing Chun school, in 1999 and publicly revealed the project in 2002. Over the course of the film's prolonged development, Wong visited martial artists, including Ip Man's disciples, and the principal photography took three years to complete. The initial director's cut of *The Grandmaster* had a runtime of approximately 130 minutes, which later became the version released in mainland China and Hong Kong. The film opened in these territories in January 2013, one month before its premiere at the Berlin International Film Festival, and grossed over $50 million at the box office, making it the most commercially successful film of Wong's career. In February 2013, a 123-minute international version of *The Grandmaster* premiered at the Berlin International Film Festival. Following the Berlin premiere, the Weinstein Company announced its acquisition of *The Grandmaster* from Annapurna Pictures, whose owner, Megan Ellison, served as a key financier and executive producer of the film.

[66] See note 61.

It is plausible that the commercial success of *The Grandmaster* across mainland China and Hong Kong inspired Weinstein to acquire the international distribution rights to the film, hoping to replicate its impressive box office figures in the United States. In a February 2013 statement, Wong announced: "With Harvey's expertise and his passion for this genre, I am confident that he and his team will reach new heights with *The Grandmaster* by cultivating hardcore action fans as well as exciting and pleasing those long time fans of my films."[67] To achieve this goal, Weinstein wielded his "Scissorhands" once again, cutting 20 minutes from the already-shortened Berlin Film Festival version. As Weinstein sought to satisfy both action genre fans and arthouse audiences, the American cut also added some new shots, including Bruce Lee's quote in the closing credits that highlighted Ip's identity as Bruce Lee's enlightened teacher. In the following section, I will compare the two versions through a close reading before moving on to the distribution controversy around *The Grandmaster*.

To begin with, the two versions of the film—the American cut and the mainland China/Hong Kong version—differ in their thematic focus in a nuanced way. When compared to the film's Chinese title, *Yi Dai Zong Shi*, or "grand masters of an era," the English title, *The Grandmaster*, provides insight into Wong's divergent intentions behind the two distinct versions of the film. Although the project was initially conceived as a biopic of Ip Man, Wong envisioned a sweeping panorama of martial art masters from China's Republican era, further elaborating on the formality of their grand traditions. In the Chinese version, Ip Man serves as the film's

[67] Nigel M. Smith, "The Weinstein Company Nabs Wong Kar Wai's 'The Grandmaster' Out of Berlin," *IndieWire*, February 7, 2013, www.indiewire.com/2013/02/the-weinstein-company-nabs-wong-kar-wais-the-grandmaster-out-of-berlin-41304/ (accessed November 5, 2022).

connecting thread, but Wong's primary focus lies in depicting the historical and political milieu, emphasizing both the internecine politics and the legacy it has bequeathed to the martial arts world. This cut of the film features far more subplots than the American version, inviting audiences to observe secondary character arcs involving the Northern masters, such as Razor (the Baiji Quan master) and Ding Lianshan (Gong Yutian's senior fellow), in addition to the main protagonists, Ip Man and Gong Er (see Figure 1.3). The fates of these secondary characters foreshadow various personal choices in a chaotic era and symbolize the rise and fall of martial arts. Moreover, Wong presents these characters enigmatically, refusing to disclose their complete stories to the extent that even local Chinese audiences might find them confusing without name signifiers.



Figure 0.3 A deleted scene between Gong Yutian and Ding Lianshan greeting in Foshan.

Furthermore, as Yvonne Tasker observes, Hollywood action movies "typically downplay dialogue and complex character development or interaction in favor of spectacular action set-

pieces."[68] The primary logic behind re-editing *The Grandmaster* aligns with this approach. The deletions, additions, and alterations made to the plot of Razor—a Kuomintang assassin-turned-barber—exemplify how the American cut omits the convoluted character development that distinguishes the Chinese version, instead focusing on body-centered action sequences (see Figure 1.4). In the Chinese version, Gong Er and Razor meet aboard a train during one of Razor's assassination missions. In the American cut, this backstory is partially deleted and then narrated by Ip Man: "He called himself a barber. Some said he was once an assassin, even the Last Emperor's bodyguard. His blade was swift and untouchable. But a blade not blocked never sings. And he sought the Music of Steel." Alongside Ip Man's monologue, the scene cuts to Razor fighting in the rain during his assassin era. Despite the removal, the American cut adds a friendly match between Razor and Ip Man when both masters flee to Hong Kong and maintain mutual respect. This new interpretation of Razor shifts the focus from the transition of his personal identity to an overwhelming action-concentrated spectacle.

[68] Yvonne Tasker, *The Hollywood Action and Adventure Film* (Chichester, West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), 13.

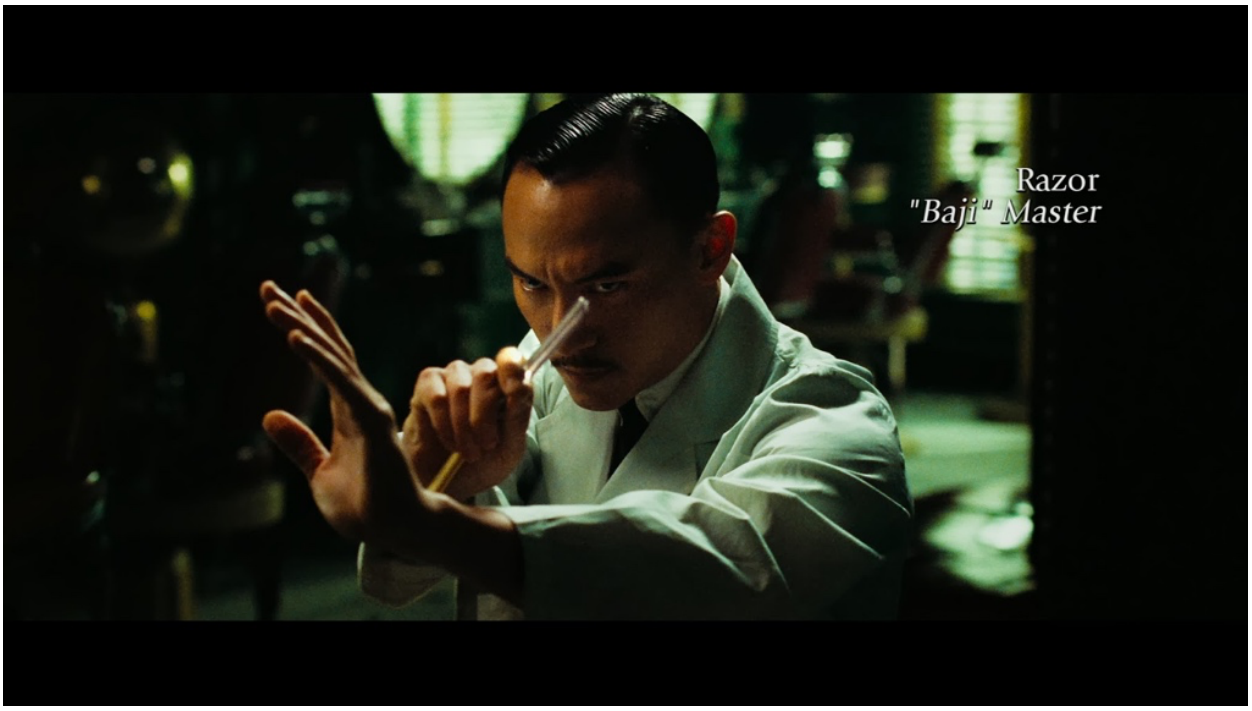


Figure 0.4 The added action scene of Razor in the US cut of *The Grandmaster* (2013, Wong Kar-wai).

The American cut of *The Grandmaster* thus deviates from the Chinese version's sprawling narrative approach, instead relying heavily on Ip Man's voiceover narration and explanatory intertitles to propel the story forward in a more streamlined, action-focused manner. A notable example is the film's action prologue. While both versions open with a spectacular melee in the rain, the American cut introduces an entirely new scene in which Gong Yutian, observing the melee from upstairs, compliments Ip's kung fu skills. This added scene firmly establishes Gong's recognition of Ip's talents and provides clear context for a later, equally pivotal scene where Gong Yutian invites Ip to his retirement ceremony for a demonstration match, intending to name him as the leader of the next generation of martial arts masters. However, several subplots that do not involve action sequences have been trimmed. These deleted scenes include Ip's deep attachment to his wife, the Japanese army's occupation of

Foshan, the displacement of Ip's family, Ip's retrieval of leftovers from the Golden Pavilion brothel, and the murder of kung fu master Uncle Deng by the Japanese. By removing these subplots that are deemed as digressive, the American cut increases the narrative's linear momentum.

David Bordwell has insightfully noted Wong Kar-wai's history of cutting different versions for almost all his films, a modus operandi that eschews conventional scripts or storyboards in favor of intuitively overshooting to produce a vast amount of footage.[69] On the one hand, Wong assembles and reorganizes his plots during post-production, a practice that offers him more scope and flexibility to produce different versions of his films for different regions. And it is this flexibility that allows him to produce different versions for different regions. On the other hand, this improvisational approach has led to the signature of his films, which are renowned for their disjointed, convoluted, and fragmented narrative structure. In an interview with film critic Justin Chang, Wong also asserted that releasing two cuts was, far from a compromise, an active decision made in the early stages of the film. [70] In *The Grandmaster*, rearrangements further give insight into different interpretations of relationships between characters.

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[69] David Bordwell, "The Grandmaster: Moving Forward, Turning Back," *David Bordwell's website on cinema*, September 23, 2013, www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2013/09/23/the-grandmaster-moving-forward-turning-back/ (accessed October 18, 2022).

[70] Justin Chang, "In 'The Grandmaster,' Wong Kar Wai Takes Audiences on an Ip Trip," *Variety*, August 8, 2013, www.variety.com/2013/biz/news/in-the-grandmaster-wong-kar-wai-takes-audiences-on-an-ip-trip-1200575645/ (accessed October 18, 2022).

The rearranged parts in the American cut complicate the narrative regarding the subtle relationship between Ip Man and Gong Er. In the Chinese version, it is inaccurate to describe the relationships between Ip Man, Zhang Yongcheng (Ip's wife), and Gong Er as a love triangle. Although Gong Er reveals a certain affection for Ip in the end, Ip's feelings for Gong Er are more of an obsession with her 64 Hands technique, which the director himself confirmed multiple times.[71] In the American cut, deleted parts weaken Ip Man's attachment to his family. The most significant change between the two versions occurs in the scene when Ip Man plans to visit Gong Er in northeast China and makes two coats for Zhang and himself. In the Chinese version, Ip makes a coat for Zhang, who asks with an innocent smile, "Is Foshan that cold?" After a brief moment of silence, Ip says, "Let us take a family portrait." In the American cut, Zhang is the one who makes a coat for Ip, who says in embarrassment, "Foshan is never this cold." Zhang replies, "Better to be ready. You will go to the northeast sooner or later," and proposes taking a family portrait. This revision intentionally shows Ip's wife Zhang's sensitivity, jealousy, and dignity as a traditional Chinese housewife. As someone who suspects her husband may be in love with

[71] The relationship between Ip and Gong Er has caused extensive discussion among fans. Wong Kar-wai himself confirmed that it was mutual respect instead of romance between the two grandmasters, according to a blog on the post-screening Q&A on Douban. In another interview, Wong said: "This movie does not exist love triangle. Tony Leung and Zhang Ziyi are also not in a relationship. As martial art grandmasters, they are balanced, and both have gone through the years of hardship and finally come to Hong Kong…" in *Southern Metropolis Daily*, January 16, 2013, http://ent.ifeng.com/movie/special/grandmasters/content-6/detail_2013_01/16/21243226_0.shtml?

another person, Zhang takes the initiative to pack luggage for Ip's trip to the north and reminds Ip that they are still a family by mentioning the family portrait. In the Chinese version, Ip is the one who comforts his wife and asks her to take a picture together, hinting at his fidelity. This contradiction in the American version redirects Ip and Gong Er's relationship in a romantic sense. A similar revamp of lines occurs in the American version when Ip narrates, "It is said all the encounters in the world are a kind of reunion, and that's how we first meet. She was nothing I could've ever expected." In the Chinese version, the same line is narrated by Gong Er, who says, "It is said all the encounters in the world are a kind of reunion (世间所有的相遇，都是久别重逢)."

When viewed side by side, it is safe to say that the American cut is more of a proactive restructuring within Hollywood's constraints rather than a merely condensed version. Wong and his long-time collaborator William Chang Suk Ping worked closely with Weinstein in the editing process. Nevertheless, the controversy surrounding the US distribution of *The Grandmaster* arose as soon as news broke that the American cut would be 20 minutes shorter than the original version released in China. Wikanda Promkhuntong has noted how Wong's international reputation is generated by transcultural fandom in online communities such as YouTube, where Wong has developed a solid fan base among cinephiles and critics.[72] As Weinstein's compressed version sought to satisfy both action genre fans and arthouse audiences, the backlash around the

[72] Wikanda Promkhuntong, "Cinephiles, music fans and film auteur(s): Transcultural taste cultures surrounding mashups of Wong Kar-wai's movies on YouTube," *Participations* 12, no. 2 (2015): 255-74.

deleted 20 minutes prompted a string of negative reviews. Fans and critics blamed "Harvey Scissorhands" for destroying the authenticity of Wong's artistry, as the potential link between authorship and authenticity meant that intervention from a powerful Hollywood executive like Weinstein jeopardized the intact idea of auteurism.[73]

While Weinstein's distribution strategy had brought a series of critical and commercial successes in the past, *The Grandmaster* did not perform as planned. The highly anticipated film hit theaters in New York, Los Angeles, and Toronto on August 23, 2013, and opened nationwide on August 30. Prior to that, Weinstein had recruited Martin Scorsese and Samuel L. Jackson to give glowing reviews for the film, putting a seal of approval on it for the arthouse audience. *The Grandmaster* started strongly, with $132,259 from seven theaters in its opening weekend, but lost momentum during the expansion. After the first week, the film quickly vaulted to 704 theaters, and 804 theaters at its highest point. Nevertheless, the average per theater quickly dropped to around $200 per day, and the wide release only lasted for less than a month.

What eventually agitated the American audience was Weinstein's thoughtless speech at the London Film Festival in October, where he said, "This is the love, joy and amazing relationship that Kar Wai has with space, time and memory in this movie…. We tried to keep it as chronologically as we could and at the end of the day, who gives a shit? It's beyond belief watching the artistic cinema that he did." Weinstein's arrogant talk was scrutinized by fans and critics and spread quickly on social media, with audiences clearly caring about his long history of

[73] See, for example, David Ehrlich, "Kung Foolish/ How The American Cut of 'The Grandmaster' Ruins a Masterpiece," *MTV.com*, August 20, 2013, http://www.mtv.com/news/pqrock/wong-kar-wai-the-grandmaster-ruined-by-american-cut

excessive tampering with foreign titles. Once regarded as one of the largest foreign-language releases of the year, *The Grandmaster* underperformed at the US box office with a total gross of $6.5 million.

A review piece published on rogerebert.com provides insight into the American audience's antipathy towards the new version. The writer, Steven Boone, calls the 108-minute version "an insult to American audiences," as it implies that they are too self-absorbed for meditative content. Wong himself had clarified on multiple occasions that the 108-minute cut was not a watered-down version but one that was tighter with historical contexts.[74] Nevertheless, for arthouse audiences, the director's cut version is sacrosanct, particularly when it comes to an acclaimed auteur like Wong. As for diehard action genre fans, Donnie Yen's two blockbusters, *Ip Man* (叶问, 2008) and *Ip Man 2* (叶问 2：宗师传奇, 2010), both of which were released in the US, had already said a lot about the martial art master in popular culture.

The power Weinstein held in Hollywood and the Academy still earned *The Grandmaster* two Oscar nominations in the costume design and cinematography categories, making it Wong's first film ever recognized by the Academy. The film was also shortlisted for the Best Foreign Language Film as the Hong Kong entry but failed to make the final nomination. It is noteworthy that Hong Kong sent the US version for the Oscars and even played the US version for seven days in Hong Kong to qualify. What further proves Wong's acknowledgment of the US cut is the

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[74] Tim Appelo, "Wong Kar Wai Says His 108-Minute '*The Grandmaster*' Is Not 'A Watered-Down Version,'" *The Hollywood Reporter*, January 6, 2014, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/wong-kar-wai-says-his-668633/ / (accessed on January 2, 2022).

3D re-release of *The Grandmaster* in China in 2015. The fourth cut of the film, commanded by Wong himself, is almost identical to the US cut, except for a new scene where Gong Er shows the 64 Hands technique to Ip Man as an Easter egg at the end. Many Chinese audiences also speak highly of the 3D version, praising its cohesive narrative. Ultimately, it is inaccurate to call the US cut a travesty that ruins the film. The case of *The Grandmaster* manifests the complicated dynamic between international auteurs, powerful Hollywood distributors, and American audiences.

In Search of Ethnic Authenticity: China Lion and CMC Pictures

In 2010, Chinese director Feng Xiaogang publicly criticized Harvey Weinstein at the Shanghai International Film Festival, calling him "a cheater in the eyes of many Chinese moviemakers." According to Feng, Weinstein initially promised an $8 million buyout deal for the North American distribution rights of his film *The Banquet* (夜宴, 2006), which effectively pushed other American distributors out of the negotiations. Weinstein later reduced the offer to a mere $500,000 for DVD distribution under Miramax's Dragon Dynasty label. Feng's frustration with Weinstein was not an isolated case among Chinese filmmakers. Dating back to 2002, Zhang Yimou's *Hero* was cut 20 minutes, and its US release was deferred for two years. Zhang then took his next film, *House of Flying Daggers* (十面埋伏, 2004), to Sony Pictures Classics, and never worked with Miramax again. Similarly, Chen Kaige, who had previously collaborated with Miramax on *Farewell My Concubine* (霸王别姬, 1993), parted ways with Weinstein during negotiations for *The Promise* (无极, 2005). Initially promising a deal to Chen, Weinstein exited the project after six months of negotiation because he saw limited potential for the film to win an Oscar.

The longstanding feud between Chinese directors and Weinstein, who was once considered the most influential figure in Hollywood, highlights the power imbalance in the film industry. As the exchange of resources between Hollywood and China has grown, an increasing number of Chinese directors are actively seeking overseas distribution opportunities for their work. Their goal is to expand their films' global reach and potentially break into the lucrative American market. However, Hollywood executives often view Chinese films as a small, less profitable segment of the highly competitive North American market. Consequently, they tend to acquire Chinese titles at low costs, primarily as a token of goodwill. This less lucrative business prospect has made Hollywood distributors extremely cautious when purchasing Chinese-language films.

In the same year that Feng gave the comment at the Shanghai International Film Festival, China decided to send Feng's disaster epic *Aftershock* (唐山大地震, 2010) to the Oscar foreign-language film competition. The production company Huayi Brothers wanted to find a distributor to handle the US theatrical release but was unsure about the "untrustworthy" Hollywood executives. This backstory became the reason why China Lion (Huashi 华狮) was born. Funded by Huayi Brothers and Bona Film Group, the top two private film studios in China, China Lion specializes in distributing commercial Chinese movies around the world. Mainland Chinese scholar Qingsheng Zhan regards the establishment of China Lion as a turning point for the structural change in the overseas distribution landscape of Chinese-language films. Zhan vividly charts three stages for the overseas dissemination of PRC films: from prioritizing ideology in the Cold War era to "seeking fame" in the 1980s international film festival circuit, Chinese filmmakers finally started to "seek profit" alongside the market-oriented film reform in the

national film industry.[75] In this regard, China Lion's market appeal is crystal clear: bringing the most authentic Chinese box-office hits to overseas Chinese audiences. China Lion also covers a wide range of genres, including comedy, romance, crime, and "main melody" propaganda films.

China Lion has handled overseas distribution of Feng's films ever since *Aftershock*. In what follows, I will take *Youth* (芳华, 2017)—the top-grossing film distributed by China Lion—as an example to elaborate on its distribution strategy. *Youth* was simultaneously released in China and the US on December 15, 2017. The film follows the story of a group of young friends who are members of a military art troupe in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The nostalgic depiction of the Cultural Revolution and Sino-Vietnam War, therefore, attracts both middle-aged immigrants who came to the States during the last century and young overseas Chinese who are curious about this sensitive historical period. If we try to map all the theaters that China Lion has negotiated for releasing *Youth*, they are unanimously multiplexes in the state capitals or regional centers (see Figure 1.5). I further visualize the location of the theaters and correlate it with the demographic distribution of Chinese immigrants (see Figure 1.6). It is noteworthy that China Lion usually rents screens from commercial theater chains, including AMC, Regal, Cinemark, and Cineplex in Canada, for either short-term or long-term exclusive use.

[75] Zhan Qingsheng, "2003-2017: Zhongguo dianying de haiwai shangye faxing" [2003-2017: Chinese Films' Overseas Commercial Distribution], *Dangdai dianying* (*Contemporary Cinema*) no.5 (2018): 55-63.

Theatre name	Location
Ragal Hollywood Stadium 24	Atlanta, GA
AMC Loews Boston Common 19	Boston, MA
AMC Classic Bloomington 11 (1 week only)	Bloomington, IN
AMC River East 21	Chicago, IL
AMC Lennox Town Center 24	Columbus, OH
AMC Stonebriar 24	Frisco, TX
AMC Studio 30	Houston, TX
NCG Eastwood Cinemas (1 week only)	Lansing, MI
AMC Atlantic Times Square 14	Monterey Park, CA
AMC Puente Hills	City of Industry, CA
AMC Sunset 24	South Miami, FL
AMC Empire 25	New York, NY
AMC Loews Cherry Hill 24	Cherry Hill, NJ
AMC Centerpoint 11	Tempe, AZ
AMC Loews Waterfront 22	West Homestead, PA
AMC Mission Valley	San Diego, CA 92108
AMC Metreon 16	San Francisco, CA
4-Star Theatre	San Francisco, CA
AMC Cupertino Square 16	Thousand Oaks, CA
AMC Pacific Place 11	Seattle WA
AMC Orange 30	Orange, CA
Regal Rockville Center 13	Rockville, MD
AMC Grapevine Mills 30	Grapevine, TX
AMC Soundpoint 17	Durham, NC
College Point Multiplex	New York, NY
Metrograph Theatre	New York, NY

Figure 0.5 List of theaters in the US showing *Youth* (2013, Feng Xiaogang).

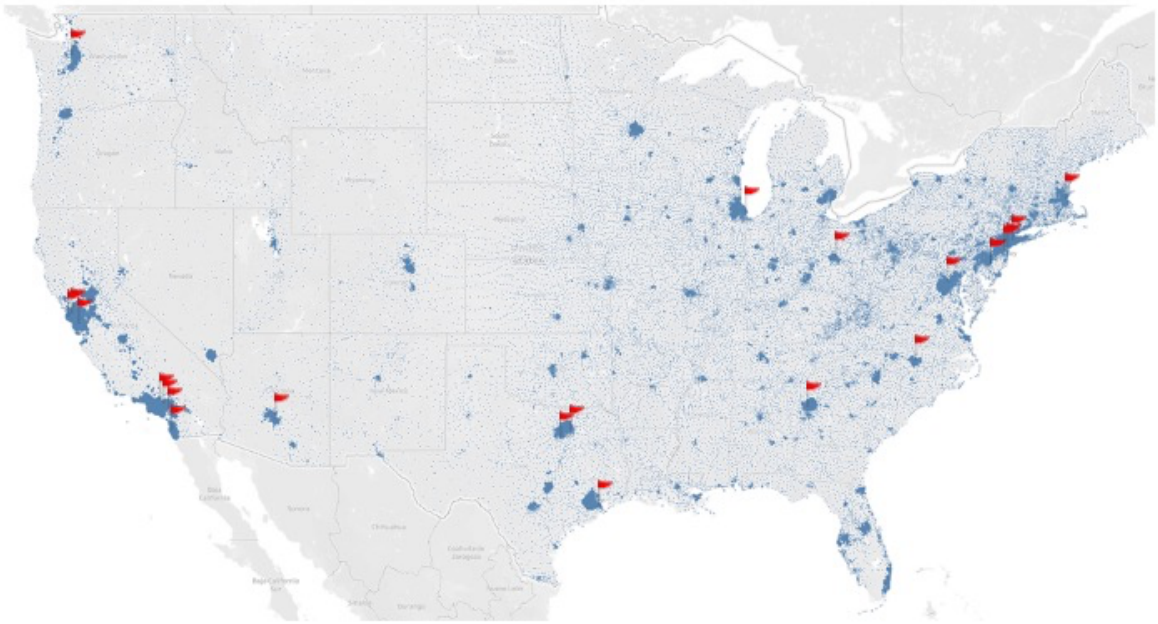


Figure 0.6 Theater location in relation to Chinese population distribution in the US.

Even though I only present the case of *Youth*, the geographic location of movie theaters that China Lion has chosen for releasing films are always similar to each other. By mapping all the theaters that China Lion has negotiated for releasing *Youth* collectively, these theaters are mostly located in areas with distinct demographic features. The locales include state capitals, such as Washington DC, Atlanta, Boston, and Austin, as well as regional centers, such as Chicago, Houston, Lansing, and Miami, with Chinatowns or ethnoburbs. Furthermore, the marketing campaign is mainly conducted on Chinese social media, including Weibo, WeChat, and Xiaohongshu (Red). Meanwhile, a more targeted distribution mode has been practiced as well. China Lion endeavors to further refine the diasporic community audience. One tactic is to release Hong Kong films where Cantonese immigrants gather as a niche community, such as the special screening of An Hui's *A Simple Life* (桃姐, 2012) in San Francisco Chinatown.

China Lion's distribution pattern exhibits several salient points. Firstly, the distribution company maintains a close relationship with Chinese production companies, enabling them to intervene in the process from a very early stage. Secondly, China Lion has a clear target audience—the Chinese diaspora community—which largely determines the locations chosen for film releases. However, China Lion's ethnic distribution strategy differs from that of the single-screen theaters of the last century. Victor Fan has examined the operation of Sun Sing Theatre, a New York Chinatown theater, during the 1970s and 1980s. Fan's historical research reveals that theaters like Sun Sing in New York Chinatown had actually become part of the Hong Kong distribution circuit during the "Golden Age" of Hong Kong Cinema.[76] In contrast, China Lion

[76] Victor Fan, "New York Chinatown Theatres under the Hong Kong Circuit System," *Film History* 22, no. 1 (2010): 108–126.

only rents screens from mainstream multiplexes as needed, rather than operating its own theaters. Lastly, China Lion achieves a relatively high average box office per theater to ensure profitability. As chairman Jiang Yanming stated in an interview, China Lion takes pride in having a higher average box office and occupancy rate per theater compared to most Hollywood blockbusters.[77] For instance, *The Wandering Earth*, widely regarded as China's first science fiction blockbuster, earned a total box office of $5.8 million during its US release. The film managed to reach a weekend gross of $1.69 million in just 64 theaters, with an impressive average of $26,000 per theater, demonstrating its competitiveness.

Another crucial strategy employed by China Lion is the "day-and-date" release, which involves showing films simultaneously in China and the US or on very close dates. Historically, the correlation between spatial distance and global markets was a decisive factor in film distribution. The greater the distance from a film's domestic market, the longer the delay in its arrival.[78] However, with the advent of social media platforms, the Chinese diaspora in the US now has easier access to entertainment news from China, thus increasing their demand for similar media consumption, including films. China Lion has endeavored to minimize the time gap between film releases in China and the US. Valerie Soe has persuasively argued that China

[77] Jiang Yanming, interview with Fengyun Zhang, Los Angeles, April 5, 2018.

[78] Deb Verhoeven, "Film Distribution in the Diaspora: Temporality, Community and National Cinema," in *Explorations in New Cinema History : Approaches and Case Studies*, eds. Richard Maltby, Daniel Biltereyst, and Philippe Meers, 243–60 (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell: Oxford, UK, 2011).

Lion leverages the emotional transnationalism of Chinese Americans by offering a cinematic representation of "home." As Soe observes,

> China Lion's movies differ from the types of Chinese-language films that have historically been distributed in the West as international art house favorites by directors such as Zhang Yimou or Chen Kaige, or martial arts, action or gangster genre films. China Lion's films are solidly middlebrow and commercial, created to entertain and not to startle. Though many of these films may not be appealing to the typical Asian-film fan in the United States, they are very appealing to Chinese audiences away from home. By marketing Chinese-language films in the United States to Chinese transmigrant communities rather than to mainstream US audiences, China Lion takes advantage of the emotional transnationalism of both immigrant and second-generation Chinese Americans, bringing them a recognizable taste of "Home" while living in the United States.[79]

From this perspective, the concept of emotional transnationalism can be extended from Chinese Americans to the broader Sinophone community. The global synchronicity of watching Chinese blockbusters in theaters has thus fostered a new sense of affiliation with the distant homeland for these diasporic audiences. This dynamic is particularly visible in ethnic enclaves like Monterey Park, California, where AMC Theater has maintained a long-term rental agreement with China

[79] Valarie Soe, "A Taste of Home: Emotional Transnationalism and China Lion Film Distribution in the United States," *Asian Cinema* 29, no. 1 (2018): 117–31, 2018.

Lion, regularly exhibiting Chinese-language releases alongside Hollywood films (see Figure 1.7).[80]



Figure 0.7 Atlantic Times Square 14 in Monterey Park, California.

As Chinese commercial films had only been sporadically released in the past two decades, overseas Chinese audiences lacked the opportunity or habit of going to theaters to watch the latest Chinese films. Between 2010 and 2014, the box office numbers for most of China Lion's films hovered around a few hundred thousand dollars. Only in 2014 did the distributor experience a major box office breakthrough, exceeding $500,000 for the first time with *Breakup Buddies* (心花路放, directed by Ning Hao). Later, *Goodbye Mr. Loser* (夏洛特烦

[80] Through a long-standing rental agreement with China Lion, this theater in one of the largest Chinese American communities in the Los Angeles area serves as a key venue for day-and-date releases of Chinese films.

恼, directed by Damo Peng, Fei Yan, 2015) grossed $1.3 million. Two other films that have earned over one million dollars in North America are Guan Hu's *Mr. Six* (老炮儿, 2015) and *Youth* (2017). After the theatrical window, China Lion also handles distribution in ancillary markets such as streaming platforms and DVDs. In terms of distribution revenues, China Lion is one of the few—if not the only—distributors dedicated to regularly releasing Chinese-language films in North America. However, it has gradually fostered a market for commercial Chinese-language films by establishing a stable, regular, and small-scale distribution network from scratch. Currently, China Lion distributes around 10 to 15 films annually, most of which are local hits from mainland China.

In 2016, CMC Pictures, another major Chinese studio, established its international distribution office. Although CMC shares a similar economic logic with China Lion, it enjoys the strong backing of China's SARFT (State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television), which has since been reorganized as the China Film Administration. At a summit co-hosted by SARFT and CMC in 2017, SARFT director Zhang Hongsen introduced the "Universal Screening (putian tongying 普天同映)" distribution plan, which aims to simultaneously release at least one Chinese blockbuster every month in various countries worldwide. Zhang emphasized that Chinese films must proactively seek new growth opportunities and enhance the international influence of Chinese culture. Zhang further stated, "I hope the production and distribution sectors can complement each other, work together, and form a synergy at this crucial moment in promoting China's film industry. Then we will do a good job in exploring overseas markets."[81]

[81] "Putian tongying, qidong zhongguo dianying haiwai xinzhengchen" [Universal Screening Launches a New Journey for Chinese Films Overseas], *Ren min wang* (*People's Daily Online*),

This statement reveals the government's preoccupation with the cultural and political necessity of exporting films and its long-term ambition to transform China into a global cinema powerhouse. Despite the Chinese government and CMC investing significant resources in overseas distribution, the overall market for Chinese films remains limited in the US. For instance, *Wolf Warrior 2* (战狼 2, directed by Wu Jing), a nationalistic action film that dominated the Chinese domestic market in 2017 and set a new box office record, was distributed in North America through CMC Pictures. However, Chinese blockbuster *Wolf Warrior 2* only grossed $219,022 from 115 screens, constituting a mere 0.3% of its total worldwide gross. In this case, the economic efficiency of overseas distribution is overshadowed by the political agenda.

The case of *Wolf Warrior 2* reminds us that, as Chinese blockbusters seek to penetrate the American market, the stakes are still high. There are many reasons for the territorial challenge of exporting Chinese films. The concept of "cultural discount," first introduced by Colin Hoskins and Rolf Mirus, refers to the diminished appeal of media products when they cross cultural and linguistic boundaries. As Hoskins and Mirus (1988) first theorized, cultural discount refers to the diminished appeal of media products when they cross cultural and linguistic boundaries.[82] Hollywood films are often seen as having a low cultural discount due to their emphasis on universal themes, high production values, and a storytelling approach that downplays culturally specific nuances. These qualities enable Hollywood films to transcend cultural barriers and

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January 14, 2016, http://finance.people.com.cn/BIG5/n1/2016/0114/c1004-28050407.html (accessed October 28, 2019).

[82] Colin Hoskins and Rolf Mirus, "Reasons for the US dominance of the international trade in television programmes," *Media, Culture & Society* 10, no. 4 (1988): 499–515.

appeal to a global audience. In contrast, Chinese films often encounter a high cultural discount when entering foreign markets, as they may lacik internationally recognized stars, include culturally specific references, and confront heavy censorship, all of which can limit their international appeal. Given these challenges, it is worth questioning whether multiplexes remain the primary venue for distributing and exhibiting Chinese films internationally.

The case of *Wolf Warrior 2* serves as a reminder that Chinese blockbusters still face significant challenges when attempting to penetrate the American market. There are numerous reasons for the territorial difficulties in exporting Chinese films. The concept of "cultural discount" can be illuminating when examining the efficiency of films traveling abroad as international business.[83] Hollywood films are considered to have a low cultural discount due to their less culturally specific nature. In contrast, Chinese films often encounter a higher level of cultural discount in foreign markets. The lack of international stars has made Chinese films a primarily local affair, while intense censorship pressure also plays a crucial role in this scenario. Given these challenges, it is questionable whether the theater remains the primary space for distributing and exhibiting Chinese films in the international market.

The rise of China Lion and CMC Pictures marks a significant shift in the overseas distribution landscape of Chinese cinema. By targeting the Chinese diaspora community and leveraging emotional transnationalism, these companies have successfully cultivated a niche market for Chinese commercial films in North America. Their strategic partnership with major Chinese studios, coupled with innovative release strategies such as day-and-date releases and targeted marketing campaigns, has enabled them to overcome the challenges posed by the

[83] Ibid.

Hollywood distribution system. However, the limited scale of their business underscores the persistent obstacles Chinese blockbusters face from the American market, particularly those regarding cultural discount and censorship. As the Chinese film industry continues to pursue its global visibility, it is crucial to explore alternative distribution channels and strategies that can effectively bridge cultural gaps and connect with international audiences. In the next chapters, I will explore independent film festivals that extend the global reach of Chinese cinema.

Film Festivals in Exile and the Remaking of Chinese Independent Cinema

On August 18, 2012**,** the 9th Beijing Independent Film Festival (BIFF) opened in Songzhuang, an artist community in the eastern Beijing suburb. After a brief opening ceremony, the screening of its opening film, *Eggs and Stones* (directed by Huang Ji, 2012), was interrupted when the power was cut. The source of the outage was not a technical difficulty or a result of electricity shortages. Rather, the power was intentionally shut off by the local government. Indeed, the surveillance and harassment of the festival's organizers and participants was already well underway: even before the screening began, the police presence was noticeable, with officers wandering around the venue, checking IDs at the entrance as attendees began to arrive. Despite this climate of hostility, the 2012 BIFF was not canceled, but rather reorganized. Festival film screenings were relocated to the studios of various local artists, and audiences had to rely on word of mouth to discover the exact time and place of each screening.

The ferocious suppression of the BIFF was not an isolated incident, but one of many that occurred that year, which led to the country's three longest-run independent film festivals—BIFF, Yunfest (The Yunnan Multi-Cultural Visual Festival) and CIFF (China Independent Film Festival)—each consecutively announcing their discontinuation. This bleak reality has raised a series of questions: How should we continue the discussion of Chinese independent cinema amid such a crackdown? How to preserve the legacy of China's independent film festival scene? Does this mean the end of Chinese independent film festivals? This article argues that the emerging category of diasporic Chinese film festivals marks both the displacement and continuation of independent film festivals in China. Notable examples include the Chinese Visual Festival (founded in 2011) in London, the DC Chinese Film Festival (2011) in Washington, D.C., the Los

Angeles Chinese Film Festival (2017) in Los Angeles, the Mulan Film Festival (2018) in Toronto, the CineCina Film Festival (2019) in New York, NewGen Chinese Film Festival (2022) in Berlin as such. This article will examine the Los Angeles Chinese Film Festival (LACFF) as a central case, unfolding how the LACFF operates on a community scale and tracing the imaginative forces behind its curation of Chinese independent cinema in a transnational context. If local independent film festivals once functioned to construct and authenticate independence in Chinese cinema, the divergent ways in which film festivals adapt to changing circumstances have been critical to remediate the notion of Chinese independent cinema, and whether it should still primarily be defined in relation to the nation-state. As such, this chapter asserts that independent film festivals have been the primary spaces constructing a fluid meaning of Chinese independent cinema.

The Rise of (Independent) Film Festivals in China

While film festivals have become common in the rest of the world, it was not until the Reform era in the 1980s that China embraced the model of film festivals for screening films and accrediting awards. China's earliest film festivals in Shanghai and Changchun are state-sponsored, both of which aim to celebrate the rapid development of the national film industry. The Shanghai International Film Festival (SIFF), for example, was initiated by Yigong Wu, a representative figure of the Fourth Generation directors and the president of the Shanghai Film Bureau at that time. Wu's personal connection and government endorsement made it possible for SIFF to gather a group of high-profile international filmmakers—Xie Jin, Oliver Stone, Tsui Hark, Paul Cox, Karen Shakhnazarov, Héctor Babenco—as its jury members in the inaugural edition. Conscious of the film industry's importance as a cultural and economic force, the

government intended to promote the Chinese film industry through the international festival circuit. To achieve this goal, SIFF appropriated the constitution of FIAPF's "A-status" competitive film festival. FIAPF (International Federation of Film Producers Associations) is considered the most prominent regulator in the international film festival circuit, granting A-list status to a few film festivals around the world. The effort to bring a Chinese film festival in line with these international standards underscored the government's rhetoric of Reform and Opening in postsocialist China. The accreditation of A-list status by FIAPF elevated the newborn SIFF to the same status as the festivals in Berlin and Cannes, which satisfied China's eagerness to assimilate into the hierarchy of the international film festival circuit.

Meanwhile, the phenomenon of non-government-organized film festivals began to appear at the juncture of the rise of independent filmmaking. Since the 1980s, the market-oriented reform liberated young directors from national and regional studios. Beijing Film Academy graduates such as Zhang Yuan and Wang Xiaoshuai became independent filmmakers, submitting works to international film festivals without seeking official permits, and receiving critical success. Paul G. Pickowicz has described the rise of underground filmmaking and the transition to independent filmmaking as a more collective force.[84] Furthermore, the rise of digital video in the late 1990s cultivated the "DV Generation," a new generation of young filmmakers who were increasingly able to access portable and convenient equipment and edit on personal computers.[85]

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[84] Paul Pickowicz and Yingjin Zhang, eds., *From Underground to Independent: Alternative Film Culture in Contemporary China* (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).

[85] Wu Wenguang and Cathryn Clayton, "DV: Individual Filmmaking," *Cinema Journal* 46, no. 1 (2006): 136–140.

Previously, directors such as the Fifth Generation could only access equipment through official production channels such as national and regional film studios or television channels. Digital video became a trend that fascinated not only an older generation of filmmakers and video artists but also amateurs and previously marginalized social groups, such as women directors.[86] The convenience of DV technologies helped generate an abundant amount of works in the period beginning in the late 1990s. And yet, the infrastructure of domestic distribution and exhibition remained minimal in China, particularly for independent films. Filmmakers could only count on international film festivals to get limited exposure outside the country, as uncensored films could neither appear in theaters nor release legal DVDs. As more Chinese filmmakers started to make films independently, they became eager to showcase their work to domestic audiences. But although some independent films such as *Bumming in Beijing* (流浪北京, directed by Wu Wenguang, 1990) and *Beijing Bastards* (北京杂种, directed by Zhang Yuan, 1993) made a significant impact on the international film festival circuit, screening at Rotterdam, Locarno, Hong Kong, Vancouver, Pusan, and Yamagata, filmmakers struggled to find domestic audiences, for whom they hoped their films would ignite new conversations in the public sphere.

Some local exhibition practices began as assemblies of filmmakers and film enthusiasts, mostly in cafes, bars, and karaoke clubs, where they watched classic films by auteurs like Abbas Kiarostami and Andrei Tarkovsky.[87] The proliferation of urban venues and the popularization of

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[86] Luke Robinson, *Independent Chinese Documentary: from the Studio to the Street* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 22.

[87] Seio Nakajima, "Film Clubs in Beijing: The Cultural Consumption of Chinese Independent Films," in *From Underground to Independent: Alternative Film Culture in Contemporary China*,

VCDs and DVDs stimulated alternative spectatorship beyond hegemonic state-sponsored cinema and Hollywood blockbusters in theaters.[88] This revival of cinephile culture catalyzed an array of cine-clubs across the nation, including Studio 101 in Shanghai, Uthèque (yuanyinghui 缘影会) in Guangzhou, Practice Society (shijianshe 实践社) in Beijing, Rear Windows (houchuang fangying 后窗放映) in Nanjing, Film Learning group in Kunming and Free Cinema in Shenyang.[89] Practice Society, whose co-founders were young faculty members and students from the Beijing Film Academy, first added local independent films to its repertoire by screening one to two independent films every weekend and inviting filmmakers for Q&As. In 2001, in collaboration with Studio 101 film clubs, Uthèque, and Free Cinema, Practice Society inaugurated its Unrestricted New Image Festival (duli yingxiang jie 独立映像节), which received 35 documentary and 85 short film submissions. The Unrestricted New Image Festival was discontinued after its first year when the Practice Society was disbanded, having received accusations that it was an illegal organization. Despite its short-lived tenure, some of the Practice Society's key members, including Zhang Yaxuan and Zhu Rikun, have become seminal figures in organizing independent film festivals across China. The year 2001 also witnessed the rise of China's earliest queer film festival, the Beijing Queer Film Festival, which was first held in the

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eds. Paul Pickowicz and Zhang Yingjin, 161–188 (London: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2006).

[88] Zhang Zhen, ed., *The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the Twenty-first Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 27.

[89] Zhang Yaxuan, "Infinite Images—The State of Chinese Independent Cinema Since the Late 1990s," *Tianya Magazine*, no. 02 (2004): 151-62.

library of Peking University. When the independent film festival phenomenon started to disseminate from Beijing to other cities, it became a prominent force for building a network connecting directors and artists working outside the state-approved system. The curation and exhibition of independent films moved from the underground to a self-sufficient independent sector, from the private sphere to the public one.

The independent film festivals during this era were never officially approved or supported by the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT). This, however, does not mean that they were utterly outside the state government's regulation system. The state always maintained the ability to exert control over independent film festivals while leaning toward indirect regulation of their activities. Because a majority of independent film festivals were run by volunteers, many of whom were young filmmakers and scholars from academia, independent film festivals received certain kinds of permission and support from university institutions. For example, the China Independent Film Festival (CIFF) in Nanjing started by collaborating with local universities and later found its institutional home in the School of Journalism and Communication of Nanjing University, which is one of China's most prestigious public research universities. Yunfest, a biennial documentary film festival in Kunming, was supported by the provincial Academy of Social Sciences. The festival's affiliation with educational institutions provided a degree of maneuverability for the inclusion of uncensored films, in contrast to formally-sanctioned film festivals initiated by the government. Intermittent and loose linkages with institutions resulted in a certain amount of autonomy for independent film festivals. In this regard, despite the contested nature of the relationship between independent film festivals and the state, such festivals emerged from the margins in the early 2000s.

Reflecting the framework of translation put forth by Chris Berry and Luke Robinson—

which, they assert, is crucial for scholarship on Chinese film festivals—these early independent film festivals have translated a non-profit model from the West.[90] Many festivals began life as "independent film screenings" (duli yingzhan 独立影展) in their early stages by offering periodic screenings, but later adapted to a film festival model in the process of institutionalization. In this context, "institutionalization" does not mean that these festivals were absorbed by the official system, but rather that they established standardized operating procedures. While they stood outside of the official system, they were not entirely free of government oversight and regulation. These "independent film screenings" were de facto film festivals: they included recurring public screenings, competition sections, prize-giving, as well as filmmaker panels. The independent film festivals, however, kept their Chinese name with "film exhibition" (yingxiang zhan 影像展) and opted for "film festival" (dianying jie 电影节) in the English translation (see Figure 2.1). The intentional inconsistency in translation, which could be found on many paratexts such as festival posters and catalogs, reduced intrusive control from SARFT, which meant the strictest level of censorship for programming. Instead of calling themselves festivals, film exhibitions also preserved some leeway and spontaneity in organizing screenings in public spaces. This compelling flexibility, which also applied to the choice of festival locations and schedules, became the most significant trait in forming the evolving identities of independent film festivals in China.

[90] Chris Berry and Luke Robinson, *Introduction to Chinese Film Festivals: Sites of Translation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 1–10.



Figure 0.1 Inconsistent translation in the poster of the 3rd China Independent Film Festival. From the Chinese Independent Film Archive.

While independent film festivals operated on local or regional levels, they also fostered a transnational network across the international film festival scene, forming new power relations and dynamics. Many Western critics and industry professionals embraced and welcomed these independent festivals as the most authentic film festivals in China. For them, low-budget, uncensored films were the outlets through which audiences saw a multiplicity of social realities. Shelly Kraicer credited the independent film festival season in China as the best way to discover new Chinese independent films. In a film festival report, Kraicer wrote:

I'm often asked how it is that I keep track of new Chinese independent films. One

> answer: just be in China for a few weeks in October and November. The film festival season here is packed right now. Two major indie film festivals have just concluded: the 6th Beijing Independent Film Festival (BIFF, in the Beijing exurb of Songzhuang) and the 8th China Independent Film Festival (in Nanjing). In Beijing itself, we've had the 4th First Film Festival (an international festival for films by first-time directors) at various campuses in China including Peking University, and the 6th Chinese Young Generation Film Forum.[91]

With the phrase "keep track," Kraicer—a consultant for several Western film festivals, including Venice Film Festival, Udine Far East Film Festival, and International Film Festival Rotterdam—reveals how the vibrant festival season in China readjusts the nexus between international film festival circuit and Chinese independent films. Foreign intermediaries and programmers were able to build direct connections with Chinese independent filmmakers and scout for films of exceptional quality by attending local events, in comparison to the 1980s when they relied on Hong Kong intermediaries to introduce the Fifth Generation directors.[92] Markus Nornes makes a similar observation regarding the rise of the "short circuit" among Asian film festivals, which exists in parallel to the international film festival circuit led by the prestigious European film

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[91] Shelly Kraicer, "Fall Festival Report: Keeping Independence in Beijing," *dgeneratefilms*, December 5, 2011, www.dgeneratefilms.com/post/shelly-on-film-fall-festival-report-part-one-keeping-independence-in-beijing.

[92] Bonnie S. McDougall, *The Yellow Earth : A Film by Chen Kaige with a Complete Translation of the Filmscript* (Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 1991), 110–114.

festivals.[93] When it comes to the Chinese film festival short circuit, it was the independent film festivals at the grassroots level, not government-controlled or government-initiated festivals, that were accepted and welcomed by the art film world. Independent film festivals became the most important platforms for the international community to unpuzzle the ecology of Chinese films and discover Chinese films and filmmakers.

Hypernationalization, Crackdown, and Exile: A Post-2012 Repressive Turn

In the first decade of the 2000s, independent film festivals in China were uniquely alive within the tensions between the tightening state censorship, a burgeoning mainstream film industry, and the democratizing potential of film as a medium. The situation raises critical questions about various stakeholders and their power relations that scholars must engage with to fully understand the complexities of film festivals in an authoritarian state. The nation-state became an invisible but looming specter that overshadowed organizers, filmmakers, critics, audiences, journalists, and sponsors. For example, the 2007 Yunfest in Kunming was canceled for its planned inclusion of director Hu Jie's *Though I Am Gone*, a documentary about the Cultural Revolution, a political history deemed too sensitive by the Communist Party. All the public screenings of the festival were called off. A filmmaker panel, however, survived: all the participating filmmakers secretly moved from Kunming to Dali. At the 7th DOChina, the Chinese premiere of *Karamay* (Xu Xin, 2010), a documentary about the tragic deaths of 288 pupils in the 1994 Karamay fire as officials

[93] Markus Nornes, "Yamagata—Asia—Europe: The International Film Festival Short-Circuit" in *The Oxford Handbook of Japanese Cinema*. 1st ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 245–262.

fled, was canceled by the organization team to dodge government attention. Such incidents forced festival organizers to precariously self-censor the editorial and curatorial contents, resulting in a painful dilemma: if they were to oppose a degree of self-censorship, film festivals could not even survive.

This adaptive capacity of independent film festivals to foster public spaces that resist state censorship reached its pinnacle in the early 2010s. For example, as Flora Lichaa's has observed in the context of the BIFF, the festival translated a non-profit model in the process of institutionalization, acting as a "third space" that resists central control from the government. The process by which BIFF adapts a global model of film festivals to social realities in China has generated new forms of cultural practices and interactions.[94] By advocating for uncensored films and by focusing on up-and-coming directors, independent film festivals witnessed what Marijke de Valck has described as the logic of counter-events in the worldwide proliferation of film festivals.[95] This proliferation of counter-festivals in China, however, increasingly posed a threat to the social status quo amid the political climate of recentralizing authority soon after Xi Jinping's ascendance to power in 2012. On the one hand, festival organizers and participants were increasingly hopeful that their measure of autonomy could build associational life, further

[94] Flora Lichaa, "The Beijing Independent Film Festival: Translating the Non-Profit Model into China," in *Chinese Film Festivals: Sites of Translation*, eds. Chris Berry and Luke Robinson, 79–100. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 115.

[95] Marijke de Valck, "Film Festivals: Mediating the Mainstream and Marginal Voices," in *The Routledge Companion to Cinema and Politics*, eds. Yannis Tzioumakis and Claire Molloy, 329–38 (London: Routledge, 2016), 333.

expanding the boundaries of civil society.[96] The independent film festival was implicitly framed by festival organizers as a means by which the creative industry might undermine the strict censorship of content production. On the other hand, the state's grip over every aspect of social and cultural life was strengthened to such an extent that once-hopeful festival organizers and film enthusiasts no longer perceived space in the constrained political landscape.

Nevertheless, it is dangerous to reduce the complexities and contradictions inherent to the dynamic between independent film festivals and the state into a binaristic contest between liberal democracy and authoritarianism. While the Chinese film industry has historically functioned under a unitary system, the post-2012 period has witnessed an unprecedented level of centralization and rigidity in media censorship, including print media, internet, television, radio, and film. It is crucial to contextualize the ideological control of post-2012 China as part of the government's larger repressive turn, which has been thoroughly scrutinized by scholars from a range of disciplines, from international relations to sociology.[97] The heightened ideological control over the media coalesced with the repressive turn in economic, political, and socio-

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[96] "Associational" is a term frequently employed by political scientists regarding NGOs in early 2000s China. See Jonathan Unger, ed., "Chinese Associations, Civil Society, and State Corporatism: Disputed Terrain," in *Associations and the Chinese State: Contested Spaces* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2008), 1–13.

[97] See for example: Greitens, Sheena Chestnut, Myunghee Lee, and Emir Yazici. " Counterterrorism and preventive repression: China's changing strategy in Xinjiang." *International Security* 44, no. 3 (2019): 9–47; David Shambaugh, *China's Future*, (Cambridge, UK : Polity, 2016).

cultural life, from China's anti-corruption campaign and supply-side structural reform to its more assertive foreign policy. Ching Kwan Lee compellingly suggests that this repressive turn is due not only to Xi's personal political ambitions, but is the result of mounting political and economic pressures that China perceives or projects.[98] The violent riots in Xinjiang, unrest in Tibet, and protests in Hong Kong, as well as uprisings against authoritarianism across the globe, such as the Arab Spring, further developed China's anxiety over national security. Such critical circumstances motivated the Xi administration to take a repressive approach to governance, economy, and diplomacy in order to reconsolidate state power. The major strategy in this regard has been to encourage, through coercion, ideological conformity, with the goal of maintaining social stability. In this regard, the administration has further tightened control over media outlets and the film industry.

Amid this intensified political repression, it is necessary to consider the government's shifting attitude toward independent film festivals as a crucial component of this wider paradigm shift. As a medium of personal expression and political resistance, independent films can no longer operate safely as long as they stay in the margins. If the earlier discourse regarding independent films was that they revealed less salubrious facets of Chinese society or present an alternative vision apart from mainstream commercial films, independent films in the 2010s China had become a source of dissent that was no longer tolerable to the state. The tension between state and independent films, which evolved out of political, cultural, and social activism, determined the grave fate of the independent film community. There were also specific

[98] Ching Kwan Lee, *Hong Kong: Global China's Restive Frontier* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 17.

factors that deepened the systemic repression in the process: for example, Cao Kai, the co-chair of CIFF, directly correlates the rise of Ai Weiwei's documentary activism with the state's shifting attitude toward independent films, which had devastating consequences for the entire independent film festival scene.[99] The online popularity of prominent documentary filmmakers and activists such as Ai Weiwei made the independent filmmaking community a direct target of the government.

The state did not shut down independent film festivals overnight. First, fear of harassment and retribution contributed to a deep malaise among festival organizers as increased government scrutiny forced them to impose more self-censorship. Although festivals like CIFF tended toward an apolitical stance by focusing on experimental films and video art (innovative in artistic forms rather than narratives) and including "dragon sealed" films in their programs, the organizers underestimated the government's determination to crack down on the independent film community.[100] 48 hours before its opening, the 9th China Independent Film Festival (CIFF) in Nanjing was canceled. After the government ordered all partner institutions, theater venues, and hotels not to collaborate with the festival, organizers were unable to handle the logistics of the festival and had no choice but to call off the event. While CIFF attempted to keep its jury sessions and eventually held an award ceremony in a small bar in Beijing, it became a film festival without public screenings or panels. Zhang Xianmin, a professor at the Beijing Film

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[99] Wen Hai, *The Gaze of Exile—The Testimony of China's Independent Documentaries* (Taiwan: Qingxiang Publisher, 2016), 302.

[100] A "dragon seal" is the green precredit title shown in the beginning of each Chinese film that signifies passage through censorship.

Academy and a key member of the CIFF since its fourth edition, admitted that the 9th CIFF had become "a film festival in ruin," which had been destroyed and left only with debris.[101] In the following year, the Yunfest, another major independent film festival, announced its indefinite postponement. After constant harassment by national security officers, Yunfest's founder, Sichen Yi, realized that the crackdown was not regional in scale, but was an authoritarian consolidation initiated at the highest level. The suppression did not target specific films or filmmakers, but the ultimate goal was to eliminate every independent film festival and their public screenings.[102]

Following Zhang Xianmin, who called the year 2012 "'Year of the Demolition' of China's Independent Film Scene," I describe this era as the hypernationalization of film festivals in China. This concept of hypernationalization holds two layers of meaning. First, the government had grown suspicious of foreign participation in the independent film festivals; the increasing participation of foreign programmers, critics, and coverage from foreign news agencies motivated the government to thoroughly monitor the film festival events. For example, as I mentioned in the previous section, BIFF was famous for its transnational alliances. Second, this suspicion motivated the state to reverse the relative autonomy of independent film festivals—which had previously coexisted with government-initiated film festivals—and to deprive the power of private individuals to organize such festivals. The hypernationalization of film festivals is best illustrated by the Film Industry Promotion Law, enacted in 2017. As the first

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[101] Zhang Xianmin, "A Year of Demolition for Independent Chinese Films," *The New York Times (Chinese)*, May 16, 2013, https://cn.nytimes.com/film-tv/20130516/cc16filmfestival/.

[102] Wen Hai, *The Gaze of Exile—The Testimony of China's Independent Documentaries* (Taiwan: Qingxiang Publisher: 2016), 275–276.

national law to regulate China's film industry, it requires any film festival or exhibition involving foreign entities to first obtain government approval.[103] The Promotion Law also eliminates the formerly gray area in which film festivals could include non-censored entrants. From 2017 to the present day, every film must be approved by the censor before it is submitted to a festival; any public exhibition of a film without a dragon seal will face extreme penalties.[104] Directors who fail to do so will be fined and forbidden from filmmaking for five years.

Indeed, prior to the adoption of the Film Industry Promotion Law, independent film festivals underwent a process of implosion, restructuring, and reconciliation. The state's tightening grip over independent film festivals triggered a range of local counter-movements. When the 11th Beijing Independent Film Festival was shut down, festival organizers and filmmakers took selfie photos with closed eyes and post them on social media with the caption of "(Eyes) Closing Ceremony" (see Figure 2.2).[105] As Zhu Rikun, the programming director of BIFF, has commented, "An ostensibly well-established, institutionalized film festival may not be our goal. It is more important to seek the path of cultural redemption and progress in a country as

[103] China, the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (NPC), Film Industry Promotion Law (Zhonghua renmin gongheguo dianying chanye cujinfa), adopted March 1, 2017, art. 35.

[104] Ibid, art. 21.

[105] The social media activism has been documented by filmmaker Wang Wo in *A Filmless Festival* (2015).

devastated as ours."[106] Many festival organizers agreed with Zhu, and, regarding the government intervention as unacceptable, sought to prioritize an independent spirit above the film festival's longevity. One exception to this may be the FIRST International Film Festival (2006–present), which maintains a certain level of independence when it is compared to other official, state-run film festivals in China. In 2011, the FIRST International Film Festival, whose slogan was "for first-time directors," moved from Beijing to Xining, distancing itself as much as possible from the state center. Although FIRST received partial funding and support from the Xining Municipal People's Government, it is operated by a separate executive team with its co-founders Song Wen and Li Ziwei. Nevertheless, the case of FIRST makes it apparent that a film festival cannot functionally exist without the government's endorsement.

[106] This quote is taken from *fanfall.com*, which was once the largest online community for discussing independent films in China. The website was shut down by the government in 2012 and reinstated in 2013. The domain *fanfall.com* is no longer accessible.



Figure 0.2 Writer Tsering Woeser, activist Wang Lixiong, and independent filmmakers Wang Wo, Zhu Rikun, and Xu Xin symbolically "close their eyes" in Yangbajing (Lhasa) and Bomi (Nyingchi). Photo by Woeser, July 2012.[107]

The utopian vision of the independent film festival as a censor-free space which emerged in the early 2000s had, by the 2010s, collapsed. Some filmmakers and curators took this as a sign that exile was the only way to resist their absorption into the state-mandated system. This movement, both ideological and geographic, exemplifies what Arjun Appadurai has called the global flow in and through ethnoscapes, a flow composed of "tourists, immigrants, refugees,

[107] See Woeser's blog September 2014 blog entry, http://woeser.middle-way.net/2012/09/.

exiles, guest workers, and other moving groups and individuals."[108] Some filmmakers travel between China and their new homes in foreign countries in order to dodge political interrogation and strive for independence in filmmaking.[109] One notable example is Huang Wenhai, a.k.a. Wen Hai (*Dreaming Walking*, 2005), who relocated to Hong Kong in 2013 after being held in detention for making a documentary about human rights activist Liu Xiaobo. Although Hong Kong is a special administrative region of China, relative independence makes it possible for Huang to make and exhibit films. A further example is Zhu Rikun, a key figure of BIFF, who moved to the United States and started the exhibition "Cinema on the Edge: the Best of the Beijing Independent Film Festival" in New York in collaboration with Shelly Kraicer.

Meanwhile, there is an emerging category of overseas film festivals that specialize in exhibiting independent Chinese cinema. Examples include the Chinese Visual Festival (founded in 2011) in London, the DC Chinese Film Festival (2011) in Washington, D.C., the Los Angeles Chinese Film Festival (2017) in LA, the Mulan Film Festival (2018) in Toronto, and the CineCina Film Festival (2019) in New York, NewGen Chinese Film Festival (2022) in Berlin as

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[108] Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 33.

[109] Markus Nornes charts a list of filmmakers who moved abroad: "This list is long and features many of the stars of the previous era. Ying Liang, Wang Hongwei, and Huang Wenhai have all gone to Hong Kong; Zhao Liang, to Thailand; Zhu Rikun, Wang Wo, Cui Zi'en, Zhao Dayong, and Xu Ruotao, to the United States; Fan Popo and Ai Weiwei, to Germany; Huang Ji, to Japan; Yang Lina, to Taiwan; and Wang Bing, to France." See Markus Nornes, "Filmless Festivals and Dragon Seals: Independent Cinema in China," *Film Quarterly* 72, no. 3 (2019): 78–86.

such. Even though these film festivals are located in global cities, they are still effectively marginalized in terms of scope and scale. Luke Robinson, in his study of the Chinese Visual Festival, encapsulates its operation:

> They are usually managed by one or two people who often work full time elsewhere and do not make a living running the event. While these people are assisted in their work by volunteers, they are usually involved in many different facets of festival organization, including day-to-day management, programming decisions, and sourcing films for the festival. Finally, although funding streams often vary, in practice considerable financial support for such festivals comes or has come out of the pockets of this handful of individuals. It is not just the programming, but also the managerial, financial, and operational structures of these specialist festivals, that sets them apart from London (the London Film Festival) and Edinburgh (the Edinburgh International Film Festival).[110]

Film festivals such as the Chinese Visual Festival represent a conspicuous departure from both state-sanctioning in China and institutional support from the West. They not only provide exhibition sites for films that have had minimal visibility in both China and abroad, but also become generative in curating and constructing Chinese independent cinema in a transitional era. In this regard, I view these overseas Chinese film festivals as an extension of local festivals within China that have been suppressed by state power. While they exist within different

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[110] Luke Robinson, "Sole traders, cultural brokers, and Chinese-language film festivals in the United Kingdom: The London Taiwan Cinefest and the Chinese Visual Festival," in *Chinese Film Festivals: Sites of Translation,* ed. by Chris Berry and Luke Robinson, 193–213 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 194–195.

geographies and temporalities, the early 2000s independent film festivals in China and the fledgling overseas film festivals share similar programming priorities and management structures. The displacement contributes to an exilic identity that complicates the meaning of Chinese independent cinema in a transnational context. Furthermore, these film festivals seek to diverge from a coherent narrative of nationhood and reconfigure the deterritorialized imagined spaces. In the following section, I move on to the Los Angeles Chinese Film Festival (LACFF) as a case study that explores the potential and the challenges of curating Chinese independent cinema. I have attended LACFF since its inaugural edition and served as a programmer from 2019 to 2021, which sustained my engagement in and critical observation of the festival. In what follows, I will examine how LACFF operates on a microsocial level and outline the festival's own imaginative forces in defining Chinese independent cinema. As such, I seek to reframe the notion of Chinese independent cinema as processual rather than static.

In the following section, I turn to the Los Angeles Chinese Film Festival (LACFF) as a primary case to explore the potential and challenges of curating Chinese independent cinema within this transnational network. Having attended LACFF since its inaugural edition and served as a programmer from 2019 to 2021, this sustained involvement informs my critical observations of the festival's operations and strategies. LACFF exemplifies how independent Chinese cinema can reimagine itself through micro-level curatorial practices and community engagement. By examining its programming choices, operational dynamics, and broader cultural impact, I seek to reframe the notion of Chinese independent cinema as processual rather than static—that is, as a constantly evolving phenomenon shaped by the interplay between state control, exile, and the shadow networks of exhibition and reception that transcend national boundaries. Rather than being a fixed category defined solely by opposition to state-sanctioned filmmaking and

distribution pipelines, Chinese independent cinema emerges as a dynamic category of negotiation, resilience, and cultural reinvention. This perspective not only underscores the resilience of Chinese independent cinema to endure political suppression but also highlights its active role in reshaping Chinese identities within a globalized context.

LACFF: An Integrated Approach to Chinese Independent Cinema

LACFF launched its inaugural edition in 2017 and is entirely run by volunteers. It was co-founded by three young film enthusiasts based in Los Angeles, Claire Yu, Lewis Liu, and Athena Bowe, all of whom have transnational education backgrounds and expertise in both China and the States. Before that, Liu was also the director of programming at the second biennial DC Chinese Film Festival in Washington DC. Liu and Yu had both worked at the Southern California branch of Asia Society, where they received support from Janet Yang, the producer of *The Joy Luck Club*, who became the chair of LACFF's advisory board. Yu described how they started to conceive a film festival on independent films while working at Asia Society:

> We [Claire Yu and Lewis Liu] often talk about what we like about films and what we see in the film festival scenes in LA. Despite the amount of film activities in LA, we both agree that most of them are really profit-oriented and highly commercialized, which makes it really difficult for young and new-generation foreign filmmakers to showcase their films in LA and for Hollywood film studios to find overseas talent. But this idea was

> a little bit daunting because film festivals cost a lot of money.[111]

It is worth noting that Yu describes most film festivals in LA as "really profit-oriented and highly commercialized" and, consequently, unfriendly to young filmmakers seeking to launch their careers. While Yu does not identify the exact event she criticizes in the excerpt above, which is taken from a 2017 interview, the Chinese American Film Festival (zhongmei dianyingjie) was at that time one of the few festivals to focus on Chinese audiences in the United States. With attendees that include high-profile directors and actors, executives from major studios in China and the United States, and politicians from the Chinese Consulate in Los Angeles, the Chinese American Film Festival attempts to reproduce the format and style of the Academy Awards or the Golden Globes, prioritizing celebrity over new voices. The founders of LACFF were aware of these limitations and sought to swim against the stream of US–China co-productions and box-office clichés. The goal is not to pursue profit or conduct cultural diplomacy, but to build a platform for emerging talents where they can showcase films and further launch careers. LACFF describes its founding principles on the official website:

> A strong proponent of originality and diversity, LACFF is the embodiment of independent spirit. The team is very committed to providing a platform for the best of independent Chinese films and prides itself on the principle of selecting films based on artistic merit. As such, LACFF extends a warm welcome to any newcomers and independent filmmakers who aspire to take center stage in the heart of the world's

[111] Nien-chen Lin, "Interview with LACFF Co-founder Claire Yu," *Medium*, October 13, 2017, www.medium.com/la-chinese-film-festival/interview-with-lacff-co-founder-claire-yu-1c021ed4eea8.

entertainment industry.[112]

The description signals a rhetoric of providing spaces where marginal or counter-discourses can be amplified and the commitment to cinema as art. Nevertheless, the way in which LACFF elaborates the independent spirit is no longer a film's relation to the party-state, in other words, if it is censored by the State Administration of Press Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT). In contrast to independent film festivals in China, which I discussed in the previous sections, LACFF seeks to grapple with the traditional gatekeeping power by fostering new relations with the industry. As a niche film festival based "in the heart of the world's entertainment industry," LACFF's mission is to serve a minority community. The meaning of minority encompasses language, identity politics, and sometimes minority aesthetics, all of which remain marginalized in the commercial industry. Chinese independent films and filmmakers in a transnational middle space have been part of the minority. LACFF not only rejects the centripetal power of the nation-state, but, at the same time, transplants the idea of "indie," which refers to films produced outside the major studio system in a Hollywood context.

This awareness leads to new connotations of Chinese independent films. This is manifested, for example, in the film selected to open the festival's inaugural edition, *Paths of the Soul* (冈仁波齐, Zhang Yang, 2015). *Paths of the Soul* is a documentary-style film about Tibetan villagers' pilgrimage toward one of the most venerated mountains, Kang Rinpoche, meaning "the Precious Jewel of Snow" in Tibetan. While Zhang Yang is generally categorized as the "Sixth Generation" director active since the 1990s, it is debatable whether Zhang is an independent director in China. Unlike many Sixth Generation directors, including Jia Zhangke, Wang

[112] "About LACFF," LACFF, www.lacff.org/en/about.

Xiaoshuai, Lou Ye, notable for their underground films focusing on the marginalized population, Zhang's films often provide a more lighthearted depiction of urban daily life in postsocialist China. His directorial debut, *Spicy Love Soup* (爱情麻辣烫), a low-budget romance movie with a pop music flare, was a major box-office hit in 1997. *Spicy Love Soup* was produced by Imar Film, an independent production company founded in Beijing by American producer Peter Loehr, which collaborated with Xi'an Film Studio to receive a license for its domestic release. Zhang's next film, *Shower*, also produced by Imar Film, has been one of his most critically acclaimed films. *Shower* tells the story of a public bathhouse in Beijing, which symbolizes the disappearance of mundane enjoyments, the dislocation of urban space, and the dissolution of the traditional family in the late 1990s. While Zhang shot films with relatively low budgets outside the national studio system, his films barely struggled to get approval from the Film Bureau. In this case *Paths of the Soul* was approved by SARFT and had its theatrical release in 2017—with an impressive 100 million yuan box-office in China. If a film can be distributed in multiplex venues and receives commercial success, is it still an independent film in China's context?

On the opening night of the 2017 LACFF, I spoke to the programming director Yanyu Dong about the festival's choice to screen *Paths of the Soul*. Dong told me that the co-founders and the programming team unanimously believed that *Paths of the Soul* was a great choice to demonstrate LACFF's independent spirit. Although *Paths of the Soul* is a dragon-sealed film, the audacity of revisiting Tibetan religious rituals from a Han director's perspective distinguishes itself. *Paths of the Soul* rejected the banal imagination, neither promoting a pro-socialist agenda by applauding the liberation of Tibet from serfdom—as in *Serfs* (农奴, directed by Li Jun, 1963)—nor by showcasing the magnificent landscape of a utopian Tibet, both of which follow the cultural logic of a Han-centric narrative. In this sense, *Paths of the Soul* was well-suited to

the message the festival wished to convey to the its local LA audience, demonstrating and enacting its promotion of a multicultural perspective in reaction to the socio-political climate of marginalization and isolation in a divided world.

As an identity-based film festival, the submission rule of LACFF conceives a sense of inclusion and flexibility when it comes to the definition of "Chinese." Films only need to satisfy one of the conditions to be considered: The main language of a film is Chinese (for example, Mandarin, Cantonese, or any Chinese dialects); the creative team includes people of Chinese ethnicity/heritage (i.e., director, screenwriter, or the lead actor/actress); the film content focuses on Chinese society, Chinese culture/heritage, or the lives of Chinese people/Chinese speaking people/people of Chinese heritage. Consequently, a plurality of the connotations of "Chinese" probes the conceptual richness of approaching Chinese cinema. This also resonates with the growing critical attention toward notions of "Sinophone" and "Sinophone cinema" in academia.[113] Shu-mei Shih casts fresh perspectives on shifting from the diaspora paradigm, which prioritizes a centripetal power toward the nation-state (or the Han ethnicity), to a more localized Sinophone paradigm. Based on the openness and fluidity of language, Sinophone focuses more on the intersections of history and culture and rethinks the interaction and substitution of the root and route, therefore integrating a multicultural perspective into the

[113] See, for example, Audrey Yue and Olivia Khoo, "Special Issue on 'From Diasporic Cinemas to Sinophone Cinemas,'" *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 4, no. 2 (2010): 169–70; Audrey Yue and Olivia Khoo, eds., *Sinophone Cinemas* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

inspection of visual images and texts.[114] On the one hand, the submission criterion of LACFF effectively maximizes every year's submission number, which is essential for a young film festival. On the other hand, it is a reaction to the varied meanings of "Chinese" in an age of the transnational nature of financing, production, and very often the filmmakers themselves. In the following section, I will turn to *People's Republic of Desire* (虚你人生, 2018), the winner of the LACFF 2018 Best Documentary Feature, to exemplify how the festival provides fertile ground for a new generation of Chinese independent filmmakers in a transnational sphere.

People's Republic of Desire is directed by Hao Wu, a Chinese-American tech executive-turned-director. With its obvious allusion to the People's Republic of China, *People's Republic of Desire* centers on the stories of two live-streaming stars in China's biggest streaming platform, *YY.com*, between 2014 and 2016. *People's Republic of Desire* takes a verité journey through both the online showroom where fans tip lavish virtual gifts and the influencers' real lives outside the screen. Born and raised in China, Wu came to the United States in the 1990s and began a Ph.D. program in molecular biology at Brandeis University. He later dropped out with a master's degree and shifted his career path from biologist to product manager, working in both Beijing and Silicon Valley. During this period, Wu exercised his passion for storytelling by making documentaries part-time. His first film, *Beijing or Bust* (2005), is a low-budget documentary about the lives of six young ABCs (American-born Chinese) in Beijing. In 2006, when working on a documentary project about China's Christian house churches, Wu was detained by the Chinese government for five months. Wu's second film *Road to Fame* (成名之路, 2013)

[114] Shu-mei Shih, *Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations Across the Pacific* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

approaches China's one-child policy through a student rehearsal at the Central Academy of Drama. While Wu has consistently shot his films in China, his films rely on international funding opportunities such as the Ford Foundation's JustFilms, the Sundance Institute, and the Tribeca Film Institute, among others.

People's Republic of Desire inherits the concern for underprivileged and marginalized groups and how they confront the breakneck social and economic shifts in Chinese independent films. With formal complexity, the film conducts a meticulous investigation of the social environment and characters. Responding to the challenges of how to cinematically represent the online world, Wu makes innovative use of 3D animation graphics, an inclusion unusual in documentary filmmaking. To do so, Wu collaborated with Eric Jordan, an expert in user interface design and 3D animation, to make the virtual live-streaming world come to life on screen in a way that would be legible to viewers; it also helped to convey the elusive mechanisms and rules in the streaming platform that might otherwise be lost in translation (see Figure 2.3). Furthermore, the film's visual design profoundly enhances the immersive experience and provides a substantial complement to real-life footage. Shooting began in 2014 and wrapped after two years, while post-production took two further years. Wu himself did most of the major editing tasks, in collaboration with Chinese filmmaker Nanfu Wang (*Hooligan Sparrow*, *One Child Nation*) as the consulting editor. During this time, a rough-cut version was workshopped in the 2017 Sundance Documentary Edit and Story Lab.



Figure 0.3 The cityscape of Shanghai is plastered with live stream feeds. Still from *The People's Republic of Desire* (2018, Hao Wu).

In early November of 2018, the second edition of LACFF became one of the earliest events to screen from *The People's Republic of Desire* on the West Coast, followed by a Q&A session with the director Wu. The film received critical acclaim for its fresh perspective and idiosyncratic aesthetic choice, and eventually won the Best Non-fiction Feature. The techno-dystopian elements of *People's Republic of Desire* quickly drew comparisons to Netflix's dark sci-fi series *Black Mirror*.[115] An anchor point of *People's Republic of Desire* is the tripartite

[115] See Ken Jaworowski, "'People's Republic of Desire' Review: A Virtual Craze Makes Actual Cash," review of *People's Republic of Desire,* directed by Hao Wu, *New York Times*, November 29, 2018, www.nytimes.com/2018/11/29/movies/peoples-republic-of-desire-review.html; and

relationship between the YY platform, streamers, and their patrons, both the ultra-rich and the ultra-poor, suggesting that, in a hyper-capitalist reality, everyone is exploited in one way or another. David Ehrlich, the chief film critic of *Indiewire*, wrote, "the film ushers us into a bold new world where our pleasure is simulated, but our pain is real."[116] The film indicates that the virtual world has invaded reality; this is no longer "something weird happening in China," or a minority concern, but a deeply unsettling and alarming situation to humankind. The film shares accounts of cosmopolitan experiences and the struggles and fears that arise from interlinking transformations of capital, identity, and technology. As such, the LACFF's inclusion of films like *People's Republic of Desire* demonstrates the festival's ethos of expanding the definition of "independent" as well as "Chinese" identity.

The Specters of Ephemera and Identity Crisis

Indeed, a small but significant body of research on the transnational dynamics of diaspora film festivals has emerged in recent years. In an essay on the film festival as a diasporic medium, Dina Iordanova draws on sociologist John Porter's concept of the "vertical mosaic," a term initially developed to describe Canadian society. While "mosaic" describes the "different ethnic,

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Gabrielle Bruney, "A 'Black Mirror' Episode Is Coming to Life in China," *Esquire*, March 17, 2018, www.esquire.com/news-politics/a19467976/black-mirror-social-credit-china.

[116] David Ehrlich, "'People's Republic of Desire' Review: SXSW-Winning Documentary Offers a Terrifying Look at the World of Live-Streaming," review of *People's Republic of Desire,* directed by Hao Wu, *IndieWire*, March 14, 2018, www.indiewire.com/2018/03/peoples-republic-of-desire-review-china-live-stream-sxsw-1201939347/.

linguistic, regional, and religious groupings" comprising society, the "vertical" aspect of Porter's term entails the different and unequal "access to economic and cultural power that these groupings had within the social sphere."[117] Iordanova's adaptation of the concept consists of three main categories: film festivals with governmental funding or publicly backed NGOs support in aiming for cultural diplomacy; film festivals for the promotion of political and identity agendas, which are usually supernational, as Francophone, Arab, lbero-American, Mediterranean, pan-African and pan-Arab film festivals; film festivals with propositional commercial appeals.[118] Iordanova's proposed typology is valuable for understanding the different and unequal levels of access to economic and cultural power that diaspora-linked film festival represent. LACFF, to this extent, is located on the lower end of the "vertical mosaic" due to sporadic funding and limited human resources.

Although LACFF is free from political scrutiny and censorship from China, one of its major challenges is its inconsistent funding. While registration fees and ticket sales fulfill a fraction of the budget, a huge gap in funding still remains. A variety of monetary and in-kind sponsorships exist to help narrow this gap, ranging from corporate sponsors to small businesses, in both China and the United States. For example, AmeriChina Group, a public relations and business consulting firm whose founder Margret Yang was a board member of LACFF, was a major sponsor of the 2017 film festival. In 2018, Sony Pictures, Loeb & Loeb LLP, and Final

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[117] Dina Iordanova, "Mediating Diaspora: Film Festivals and 'Imagined Communities'," in *Film Festival Yearbook 2,* eds. Dina Iordanova and Ruby Cheung, 12–44 (St. Andrews: St. Andrews Film Studies, 2010), 16.

[118] Ibid., 22.

Draft (a screenwriting software) got on board with the sponsor list, and each contributed a moderate amount of money. In 2019, Xiamen Airlines provided four free flight tickets between the US and China for juries and filmmakers. Qin West Noodles, a Chinese restaurant near the USC campus, has delivered free lunches and dinners for film festival volunteers since the first year. LACFF also receives a certain percentage of philanthropic donations every year. Nevertheless, while the festival's growing impact has led to more sponsorship opportunities, inconsistent funding has meant that LACFF has struggled financially since day one.

To a certain extent, this dilemma allows the festival to retain its autonomy, in contrast to festivals with state-government funding or NGO support. However, as with many festivals and events, the fourth edition of LACFF was canceled in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic; and while many more established film festivals have been able to pivot to online or return to in-person events, LACFF has been unable to resume operations due to a lack of sustainable sponsorship. The pandemic added more risk to holding in-person events and connecting with local audiences, which was a key component of the festival's pitch to sponsors. LACFF, a young film festival once driven by idealism, optimism, and the promise of facilitating transnational film culture, is now facing multiple crises.

By facilitating media circulation across national borders, LACFF has situated itself within both a transnational and localized context, offering a dual promise: to facilitate transnational encounters and to serve the local community. The idealization of transnational encounters, however, has caused certain internal fractures about the self-positioning of LACFF, which is attributable to the everlasting debates on geopolitics and cultural identification from mainland China to Taiwan, Hong Kong, and other Sinophone communities. As with many other film festivals around the world, the 2020 LACFF was canceled and became a "virtual showcase"

of its previous entries, including question-and-answer sessions with filmmakers, and all the events were free to the public. When the 2021 LACFF was again disrupted amid the rampant COVID-19 pandemic, the leadership of the LACFF decided to take time to restructure the organization and launch new initiatives, including a screenwriting competition and the annual summit on GatherTown, an interactive web-conferencing platform. In April 2021, Rebecca Davis, the China bureau chief of *Variety* and the moderator for several events of LACFF, published an article—at a time when the reorganization had not yet been made official—in *Variety*:

> The organization Chinese in Entertainment, the non-profit behind the Los Angeles Chinese Film Festival (LACFF), is changing its name to remove the word "Chinese" after internal discussions about the political implications of the term.
>
> After some soul-searching, the team decided that the new name Sino Entertainment Association (SEA) would be better aligned with its goal of championing inclusivity and diversity.
>
> The LACFF, its flagship event, will keep its current name for now. The term "Chinese" no longer represents who we are as an organization, since our members and volunteers come from diverse backgrounds, including people from China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, the U.S., Canada and many other countries and regions," explained Lewis Liu, the organization's founder and sitting board member . . .[119]

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[119] Rebecca Davis, "Los Angeles Chinese Film Festival NGO Changes Name as It Rethinks What It Means to Be 'Chinese,'" *Variety*, April 28, 2021, www.variety.com/2021/film/news/los-angeles-chinese-film-festival-name-change-1234962567/.

The article unleashed a tsunami of criticism within the organization that indicated a certain element of chaos within the organization's decision-making process. Because the film festival is completely run by volunteers, it leans toward a bottom-up management structure where everyone is invited to participate in goal-setting, and projects are communicated by individual teams to leadership. The operation structure makes it difficult to balance everyone's opinion and escape the pitfalls of institutionalization. A tension between transparency and efficiency in decision-making occurred alongside the development and expansion of LACFF. When the *Variety* article was published, part of the senior leadership was still hesitant about the name change, and many junior-level volunteers were unaware of the situation. While volunteers believed in a democratic film festival culture that offered greater access to alternative voices, there are naturally conflicting opinions regarding what exactly constitutes a Chinese cultural identity. Volunteers could not unanimously agree whether "Chinese" should be radically eliminated from the non-profit's name, and LACFF could not simply ignore the lingering nationalistic sentiments among some volunteers, in particular those from mainland China. LACFF eventually held an online townhall meeting to try to resolve the PR crisis. An anchor point in the internal meeting was whether—and to what extent—the film festival should remain apolitical or advocate a more radical, activist-led programming in solidarity with pro-democracy movements in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Tibet. In other words, when LACFF is perceived to represent the ethnic Chinese community, what does it even mean to be Chinese in a tumultuous world with increasing divisions?

As one of the very few film festivals to promote Chinese independent cinema in the United States, the internal conflict and funding challenges within the LACFF is similar to many of its community partners. China Onscreen Biennial, which is funded by the UCLA Confucius

Institute, was interrupted after the fourth edition in 2018. Although the biennial does not officially regard itself as a "festival," it has nevertheless adopted a very similar format to film festivals and is regarded as a significant showcase of Chinese film and media arts in the United States. While the China Onscreen Biennial has fostered collaboration with some of the most distinguished cultural institutions, including the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Asia Society, UCLA Film & Television Archive, the biennale was interrupted by the US–China Trade War during Donald Trump's presidency. The Confucius Institute, an organization that aims to provide Chinese language and cultural learning services in the US, was accused of "spreading communist propaganda."[120] An amendment to the 2018 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), signed into law by President Donald Trump, prohibited federal funding to any college or university that hosted a Confucius Institute, unless the institution received a special waiver. This legislation led to the closure of nearly all Confucius Institutes across the United States.[121] Even for independently-run film festivals such as LACFF, inflamed anti-Chinese sentiment and resurgent xenophobia have exacerbated all kinds of challenges. The sustainability of LACFF as

[120] Deb Riechmann, "Trump Administration: Confucius Institute Is Arm of Beijing," *Washington Post*, August 13, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/trump-administration-confucius-institute-is-arm-of-beijing/2020/08/13/37418da0-dd8a-11ea-b4f1-25b762cdbbf4_story.html (accessed September 1, 2024).

[121] U.S. Government Accountability Office, *China: With Nearly All U.S. Confucius Institutes Closed, Some Schools Sought Alternative Language Support*. Report No. GAO-24-105981. Washington, DC, 2023, https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-24-105981 (accessed December 5, 2024).

an organization is jeopardized by the inflammation of this reactionary rhetoric, which in turn reveals double standards of cultural freedom in American society.

To conclude, the post-2012 exile of independent film festivals represents a critical node in the shadow network of Chinese cinema's global circulation. Just as Chapter One demonstrated how ethnic theatrical distribution navigates between mainstream and specialized exhibition, film festivals illustrate another dimension of the shadow network—one that preserves and reimagines independent Chinese cinema culture through grassroots, bottom-up activities. The rise, fall, and rise again of independent film festivals have compelled us to reconceptualize both "independence" and "Chinese cinema" for a new era of tightening of ideological control and increasing transnational connection. As exemplified by LACFF's experiences, these diasporic festivals operate in a transnational middle space—geographically distant from state censorship yet still grappling with questions of cultural identity, institutional sustainability, and artistic freedom. The challenges faced by LACFF—from funding instability to internal debates over the meaning of "Chinese"—reveal how exile has not simply relocated these festivals but has forced them to reconstitute their very nature and purpose within broader networks of film circulation.

What emerges from this analysis is that independence in Chinese cinema can no longer be defined solely through opposition to state censorship, but must be understood within the space of film festivals through multiple vectors: aesthetic innovation, cultural hybridity, community engagement, and organizational autonomy. Films like *People's Republic of Desire* demonstrate how contemporary Chinese independent cinema addresses universal concerns while maintaining cultural specificity. Meanwhile, programming choices like *Paths of the Soul* expand conventional interpretations of Chinese cinema to encompass broader cultural and ethnic diversity. Together, these curatorial decisions reflect a more fluid conception of Chinese independent cinema—one

that canvasses the transnational movement of ideas, talents, and resources, and prestige, while fostering emotional connections across diasporic communities.

However, the precarious state of festivals like LACFF, particularly amid global crises and geopolitical tensions, points to the inherent instability of shadow networks. Their struggle to maintain operations during the COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with deteriorating U.S.–China relations, indicates that these institutions exist in an increasingly fragile environment. Yet perhaps it is precisely this instability that makes them vital sites for reimagining what Chinese independent cinema can be in an era of global interconnection and cultural flux. As we will see in Chapter Three, many cultural intermediaries and audience communities have turned to digital platforms, where questions of censorship, authenticity, and community-building continue to evolve in virtual spaces. While streaming services have partly transformed how audiences access Chinese cinema, they have not eliminated the need for community-based exhibition spaces but rather created new dynamics between physical and virtual sites of cultural connection. The story of independent film festivals outside China thus offers insights into how shadow networks adapt and evolve, finding new ways to maintain transnational flows among escalating geopolitical tensions in a fragmented world.

Digital Piracy in the Streaming Era: Border Crossing and Diasporic Connections

This chapter traces the shifting meanings and boundaries of media piracy in China from the era of rampant counterfeit DVDs since the late 1990s to the rise of digital piracy in the streaming age. Rather than solely attribute regulatory power to the government, I argue that local streaming platforms owned by China's major tech companies have become a consistent force in tempering media piracy since the 2010s. While media scholars such as Amanda Lotz differentiate between platforms (for user-generated content) and portals (for licensed streaming content) in Western contexts, the evolution of Chinese streaming services challenges this binary framework, developing instead as hybrid spaces that blur these distinctions. Moreover, while China's censorship system is often perceived as a repressive monolith, these platforms navigate a more complex and often opaque regulatory environment. By examining how streaming platforms interpret and implement censorship requirements differently, this chapter offers new insights into understanding censorship in China not as a unified system but as a negotiated process shaped by various industrial and institutional actors. Their self-censorship practices and geo-blocking measures, implemented in response to this regulatory complexity, have inadvertently catalyzed new niches of piracy. Understanding that piracy is always shaped by overlapping forms of power, I seek to bring together cultural and political economy perspectives to analyze piracy as a means of access, resistance, and cultural connection for both domestic and diasporic audiences.

This chapter begins by surveying previous literature on piracy, highlighting the diverse discourses surrounding it, both globally and within the specific context of China. While scholars have examined the cultural, social, and political dimensions around piracy, the local industrial milieu remains largely unexplored. Through case studies of two prominent online video

platforms, Sohu and Tencent Video, this chapter illustrates how these platforms have waged anti-piracy efforts, establishing new industry standards for content licensing and cultivating viewer preferences for legal content. With the considerable financial backing of their parent companies, these leading streaming platforms also spurred the proliferation of original content amidst intense competition. The rise of Chinese streaming platforms has thus not only undermined previous pirate operations, but also fundamentally influenced what is being pirated. This chapter concludes by exploring a new frontier of piracy in the streaming era: illicit streaming websites that aggregate content from Chinese streaming sites and re-stream it to diasporic audiences outside China. While streaming services like Tencent Video and iQIYI protect licensing agreements by restricting users' access based on their Internet Protocol (IP) addresses, technical loopholes of geo-blocking measures have inadvertently made it easier for pirate operations to re-stream content in unlicensed and unrestricted regions, particularly outside China. Taking piracy as its point of departure, this chapter aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the evolving digital landscape of the Chinese media industry, one that takes into account the interplay between technological, cultural, and political factors, as well as the agency of both domestic and diasporic audiences in shaping this landscape.

The Many Faces of Piracy: A Brief Overview

Feng Xiaogang's 2001 Chinese New Year film (*hesuipian* 贺岁片) *Big Shot's Funeral* (大腕) weaves a scathing commentary on the intersection of commodified cultural production, globalization, and informal economies through an absurdist premise. The film follows Hollywood director Don Tyler (Donald Sutherland), who falls into a coma while filming a

remake of Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Last Emperor* in Beijing's Forbidden City. Before collapsing, Tyler, inspired by a traditional Chinese funeral, expresses his wish for a "comedy funeral" to Yoyo (Ge You), a documentarian originally hired to film behind-the-scenes footage. After Tyler's collapse, Yoyo decides to honor the director's unusual request by transforming the event into a lavish commercial spectacle. He organizes a globally live-streamed TV special funded through ad reels and extensive product placements, even using Tyler's coffin portrait as advertising space. The funeral's transnational lineup of sponsors—ranging from local knockoff brands like Ke Xiao Ke Le (a Coca-Cola imitator) to global chains such as Outback Steakhouse—sheds light on the cultural commodification in an increasingly globalized China. Amid this carnival of consumerism, where everything appears to be for sale, Yoyo rejects the sponsorship of Love Island DVD player due to its "super error-correction" feature—a euphemism for its ability to play poor-quality pirated DVDs and bypass regional restrictions. When the company's boss defends the business as "national industry" (*minzu gongye* 民族工业), Yoyo retorts with biting sarcasm: "National industry like yours should go bankrupt as early as possible." Instead, he replaces the rejected ad slot with public service announcements promoting anti-piracy and intellectual property protection, illustrating the Chinese film industry's mounting frustration with rampant piracy in the early 2000s. More specifically, this scene crystallizes the animus between commercial filmmaking and piracy during a time when unauthorized DVD copies of films routinely appeared on street corners mere days after theatrical release, sold at a fraction of the price of legitimate copies.

One common reaction to ubiquitous piracy is to put judgment on both moral and economic grounds. Although certain economists and legal scholars have reflected upon the negative consequences of copyright on innovation, creativity, and free expression, media piracy

in developing countries is generally viewed as theft.[122] Reports from industrial groups such as the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) and International Intellectual Property Alliance (IIPA) have routinely delineated the massive revenue losses experienced by Hollywood studios and multinationals. For example, the 2005 MPAA report alleged that film and TV piracy cost $6.1 billion in US studio losses.[123] In 2020, the monetary losses due to online piracy spiked to $29.2 billion.[124] Consequently, these staggering numbers have been widely used to support anti-piracy enforcement, awareness campaigns, and, most importantly, MPAA's lobby efforts to reinforce the global reign of Hollywood. However, it is questionable whether academic research should trust these blown-up figures. Joe Karaganis, for example, has cautioned scholars against using data sets from industry-sponsored work in an indiscriminate, uncritical way. Because industrial groups hire private consulting companies to write reports with an anti-piracy

[122] Lawrence Lessig, "How Big Media Uses Technology and the Law to Lock down Culture and Control Creativity" (New York: Penguin, 2004); Neil Weinstock Netanel, *Copyright's Paradox* (Oxford University Press, 2008).

[123] L.E.K. Consulting, "The Cost of Movie Piracy: An Analysis Prepared by LEK for the Motion Picture Association," 2005.

[124] Motion Picture Association, "The Notorious Markets Report," October 7, 2022, https://www.motionpictures.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/MPA_2022-Notorious-Markets.pdf.

preacquisition, many of the industrial reports lack transparency due to commercial sensibility, which impacts their credibility.[125]

This singular view of piracy as theft also loses sight of the historical and political contexts of different countries. Scholars have extensively remarked upon the mediating capacity of piracy in emerging economies. Media theorist Ravi Sundaram's seminal work on Indian cities emphasizes piracy as an intrinsic part of the technologized urban experience for subaltern groups. Ubiquitous piracy, such as the boom of video and audio cassettes in the 1980s Delhi, was disruptive but also infused with mobility and creativity, which formed a pirate or recycled modernity.[126] Brian Larkin has observed a similar phenomenon in Nigeria, where the everyday reproduction and repair of pirate cassettes generates its own spatiality beyond state-controlled infrastructures.[127] Another illuminating work is Jeff D. Himpele's ethnography of film television programs in Bolivia. While media piracy has been generally criminalized by Hollywood studios and industrial groups, Bolivia's neoliberal government condones piracy practices that corrupt the neocolonial frame of film circulation between Hollywood and Bolivian legal distributors.

Such a postcolonial framework is particularly crucial for understanding the structural inequities in power and knowledge that have become entrenched in the expansion of

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[125] Joe Karaganis, ed., 2011, *Media Piracy in Emerging Economies*, Social Science Research Council, (2011): 10–13.

[126] Ravi Sundaram, "Recycling Modernity: Pirate Electronic Cultures in India," *Third Text* 13, no. 47 (1999): 59–65.

[127] Brian Larkin, *Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure, and Urban Culture in Nigeria*, 1st ed. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 225.

globalization. Piracy is not simply a case of massive revenue loss, as reported by the MPAA, but rather must be understood in the broad social, cultural, and institutional dimensions. Hong Kong-based media scholar Laikwan Pang's work, which examines the intricacies of copyright discourse in the context of Asian cinema, is also vital to the discussion. Pang has persuasively argued that "copyright's mission to systematize and regulate copying and culture is both structurally necessary and doomed to fail."[128] The act of copying, according to Pang, can be interpreted as culture's resistant nature in reaction to copyright regime, which is a legal tool in order to maintain West's global hierarchy.[129] More specifically, Pang differentiates two types of copying, including idea copying and criminal piracy, and how they interact with the legal discourse of copyright. For example, if Hollywood always denounces piracy in the Asian market as an infringement of copyright, its own transcultural copying from Asian cinema should be reckoned with as well. As for criminal piracy, a central case study is how piracy in China manifests the tensions between the government's ideological control, China's postsocialist market economy, and Hollywood's global reign.

It is not strange that China has offered a rich playground for researching piracy. In China, media piracy is part of the larger pandemic of counterfeit production chain, which has bolstered its economic prosperity in the past decades. The manufacture, trade, and consumption of counterfeit products range from knockoff iPhones, appliances, and designer clothing to

[128] Laikwan Pang, *Cultural Control and Globalization in Asia : Copyright, Piracy, and Cinema* (London; Routledge, 2006), 8.

[129] Ibid, 10.

audiovisual products.[130] Piracy does not reside in the marginal sector—or, as Ramón Lobato has conceptualized the informal sector of distribution, "shadow economies"—but has become a prevailing social practice.[131] Social scientists have contemplated why piracy is ubiquitous in China. One explanation is that China has a long history of disrespecting Intellectual Property Rights (IPR). The state did not establish the first Copyright Law to mirror the West until 1990 and complied with the international norm for IPR protection following WTO accession in 2001.[132] This pattern of foreign pressure-force-reform in order to comply with Western jurisprudence has been common ever since Late Qing dynasty.[133] Alan Zimmerman has further argued that China's disregard for IPR was inextricably linked to ideologies of Confucianism and communism, both of which "hold no interest in individual ownership."[134] But this perspective fails to explain why IPR violation is indeed common in many countries, even nineteenth-century

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[130] Elaine Jing Zhao, *Digital China's Informal Circuits: Platforms, Labour and Governance* (London: Routledge, 2019).

[131] Ramon Lobato, *Shadow Economies of Cinema: Mapping Informal Film Distribution* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2012).

[132] Kristie Thomas, *Assessing Intellectual Property Compliance in Contemporary China: The World Trade Organisation TRIPS Agreement* (Springer, 2017).

[133] William P. Alford, *To Steal a Book Is an Elegant Offense: Intellectual Property Law in Chinese* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1995).

[134] Alan Zimmerman, "Contending with Chinese Counterfeits: Culture, Growth, and Management Responses," *Business Horizons* 56, no. 2 (2013): 141–48, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2012.10.003.

America.[135] Yet there has been a huge gap between the global IPR legal structure and China's inability to meet its obligations. Besides, the overhaul of China's IP regime not only encompasses legislation but also judicial enforcement and administrative remedies for IP. The fragmented local institutions and bureaucratic politics hinder effective IPR enforcement in China.[136]

To be clear, although China has been criticized by Hollywood executives as well as Washington for its non-compliance when it comes to eliminating piracy, the government has in fact initiated multiple anti-piracy campaigns and numerous raids to confiscate piracy products since the late 1980s. In one of the most in-depth studies of the subject, *Framing Piracy: Globalization and Film Distribution in Greater China*, Shujen Wang has outlined how such anti-piracy efforts were leveraged for the negotiation of China's WTO accession. The leading institution, Anti-Pornography Working Committee, was established in 1989, and was renamed "The National Anti-Piracy and Pornography Working Committee" (NAPWC) in 2000.[137] In Chinese, the campaign was labeled as *saohuang dafei* (扫黄打非)—sweeping away pornography and striking out the illegal. Andrew C. Mertha has interpreted "dafei" as "striking out against

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[135] Mike W Peng et al., "An Institution-Based View of Global IPR History," *Journal of International Business Studies* 48, no. 7 (2017): 893–907, https://doi.org/10.1057/s41267-016-0061-9.

[136] Andrew C. Mertha, *The Politics of Piracy: Intellectual Property in Contemporary China* (Cornell University Press, 2019),131–141.

[137] Shujen Wang, *Framing Piracy: Globalization and Film Distribution in Greater China* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 81.

illegal publications," and thus illegal publications include "those deemed 'anti-government' or 'anti-Party,' but they can also include illegally produced (i.e., copyright-violating) published works."[138] As Joshua Neves observes, NAPWC "draws our attention to a governmental assemblage marked by confusion, aggressive policing, and performative publicity."[139] In this regard, subordinating copyright violations to the "striking out the illegal" mission alluded the ideological ambiguity of China's anti-piracy campaign which in result thwarted its own efficiency.

Nevertheless, as opposed to the official attitudes, the audience and industry professionals have been empathetic about piracy for a long time. Censorship and restricted import quota towards foreign films for theatrical distribution, in addition to the Chinese audience's limited buying power, account for the vast scale of piracy in China. Jinying Li elaborated on the role of piracy in creating an alternative public sphere in urban China, further developing an alternative cinema culture through her conceptualization of "D-Buff" and "D-generation" in the DVD era. D-Buff, according to Li, refers to the distinctive subculture of pirate consumers who are passionate collectors and consumers of pirated movie discs in urban China. These enthusiasts have organized themselves into a robust subcultural community, initially via online platforms such as forums and blogs, which then evolved into real-life organizations called "die you hui" (D-buff clubs). "D-generation" refers to the new generation of filmmakers in urban China who have embraced digital consumption and digital video (DV) production, largely filtered through

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[138] Mertha, *The Politics of Piracy*, 142.

[139] Joshua Neves, *Underglobalization: Beijing's Media Urbanism and the Chimera of Legitimacy* (Duke University Press, 2020), 173.

piracy.[140] In a similar vein, Dan Gao has observed how a generation of independent filmmakers had nourished from piracy through the lens of "Kino-eye." Gao discusses how the notion of kino-eye, originally conceived by Dziga Vertov as a harmonious merging of human and machine in the context of post-Revolution Russia, can be reinterpreted in the context of film piracy culture in China. Borrowing the idea of kino-eye provides an analytical angle for understanding how individuals involved in piracy interact with their fascination in playful and primitive ways in the process of filmmaking.[141]

The case studies from Li and Gao have suggested more nuanced and inclusive knowledge around film piracy in China and revealed a seeming paradox: piracy, on the one hand, was marked by its relatively low price and poor audiovisual qualities, generating new media infrastructures as well as audience experiences in contemporary China that resemble those of India, Nigeria, or Bolivia; on the other hand, piracy became a form of cultural capital preserved by elite cinephiles who distinguished themselves from consumers of mass entertainment such as domestic television. As Bourdieu reminds us, the consumption of cultural products is an essential

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[140] Jinying Li, "From 'D-Buffs' to the 'D-Generation': Piracy, Cinema, and An Alternative Public Sphere in Urban China," *International Journal of Communication*, vol. 6, 2012, https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/1219/719.

[141] Dan Gao, "From Pirate to Kino-Eye: A Genealogical Tale of Film Re-Distribution in China," in *China's I-generation: Cinema and Moving Image Culture for the Twenty-First Century*, eds. Matthew D Johnson, et al, 125–46 (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014).

way to maintain distinctions of social hierarchy.[142] Resourceful "D-generation" or "pirate-cinephiles" could access pirate discs and share the information with each other within the community. Many of the piracy consumers have even become China's first-generation internet film critics and prominent social media influencers.[143]

Whether it is understood as a set of micro-level practices or examined within the context of government anti-piracy efforts and associated discourses, discussions of piracy often overlook the role of local industry players within the piracy ecosystem. For a long time, reflecting on the ambiguity of discourses around piracy, it is not strange that film and television piracy in China has been largely pertinent to foreign imports. This has led to Hollywood entities such as the MPAA being key proponents of anti-piracy initiatives within the Chinese market. However, the emergence of China's streaming platforms and the media conglomerates behind them have significantly altered the perception and dynamics of piracy. In the subsequent section, I will elaborate on the evolving industrial landscape in China and examine how streaming platforms have emerged as major stakeholders in combatting piracy amidst the digital era.

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[142] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Translated by Richard Nice (London: Routledge, 2015).

[143] Xiang Fan, "The Production of Art Cinema Culture in China : An Exploration of the Role of Cultural Intermediaries," PhD diss. (Goldsmiths, University of London, 2021), 163.

Piracy, Censorship, and Legitimacy: The Transformation of China's Video Streaming Landscape

A majority of the aforementioned literature discusses VCD and DVD piracy, which has been disrupted and gradually replaced by online piracy, including Torrent and peer-to-peer (P2P) filesharing, since the early 2000s. If piracy consumption can be fundamentally interpreted as a quest for access, the technological developments of Web 2.0, characterized by user-generated content (UGC) and social networking, have again broadened access. During this period, fansubbing groups in China became a widespread phenomenon whereby amateurs voluntarily translated, subtitled, and distributed foreign content including Japanese anime, Korean dramas, as well as American TV shows through P2P networks for free.[144] Meanwhile, China's earliest video-sharing websites such as Tudou (launched in 2005), 56.com (2005), and Youku (2006) allowed users to upload and share user-generated content, including video and music mashups. Luzhou Nina Li described how auteurs' video spoofing and vernacular production gained popularity on these UGC sites.[145] However, the operation of video websites required substantial investments to support their bandwidth, necessitating UGC websites to explore monetization strategies beyond relying solely on venture funds.[146] As UGC content was still in its nascent

[144] Luzhou Nina Li, "Rethinking the Chinese Internet: Social History, Cultural Forms, and Industrial Formation," *Television & New Media* 18, no. 5 (2017): 393–409.

[145] Ibid.

[146] "Investors leaving China's video-sharing sites," *The New York Times*, April 11, 2007, https://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/11/business/worldbusiness/11iht-venture.1.5227083.html (accessed on February 1, 2024).

stages and not yet trusted by advertisers, many UGC websites shifted their focus to professionally-produced content, specifically films and television shows, to balance their books in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis.[147]

It is important to note that the expansion and growth of China's online video industry have been in parallel with the US's instead of lagging behind. However, due to the established IPR protection regime in the US, the boundary between *portals* and *platforms* has been distinct in regard to their divergent structures and content sources from the outset. Amanda R. Lotz, for example, has differentiated between *platform* and *portal*—platforms are the places where user-generated content is distributed, such as YouTube, while portals refer to the nonlinear internet distribution of television services, like Hulu and Netflix.[148] Ramon Lobato adopts a similar classification, delineating the global streaming ecology as consisting of portals, platforms, services, feeds, apps.[149] In the context of China, some of the earliest video websites blended these models, operating in a grey zone. The boundaries between platforms, portals, forums, and P2P torrent sites were rather vague. Almost all the video websites tacitly allowed pirated TV

[147] Jin, "The history of China's YouTube," The history of China's YouTube," *huxiu.com*, June 26, 2019, https://www.huxiu.com/article/305785.html (accessed November 5, 2022).

[148] Amanda D. Lotz, *Portals : A Treatise on Internet-Distributed Television* (Ann Arbor, Mich: Maize Books, an imprint of Michigan Publishing, 2017); Daniel Herbert, Amanda D. Lotz, and Lee Marshall, "Approaching Media Industries Comparatively: A Case Study of Streaming," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 22, no. 3 (2019): 349–66, https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877918813245.

[149] Ramon Lobato, *Netflix Nations* (New York University Press, 2019), 29.

dramas and movies in the disguise of "user uploads." According to Kelly Hu, the rise of Chinese video websites during 2005–2009 can be characterized as "an unruly era in which private video websites were pushing their luck by largely assimilating unauthorised domestic and foreign programmes in collaboration with powerful subtitle groups catering to free file sharing."[150] In the following part, I will focus on two exemplary online video sites: Sohu Video, established in 2006, and Tencent Video, launched in 2011. In what follows, I offer an analysis of the intense competition within China's streaming market, exploring how video websites established by leading tech companies have reshaped the conversations around piracy by proactively combating it, navigating government regulations, and investing in original content production. This examination aims to shed light on the complex dynamics at play in China's rapidly evolving digital media landscape and the strategies employed by major players to establish legitimacy and profitability in an increasingly competitive market.

Sohu Video: Pioneering Role in Copyright Acquisition and Enforcement

Sohu Video (tv.sohu.com/) started as a UGC streaming division of Sohu.com—one of China's earliest web portals with divergent information, services, and resources channels. As Hu pointed out, early Chinese video websites were "in the process of oscillation and transformation between piracy and copyright adherence."[151] Sohu Video became one of the first services that broke this

[150] Kelly Hu, "Competition and Collaboration: Chinese Video Websites, Subtitle Groups, State Regulation and Market," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 17, no. 5 (2014): 437–51.

[151] Ibid, 439.

balance by advocating copyright protection and offering licensed, high-quality content. To begin with, Sohu proactively deleted all the pirated content from its website. Sohu then entered into licensing agreements and partnerships with content creators and distributors to build a compelling content library and eventually launched its high-definition (HD) premium channel for licensed films and television in 2009.

In 2008, the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT) and the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology issued a regulatory decree governing online audiovisual services, with a crucial stipulation mandating that all video websites obtain government licenses. To qualify for such licensing, video websites must satisfy specific criteria: they must possess legal status, either as wholly state-owned or state-controlled entities, or demonstrate a clean legal record in the preceding three years. Furthermore, they are required to establish robust program security measures and possess compliant program resources, as well as maintain adequate technical capabilities, network resources, and legal funds. Professional personnel are mandated, with no history of legal violations among key contributors and operators. Technical solutions must conform to national and industry standards, while ensuring overall compliance with regulatory guidelines. It is notable that while the decree prioritizes adherence to legal requirements and relevant regulations, there is little emphasis on copyright compliance.

While there were more than 700 private video websites during the heyday of the video website boom, SARTF only granted 247 licenses until June 2008, with the majority allocated to

state-owned media entities.[152] Among private enterprises, web portals like Sohu, Sina, and NetEase, along with select sites such as joy.cn and Ku6, received licenses, while the two leading video-sharing platforms, Tudou and Youku, were notably excluded from the initial batch. *In Underglobalization: Beijing's Media Urbanism and the Chimera of Legitimacy*, Joshua Neves interrogates China's media culture in the Olympic era (2008-2016) through the lens of legality and legitimacy.[153] If websites such as Sohu had *become legal* through the government-granted license, they endeavored to *become legitimate* to keep up with the copyright regime. As discussed earlier, anti-piracy efforts had historically been subordinated under the broad category of illegality—in particular those deemed as anti-government or anti-party. The 2008 decree, again, reiterated this by regulating video websites and prioritizing adherence to socialist core values and ideological propaganda. In this regard, Sohu over-performed the national protocol by seeking economic and cultural legitimacies among the competition. The 2008 decree further reiterated this perspective by regulating video platforms with an emphasis on socialist values and ideological propaganda. In this context, Sohu over-performed national requirements by actively seeking economic and cultural legitimacy amidst stiff competition.

It is worth noting how Sohu utilized compliance with copyrights as a way of establishing distinction amid the intense market competition. As Sohu Video eliminated all the pirated content on its site, it also established an "Online Video Anti-Piracy Alliance" together with joy.cn, Union Voole (youpeng pule 优朋普乐), and hundreds of distributors and advertising agencies, to

[152] Internet Society of China, "The State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television issued 247 video licenses," https://www.isc.org.cn/article/6963.html (accessed on February 1, 2024).

[153] Neves, *Underglobalization*, 197.

boycott online video piracy. As the initiator of the alliance, Charles Zhang, the founder and CEO of Sohu, expressed his resolution in fighting against video piracy by calling piracy "no different from theft."[154] In contrast to competitors such as Youku and Tudou maintained obscure attitudes towards piracy and often cited the Safe Harbor Principle as an umbrella—video websites were not held liable for copyright violations for user uploaded content, Zhang branded himself as a prominent anti-piracy activist for promoting the society-wide dialogues on copyright protection. Zhang remarked, "It's a complete excuse to say that it is difficult to monitor piracy in a timely manner," and "eliminating piracy should not be handled with patience" as it was poisonous, leading to "a vicious circle" for the online video industry. [155] To qualify as a member of the Online Video Anti-Piracy Alliance, a website needs to ensure the content is 100 percent piracy-free.

One of the central drivers of Zhang's anti-piracy advocacy was the need to bolster the credibility of video websites for advertising purposes. This industrial activism stemmed from the harsh reality that, up until 2008, no Chinese video website had achieved profitability. Moreover, these platforms operated with similar content and business models, heavily relying on viral content to attract traffic and gain popularity. However, the pirated content hosted on these websites held little commercial value, as any attempts to monetize it would invariably lead to legal action from copyright holders. Consequently, these platforms were dependent solely on

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[154] "Charles Zhang launches a scathing attack on piracy, calling for strict punishment to make offenders feel the pain," *Sohu News*, December 3, 2009, https://yule.sohu.com/20091203/n268660126.shtml (accessed on February 1, 2024).

[155] Ibid.

venture capital investments to cover operational expenses, with the hope of eventually going public. The formation of the Online Video Anti-Piracy Alliance represented a turning point for video websites, as it created a coalition focused on winning back advertisers by offering legitimate, licensed content. The alliance also empowered its members to initiate widespread legal actions against other video platforms and even advertisers who collaborated with sites hosting pirated content. During the inauguration ceremony of the Online Video Anti-Piracy Alliance, it was announced that the alliance had filed a lawsuit not only against Youku but also included Coca-Cola in the litigation for their involvement in piracy.[156]

The combination of aggressive legal acts and performative publicity propelled video websites as well as advertisers towards greater compliance with copyright protection—an approach distinct from the previous reliance on top-down administrative power for copyright enforcement in the DVD era. Despite facing criticism from competitors, including accusations of weaponizing copyrights leveled against Sohu, platforms such as Ku6, Youku, and Tudou subsequently adopted similar strategies for removing pirated content in the following years. For instance, Ku6 announced its initiation of content removal without proper copyright authorization and imposed restrictions on user uploads of unlicensed movies and TV shows in 2009. Subsequently, in January 2010, major video websites, including Sohu, Youku, and Tudou,

[156] "The Anti-Piracy Alliance seeks 680,000 RMB in compensation from Coca-Cola and has filed 111 cases for intellectual property rights protection." *Beijing Morning Pos*t, September 23, 2009, https://www.chinanews.com.cn/it/it-itxw/news/2009/09-23/1880827.shtml (accessed on January 2, 2023).

collectively pledged to adhere to self-regulatory measures for copyright compliance within the online video industry (see Figure 3.1).



Figure 0.1 A snapshot of the high-definition (HD) premium channel of Sohu Video on April 1, 2011.[157] In the upper banner, positioned prominently alongside Sohu's HD logo, was an advertisement for beverages by Wahaha. Notably, Wahaha was lauded as a "partner" of licensed legal content.

As video websites increasingly adhered to copyright protection, the cost of acquiring domestic content surged. For instance, the top TV shows *Soldiers Assault* (士兵突击, directed by Kang Honglei, 2006) and *Golden Marriage* (金婚, directed by Zheng Xiaolong, 2007)

[157] Accessed through Internet Archive's WayBackMachine on January 15, 2024: https://web.archive.org/web/20110401185008/http://tv.sohu.com/hdtv/

commanded prices of 3000 yuan and 4000 yuan per episode, respectively. By 2009, the highest rated show, *My Captain My Regiment* (我的团长我的兵, directed by Kang Honglei) was priced at 20,000 yuan per episode, and the total cost for acquiring streaming rights for all 43 episodes amounting to 860,000 yuan. By 2011, the prices for purchasing popular TV series skyrocketed to tens of millions of yuan. Sohu Video, for example, had invested 30 million yuan to acquire *New My Fair Princess* (新还珠格格, directed by Li Ping and Ting Yang-Kuo, 2011), while PPS (another major streaming website) invested 22 million yuan to secure the streaming rights for *The King's Woman* (王的女人, directed by Yu Zheng and Wai Chu Lee, 2012). The peak of content licensing costs was reached with *The Lost Tomb Season 1* (盗墓笔记第一季, directed by Law Wing-cheong and Lau Kwok Fai 2015), acquired by iQiyi for 5 million yuan per episode, totaling approximately 60 million yuan. Faced with intensified competition, Sohu Video shifted its focus towards importing foreign TV shows, establishing itself as a premier destination for popular American series such as *Lost* (2004–2010), *The Big Bang Theory* (2007–2019), *Desperate Housewives* (2004–2012), and *2 Broke Girls* (2011–2017), many of which were aired simultaneously with their US broadcasts.

Due to the normalization of copyright purchases, some video websites were forced out of the competition for being unable to catch up with the copyright expenses. This trend also led to the acquisition and consolidation of video platforms. Notably, Ku6 was acquired by Shanda Interactive Entertainment—a Nasdaq-listed company, in 2009. In 2012, Tudou merged with Youku, culminating in the formation of Youku Tudou, which was later acquired by Alibaba in 2016. Being a subsidiary of Baidu, QIYI (later known as iQIYI) was launched in 2010. Tencent Video, owned by Tencent, emerged as one of the largest online video platforms following its

launch in 2011. The backing of tech giants became essential for the survival of video websites, resulting in a reduction to around ten competitors by 2012.

While Sohu initially thrived in the early 2010s by offering quality licensed content, it eventually ceded ground to the subsidiaries of BAT (Baidu, Alibaba, and Tencent) in the competitive streaming landscape. Moreover, the objective of video websites evolved beyond merely importing foreign shows to securing exclusive digital distribution rights, a pivotal factor in attracting paid users. In 2014, Tencent Video struck a significant deal with HBO, announcing exclusive access to over 20 classic television shows, including *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019), *The Newsroom* (2014–2014), *Boardwalk Empire* (2010–2014), and *True Detective* (2014–). Similarly, iQIYI leveraged the financial resources of its parent company to secure deals with major Hollywood studios.[158] The 2010s thus witnessed a surge in legal foreign TV and film content on video websites. The steep increase in movie and TV drama copyright prices also prompted major video sites to produce original content to manage costs, ushering in the first slate of original series programming.

[158] Clifford Coonan, "China's iQiyi to Buy 1,000 Hollywood Titles in 2015 to Meet Surging Demand," *The Hollywood Reporter*, November 11, 2014, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/chinas-iqiyi-buy-1000-hollywood-748455/ (accessed on January 5 2024).

Tencent Video: Censorship Dilemma and Cinephile Resistance as Digital Piracy Niche

The emergence of video streaming platforms in China parallels Spotify's infamous trajectory. The Swedish streaming service initially struggled to secure licensing agreements with major record labels but successfully reversed the growth of music piracy. The emergence of video streaming platforms in China has likewise provided a viable alternative to piracy.[159] Indeed, there is a degree of optimism that the rise of streaming services brings a positive effect on the curb of digital piracy, which had largely been based on file sharing. The accessibility and high quality of licensed content have enabled audiences to forego tedious searches for BitTorrent download links, as well as the risks associated with potential viruses and phishing websites. Relying on in-house production and copyright acquisition, China's major video websites began to introduce subscription plans around 2012. Meanwhile, the government strengthened the regulation against illegal downloads and filesharing, which led to the seizure of one of the largest fansubbing groups, YYeTs, in 2021. Although Tencent Video was not launched until 2011, it has steadily built one of the largest film and television digital libraries through various partnerships and strategic acquisitions.

Nevertheless, video websites such as Tencent Video do not just purchase whatever the audience wants and stream it on the platform. Indeed, some self-censorship was always present in terms of pornographic content and material that challenged socialist core values. However, video websites did not need government approval to purchase copyrights of foreign television shows or films. Censorship did not extend to foreign content on video streaming websites until

[159] Maria Eriksson et al., *Spotify Teardown: Inside the Black Box of Streaming Music* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019), 45.

the "foreign restriction order" in 2014.[160] The directive introduced four essential rules aimed at regulating the streaming of foreign TV dramas: quantitative limitations, content requirements, pre-streaming review for clearance, and unified registration. Under the quantitative limitations rule, the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT) mandated that the number of foreign TV dramas introduced should not exceed 30% of the total number of domestic productions made available online in the preceding year. This restriction was designed to bolster the prominence of domestically produced content and control the influx of foreign media influence. Websites were also required to undergo rigorous processes of registration and content evaluation before uploading any imported dramas.

To be clear, the "foreign restriction order" targets imported television shows rather than films. Although there has been a historical quota towards Hollywood movies that can be theatrically released—a total of 34 films including revenue sharing and flat fee movies, there have been no quantitative limitations on the digital distribution of foreign films.[161] But the order

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[160] The State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television of the People's Republic of China, *Notice on the Further Implementation of the Provisions of the Streaming of Foreign Television Shows*, https://www.chinafilm.gov.cn/xxgk/zcfg/gfxwj/dyfxfyjck/201409/t20140902_1508.html (accessed on November 10, 2023).

[161] The quota for imported films has expanded over time. In 1994, the former State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television issued a notice on "Further Deepening the Reform of the Film Industry," proposing an annual import quota of 10 films that "reflect the world's outstanding civilization and art achievements." In 2001, China officially joined the WTO, and a

brings a signal to film professionals both in China and in Hollywood that the government will extend the stricter regulation on television shows to films on streaming platforms. As a US sales agent noted, "It probably wouldn't be a huge problem if some scenes of sex or violence were cut. But if scenes started to be rearranged, or there were other wholesale changes, watch out."[162]

In January 2022, Chinese movie fans found that the ending of David Fincher's *Fight Club* (1999) had been reedited on Tencent Video. In the original version, Jack (played by Edward Norton) and Marla (played by Helena Bonham Carter), hand in hand, look out of a window as skyscrapers explode and collapse one after another. The Tencent Video version not only deleted the classic explosion scene but also added a written coda explaining how the police foiled the anarchist plot, and that Tyler received psychiatric treatment (see Figure 3.2). What makes this alteration particularly striking is its careful visual mimicry of the original film's original aesthetic—the added text appears in the same font against a black background that Fincher uses throughout *Fight Club* for its inter-titles and opening credits. This attention to visual continuity

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bilateral agreement was signed between China and the United States. China allowed the theatrical release of 20 revenue-sharing films annually. On February 18, 2012, then-vice presidents Xi Jinping and Joe Biden signed a new U.S.–China Film Agreement which increased China's annual import quota of Hollywood movies to 34. With 34 imported revenue-sharing films plus approximately 30–40 buyout films, this has formed the current pattern of imported films in the Chinese film market.

[162] Clifford Coonan, "China Poised to Expand Censorship Crackdown," *The Hollywood Reporter*, February 7, 2015, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/china-poised-expand-censorship-crackdown-771092/ (accessed on January 15, 2024).

suggests a deliberate attempt to naturalize the censored ending within the film's established visual language. In addition to the fabricated ending, a total of 12 minutes—comprised mostly of violent and nudity shots—were cut from the original *Fight Club*. The subtitles on Tencent Video were also more implicit when it came to R content, such as translating the vibrator as an electric toothbrush. In this regard, Tencent Video's alternation depletes the anarchic and anti-capitalist sentiments but promotes law and order.

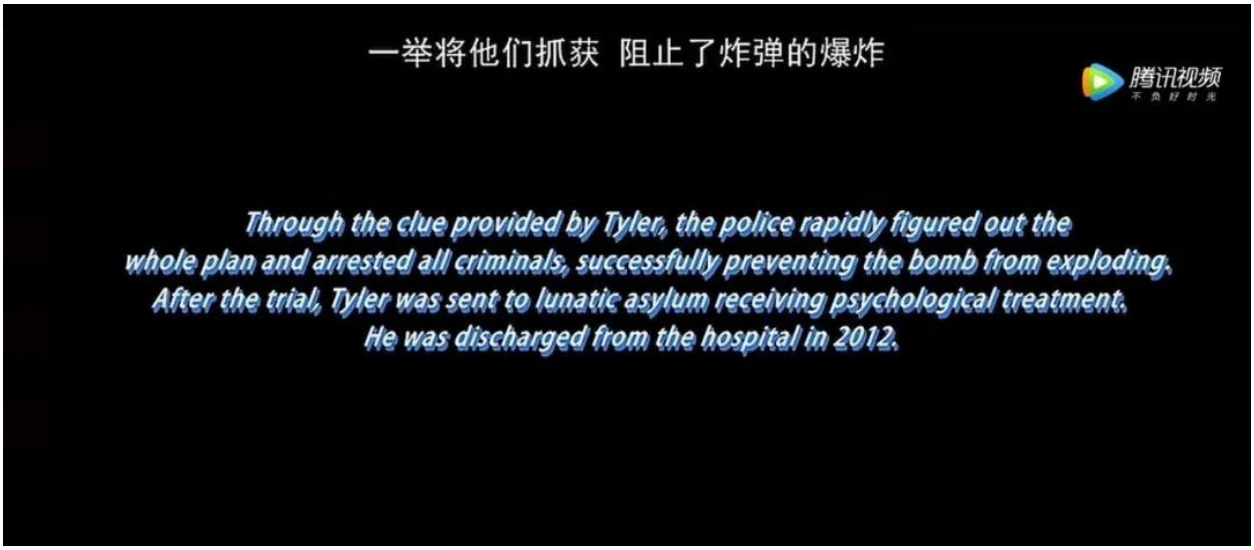


Figure 0.2 The Tencent version of the film cuts off right before the building explosion scene. The final scene is replaced with English text explaining that the anarchist plot was foiled, using a font that mimics the original film's style.

A fundamental question of the controversy surrounding *Fight Club* is *who* ordered these changes. It was unclear whether the changes were the result of Tencent Video's self-censorship, a government order, or a combination of the two. The Chinese distributor of *Fight Club*, Pacific Audio and Video Company, denied being involved in editing the Tencent version. Another interesting case may give us some clues about the censorship enigma. Two versions of the biopic *A Beautiful Mind* (2001) are available on China's streaming platforms, with a runtime of 135

minutes on iQIYI and 134 minutes on Youku. The Youku version cuts the scene where John Nash fantasizes about deciphering the radio so that the government can find a Soviet bomb. The reason for the trimmed Youku version is presumably political sensitivity, but since the original version on iQIYI could pass censorship, why can't Youku's original version be approved? Ironically, the dissatisfaction expressed by Tencent Video users and netizens over the edited *Fight Club* version sparked fervent discussion, prompting Tencent Video to reinstate the original ending of the film a month later. This episode underscores the complex interplay between the platform's self-censorship, government directives, and audience backlash within the realm of digital content distribution in China.

The common perception of China's film censorship is that it is a repressive monolith that stifles artistic and ideological expression. However, the complex nature of China's censorship regime poses significant challenges for scholars attempting to analyze it systematically. Characterized by a lack of transparency and unpredictability, censorship in China operates as somewhat of a black box, leaving industry professionals to speculate and test its boundaries without clear guidance. Compounding this challenge is China's historical practice of dual-track censorship across different distribution channels. During the DVD era, a film could be banned from theatrical distribution by SARFT (the former State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television) but have its DVD products circulated in the audiovisual market with approval from GAPP (the former General Administration of Press and Publication).[163] In 2013 the institutional reform merged GAPP and SARFT into the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio,

[163] Yuxing Zhou, "Pursuing Soft Power through Cinema: Censorship and Double Standards in Mainland China," *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 9, no. 3 (2015): 239–52.

Film, and Television of the People's Republic of China (SAPPRFT). Provincial bureaus of SAPPRFT have gained increased authority in approving production and censorship. Streaming platforms like Tencent Video, iQIYI, and Youku are now required to submit content for review directly to provincial departments rather than SAPPRFT. This apparent decentralization of censorship has not afforded streaming companies more freedom. On the contrary, the lack of transparency regarding censorship practices in China has created resulted in an environment where industry players must tread carefully, often erring on the side of caution and censoring artistic works beyond what may be officially required.

When the heavily edited version of *Fight Club* stirred heated discussion on the internet, a common sentiment emerged questioning why film enthusiasts would choose to watch international art films on mainstream streaming platforms like Tencent Video. On the surface, this commentary highlights the audience's growing distrust of mainstream platforms, which have been increasingly complying with censorship regulations. This sentiment also underscores the multifaceted nature of piracy in China, where access to uncensored versions of films—whether by purchasing region-free DVDs and DVD players or downloading original versions via BitTorrent—has long been regarded as a form of resistance against pervasive censorship. Even when a mainstream platform legally possesses the streaming rights to a film, significant alterations from the artist's original vision raise questions about the legitimacy of the edited version. Despite its illegal nature, the term "daoban," often used pejoratively to refer to pirated versions in Chinese, carries connotations of authenticity, resistance, and originality, serving as a response to omnipresent censorship from the DVD era to the streaming era. Although there has been an increasing availability of legal streaming options, it is likely that file sharing within the

cinephile community will persist as a niche of piracy unless there is a fundamental shift in China's censorship system.

Apart from licensed content, Tencent Video's appeal to subscribers largely stems from its robust in-house production efforts, with early access to exclusive premium content, which serves as a key driver for accelerating membership growth. Leveraging its extensive media investments, the parental company Tencent Holdings—China's largest technology company—has strategically expanded its portfolio by acquiring prominent film and television production studios, such as New Classics Media (*xinli chuanmei* 新丽传媒) through China Literature's (yuewen jituan 阅文集团, Tencent's e-books unit) acquisition in 2018.[164] This addition, alongside Tencent's successful gaming business, literature resources and other strategic investments, such as its minority stake in Huayi Brothers Media (one of China's major movie studios), enables seamless content sourcing, production, and distribution. As Jinying Li describes, Tencent Video has evolved as a "Pan-Entertainment Platform," where intellectual property (IP) plays a central role. With a robust IP portfolio, Tencent leverages the streaming platform as the foundation for organizing and distributing transmedia content. The ultimate goal is to establish a vibrant "fan economy" by actively engaging users across diverse channels and outlets.[165] This IP-centered strategy has transformed Tencent Video from merely a distribution channel to a vertically integrated media platform, further an undisputable leader in China's creative industry.

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[164] Jeffrey C. Ulin, *The Business of Media Distribution: Monetizing Film, TV, and Video Content in an Online World* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 437.

[165] Jinying Li, "The Platformization of Chinese Cinema: The Rise of IP Films in the Age of Internet+," *Asian Cinema* 31 (2020): 203–218.

Rethinking Border and Border-crossing: Circumvent in the Digital Era

In October 2023, Tencent Video CEO Zhonghuai Sun delivered a keynote speech at the MIPCOM, a global entertainment content market event in Cannes, France. The presentation was, in many ways, a reflection of the evolving digital entertainment landscape: a suit-clad Sun expounding on the power of original content and technological innovation in driving viewer engagement and industry growth. Although Sun's speech was titled "Good Content Transcends Boundaries," the majority of the talk centered around Tencent Video's success in the domestic market. Promising to "satisfy the increasingly sophisticated demands of Chinese audiences" through a wide array of original productions, Sun promotes Tencent Video as a way of "unleashing the imagination of creators and bringing immersive experiences to users." Towards the end of the talk, Sun invited international audiences to also discover the richness of Chinese content through Tencent Video's global version WeTV.[166]

The emergence of Chinese streaming platforms has introduced new dynamics in the global flow of content, challenging the dominant one-way pattern. During the DVD era, Hollywood studios utilized region codes as a mechanism to control the international distribution of content. Region coding served to safeguard geographic windows, which involved releasing films in staggered patterns across different regions. In parallel, DVD players were typically restricted to playing discs that matched their specific regional code. This strategic approach

[166] Tencent, "Good Content Transcends Boundaries: Tencent Looks to Forge Future of Content Industry with International Partners," the Media Mastermind series of the 39th annual MIPCOM, October 17, 2023, https://www.tencent.com/en-us/articles/2201719.html.

allowed studios to effectively manage film distribution, prioritizing releases in targeted markets to optimize revenue generation. As Evan Elkins observes, the coding system not only served as a digital rights management tool but also entrenched hierarchies of economic and cultural power.[167] For instance, North America was designated as Region One, reflecting its dominance in the global entertainment industry, while mainland China fell under the sixth region among the eight categories.[168] Moreover, region coding played a pivotal role in preserving territorial rights by ensuring that DVDs tailored for specific regions, featuring designated language tracks or censorship standards within their intended territories. The region code system resulted in disparities in pricing, content availability, and censorship standards across different regions, thereby impeding a seamless global viewing experience.

The advent of streaming services has significantly disrupted traditional geographic borders that are demarcated by sovereign territories. International platforms such as Netflix and Hulu have actively promoted an "end of geoblocking discourse" since the early 2010s, aiming to

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[167] Evan Elkins, *Locked Out: Regional Restrictions in Digital Entertainment Culture* (NY: New York University Press, 2019).

[168] The DVD region codes are as follows: Region 1 - Canada, the United States and U.S. territories; Region 2 - Japan, Europe, South Africa, the Middle East (including Egypt) and Greenland; Region 3 - Southeast Asia, and East Asia (including Hong Kong); Region 4 - Australia, New Zealand, the Pacific Islands, Central America, Mexico, South America, and the Caribbean; Region 5 - Eastern Europe, Russia, the Indian Subcontinent, Africa, North Korea, and Mongolia. Region 6 - China; Region 7 - reserved for unspecified special use; Region 8 - Special international venues for air and oceanic travel.

provide users worldwide with a borderless viewing experience.[169] However, China stands as a notable exception to this trend. Despite Netflix's global dominance, with its licensed content available in over 190 countries by 2016, China remained conspicuously absent from its coverage map. Unlike other territories excluded from Netflix's reach due to US trade sanctions—such as Iran, North Korea, and Crimea—China's absence reflects distinct regulatory and market dynamics. Roman Lobato has highlighted the regulatory hurdles and fierce competition within China's streaming market as primary factors contributing to Netflix's inability to penetrate the Chinese market. The Chinese streaming landscape is already dominated by domestic tech conglomerates, which have established a strong foothold in the market and enjoy a significant advantage in terms of local content production and distribution. The strict regulations also pose significant challenges for international streaming services seeking to enter the market.[170] The case of China serves as a reminder that the promise of a truly borderless digital media ecosystem remains elusive.

The border in the digital distribution landscape between China and the rest of the world must be understood within the context of China's Great Firewall (GFW). The GFW is a figurative term that describes the nation's extensive internet censorship infrastructure, designed to regulate and restrict access to certain foreign websites and online content. Considered one of the most intricate and all-encompassing censorship systems in the world, the GFW operates

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[169] Evan Elkins, "'Sorry about That': Hopes and Promises of Geoblocking's End," in *Digital Media Distribution: Portals, Platforms, Pipelines*, eds. Paul McDonald, Courtney Brannon Donoghue, and Timothy Havens, 183–201 (New York: New York University Press, 2021).

[170] Ramon Lobato, *Netflix Nations* (New York University Press, 2019), 130.

primarily through the manipulation of the domain name system (DNS) filter, effectively blocking access to targeted websites. Because international streaming services such as Netflix, Hulu, and Prime Video have never been licensed to operate in China, they are technically blocked by the firewall as well. Given that the primary objective of the GFW is to censor content deemed politically sensitive, socially disruptive, or threatening to national security, popular video-sharing platforms like YouTube and Vimeo have been officially banned since 2009.

While the GFW has fortified online borders, it has consequently also increased the prevalence of border crossings in the everyday life of individuals within contemporary China. Despite stringent restrictions, some Chinese users persist in seeking ways to access blocked content. These individuals leverage tools such as VPNs (virtual private networks) and proxy services to circumvent the firewall despite the legal implications associated with breaching it. Because of the regulatory nature of the GFW, wall-crossing is primarily deemed as political. Jinying Li has explained the constant tension between restriction and access when it comes to the blocking of photo- and video-sharing sites by the GFW. As Li remarks,

> As the wall becomes a symbol of political oppression, crossing the wall is thus taken as a practice of political activism regardless of individual purpose and motivation. The concentration of Chinese underground documentaries on YouTube, for example, suggests a popular imagination of a free, open space of political resistance outside the wall, despite the fact that this outside space is itself a discursive construction.[171]

[171] Jinying Li, "China: The Techno-Politics of the Wall," *Geoblocking and Global Video Culture*, 2016, 117.

However, this perspective misses an empirical fact: that moments of circumvention have been practices of everyday life long before the implementation of the GFW. The media landscape is never devoid of borders, since the government has constantly exercised its control over content flow, thereby establishing boundaries that impede access to specific content. The consumption of unauthorized DVDs, for example, can be seen as an essential act of circumventing the borders. It is crucial to recognize that the motivations behind border-crossing practices in the digital realm are not always inherently political. While some individuals may indeed engage in wall-crossing as a form of political resistance, others may do so simply to access entertainment and educational resources, or to connect with friends and family abroad.

Furthermore, border crossings are not always one-way but involve contraflows in either direction across the border. Everyday practices of circumvention are part of a broader continuum of media access and consumption. In this regard, diasporic communities have historically facilitated the transnational flow of audiovisual products. Region-free DVDs and DVD players have always been open secrets, with international students, immigrants, and foreign film enthusiasts often turning to piracy or seeking out region-free DVD players to bypass restrictions.[172] In recent years, TV boxes have also become popular devices for accessing over-the-top television streaming among diasporic audiences. Ramon Lobato and Pradip Sarkar have explored the way in which Android-based TV boxes cater to Indian and South Asian diasporic communities in Australia. Unlike mainstream devices such as Roku and FireTV, these devices

[172] Brian Hu, "Closed Borders and Open Secrets: Regional Lockout, the Film Industry, and Code-Free DVD Players," *Mediascape* 1, no. 2 (2006): 1–9.

often offer channels and content through illegal means, such as unauthorized streaming of premium channels or pirated movies and shows.[173]

In contrast to DVD region codes, the widespread adoption of geoblocking represents a shared strategy among major multinational streaming services, encompassing industry giants like Netflix, Tencent Video, and iQIYI. Geoblocking is employed to safeguard licensing agreements by restricting user access based on their Internet Protocol (IP) address, allowing streaming platforms to divide and subsequently monopolize streaming rights across different territories. Chinese streaming services also adhere to this practice, aligning their in-house productions with geoblocking principles, thereby limiting content accessibility primarily to domestic audiences. This phenomenon reflects a shifting paradigm that is shaped by Hollywood's historical dominance, national regulatory frameworks, and the rise of international media conglomerates. The prevalence of geo-blocking, again, contributes to market fragmentation by delineating global territories into spatial zones with varying content accessibility.

Overseas Chinese communities grapple with an increasingly fragmented landscape when it comes to accessing Chinese content. Mainstream platforms like Tencent Video and iQIYI protect licensing agreements by restricting users' access based on their Internet Protocol (IP) address. Hence, overseas users are often unable to access a significant portion of the content, even if they are paying subscribers (see Figure 3.3). While Chinese streaming companies have begun to expand their presence in the international market by licensing content for global audiences, the availability of such content remains limited. Some popular romance dramas can

[173] Ramon Lobato and Pradip Sarkar, "The OTT TV Box as a Diasporic Media Platform," *Media Industries Journal* 6, no. 2 (2019): 133–50.

be found on niche streaming services like Rakuten Viki, and major international platforms such as Netflix, Disney Plus, and Prime Video occasionally acquire a small selection of critically acclaimed Chinese titles. For example, the mini-series *The Long Season* (2023) became available on Prime Video for US audiences several months after its original release on Tencent Video. As a result, many overseas Chinese viewers resort to pirate streaming websites to access a wider variety of content and stay up-to-date with the latest releases.



Figure 0.3 The Geoblocked iQIYI Website.

Despite the proliferation of legal streaming services, streaming within the diaspora community is still substantially informal in nature. From a technical point of view, pirate operations can easily aggregate content from legal services and re-stream it, while the ineffectiveness of anti-piracy measures such as watermarking and digital rights management

(DRM) further enables copyright infringement activities. Moreover, with servers set up globally, pirate operations can be difficult to identify, trace, and hold accountable through legal action. In the following section, I will focus on the case of Danube Video, a popular streaming platform established in Hungary in 2009. Despite being established in Hungary, its largest user base was in North America, with over 40% of its traffic coming from the United States and Canada, making it a particularly relevant case study for examining Chinese film circulation in the US.[174] The reliance on pirate streaming sites among overseas Chinese communities underscores the relations between cultural identity, access to media content, and the limitations of current distribution models. It also raises important questions about the role of media in fostering transnational connections and the need for more inclusive and equitable approaches to global content distribution, particularly when legitimate channels fail to serve audiences who fall outside dominant market demographics.

Danube Video (2009–2019): Streaming Piracy as a Diasporic Platform

Among the pirate streaming sites that cater to diasporic Chinese audiences, many are substantially ephemeral. Such websites often shut down due to financial constraints, distributed

[174] According to Danube Video's internal traffic data, the geographical distribution of its users in 2018 showed that the United States accounted for the largest share at 31.81%, followed by Canada (9.19%) and Malaysia (8.44%). European countries collectively represented about 23% of total traffic, including Italy (5.51%), UK (5.44%), Germany (3.81%), France (3.07%), Spain (1.99%), and the Netherlands (1.12%). The remaining traffic came from Asia-Pacific regions, including Singapore, Hong Kong, Japan, and Taiwan.

denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks, or periodically change their domains to avoid seizure. Danube Video presents a compelling case study that highlights the scale, sophistication, and profitability of transnational streaming piracy. As of this writing, Danube Video has changed its domain several times, from the original dnvod.eu to dnvod.tv to iyf.tv. In this section, I examine why and how this illicit streaming website thrives in a transnational space as a diasporic video platform.

Research paradigms centered on legal streaming services often fall short in explaining the mechanisms at play in illegal or grey-area streaming sites. Analyzing pirate services like Danube Video through concepts developed for legal streaming can obscure their distinctive functions and structure. For instance, Amanda R. Lotz's differentiation between "platform" and "portal" does not fully capture the comprehensive nature of pirate sites, which often blend multiple forms of content and user interactions in ways that transcend legal streaming categorizations. Pirate services like Danube Video frequently operate as expansive, all-in-one repositories that blur these boundaries, challenging conventional frameworks used to analyze legal streaming models. Legal streaming research paradigms may fail to explain the mechanism of illegal grey areas. Analyzing pirate services like Danube Video using vocabularies from the legal realm of streaming can be challenging. Norwegian scholars Hendrik Storstein Spilker and Terje Colbjørnsen have offered an inclusive typology for researching video streaming. They pinpoint the following dimensions: professional versus user-generated streaming; legal versus piracy streaming; On-demand versus live streaming; streaming on focused versus multi-purpose

platforms; niche audience versus general-audience streaming.[175] While legal streaming platforms can easily fit into either side of these dyads, Danube Video's inventiveness lies in how it disregards these boundaries. Emerging alongside the broader wave of unregulated video websites in the late 2000s, Danube Video differentiated itself from early online video platforms like Tudou and Youku, which emphasized user-generated content (UGC). Instead, Danube Video began as a hodgepodge of aggregated content, with major sections including movies, TV series, reality shows, animation, pornography, and forums. In that case, I seek to move beyond the lens of a streaming model but view Danube Video as the *infrastructure* of distribution—in the form of a comprehensive platform.

To begin with, the term "platform" has been deployed in so many ways that it is difficult to have a coherent definition. Hardware like DVD players or mobile phones, as well as software such as the Windows Operating System, are considered platforms. Today, big tech companies such as Airbnb, Uber, Google, and Facebook are widely recognized as platform business models that facilitate digital interactions between customers and merchants with their online marketplaces. Netflix is also an explanatory platform where it delivers licensed content and produces original films and shows. From a media industry studies perspective, Marc Steinberg charts the vivid history of how "platform" has become a buzzword in the business world and

[175] Hendrik Storstein Spilker and Terje Colbjørnsen, "The Dimensions of Streaming: Toward a Typology of an Evolving Concept," *Media, Culture & Society* 42, no. 7–8 (October 1, 2020): 1210–25, https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443720904587.

management theory in the mid-2010s onward in the digital economy. [176] Another prominent platform scholar, Nick Srnicek, has defined digital platforms as intermediaries that bring together customers, advertisers, service providers, producers, and suppliers.[177]

The peculiarity of Danube Video lies in the way the platform has negotiated and navigated between community and profitability. From the very beginning, Danube Video has consciously promoted a sense of diasporic connectivity across national borders, exemplifying the notion of emotional transnationalism. Overseas Chinese have been able to retain emotional ties with their homeland by not only keeping up with the latest entertainment on Danube Video but also engaging in chat sessions and sending bullet chats (*danmu* 弹幕). Sociologist Diane L. Wolf first coined the term "emotional transnationalism" to describe the experiences of Filipino second-generation youth and their struggles to navigate their transnational identities.[178] The idea of emotional transnationalism thus encompasses the experiences of maintaining transnational connectivity through grappling with complex cultural codes, ideologies, and feelings. Although sociologists typically use emotional transnationalism to describe generational dynamics within a family setting, it is a particularly useful term for describing a more general sense of emotions and

[176] Marc Steinberg, *The Platform Economy: How Japan Transformed the Consumer Internet* (University of Minnesota Press, 2019).

[177] Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism* (John Wiley & Sons, 2017), 35.

[178] Diane L. Wolf, "Family Secrets: Transnational Struggles among Children of Filipino Immigrants," *Sociological Perspectives* 40, no. 3 (1997): 457–82, https://doi.org/10.2307/1389452.

belonging in the case of overseas Chinese. In this light, Danube Video can be understood as a diasporic platform as well as a community.

In the early stage of Danube Video, its anonymous webmaster (*zhanzhang* 站长) played a central role in terms of the website's update, operation, and maintenance. In a 2013 notice, the webmaster stated:

> As one of the diasporic Chinese who wander and strive abroad, I truly understand the difficulties we face as a community. In a foreign land where interpersonal relationships are indifferent, and life can be challenging, I find fulfillment in knowing that the website can provide some solace for the loneliness in our hearts. This, in turn, is the greatest affirmation for the website.
>
> As a pure movie lover, my initial intention (of building Danube Video) was simply to create a platform for sharing films with everyone. Operating the website is not my day job as well. However, since its establishment, its popularity has skyrocketed. Relying solely on my personal financial capacity is challenging, leading us to introduce a subscription membership plan and rent advertising spaces to alleviate the high operating costs of the website.

Acknowledging the amateur nature of its website operation, Danube Video struggled with server strain and personnel shortage in its early stages. For example, in February 2011, when the most popular movie was *Shaolin* (2011, directed by Benny Chan), the website posted a notice about the overwhelming number of clicks and advised users to avoid watching the video during peak

hours to reduce server strain.[179] Danube Video also made casual notices about service interruptions for reasons such as the webmaster's birthday or staff returning back to China for celebrating Chinese New Year. The sense of an open community was also reflected in the advertisements targeting European local community, such as dating apps exclusively for Chinese in Europe, tourist agencies, or immigration attorneys (see Figure 3.4).



Figure 0.4 A snapshot of www.dnvod.eu on July 23, 2013. The banner ads were for a computer store in Madrid, Spain and a hostel in Vienna.

[179]Danube Video front page, https://web.archive.org/web/20110224134643/http://www.dnvod.eu/Movie/detail.aspx?id=3096 (accessed on January 5, 2024).

Expanding from its initial focus on the Chinese diaspora in Europe, Danube Video successfully gained popularity in many other regions and countries, including the United States, Southeast Asia, Australia, and Taiwan. By the end of 2015, the website's traffic exceeded one million pageviews per day (PV) and had around 400,000 registered members. One crucial aspect of Danube Video was its timely uploads of Chinese blockbusters, television series, and reality shows. In the previous sections, I have discussed the spatial dimensions of transnational media distribution, in particular the intricacies of borders and border crossing. It is noteworthy that spatial differences have historically led to temporal particularities in the practices of distribution and exhibition as well. In general, the idea of window release—a defined period during which a film is exclusively available for a distribution channel— has been consistent throughout the history of the film industry. The length of a release window is territory-based, allowing for coordinated and strategic release strategies that maximize a film's theatrical exploitation as well as ancillary profit. Researching film distribution in diasporic settings, for example, Deb Verhoeven has noted how temporal differences were contingent on the distance from a film's domestic market. Verhoeven remarked, "The business of film distribution is founded on the establishment of temporal hierarchies, and its specific practices at once *promote* and *demote* markets through temporal relegation."[180]

While distributors and exhibitors may still have the power to establish hierarchies around space and temporality, audiences' viewing habits have transformed significantly in the radically different digital media landscape. The rise of streaming and cloud-based storage technologies has

[180] Deb Verhoeven, "Film distribution in the diaspora: temporality, community and national cinema," *Explorations in new cinema history: Approaches and case studies* (2011): 245.

crushed the spatial and temporal barriers in a sweeping way. In Verhoeven's case study, the Greek community in Australia waited a median time of around three years after a film's domestic release in Greek in the 1950s and 1960s.[181] Furthermore, as I discuss in Chapter One, Miramax postponed the US release of Zhang Yimou's *Hero* by two years. Danube has drastically shortened and even eliminated the wait times. For popular Chinese commercial films, Danube Video often uploaded cam versions that were clandestinely recorded in theaters and later replaced them with high-quality versions. When it comes to television series and reality shows, *Danube Video* made it possible for audiences to have synchronized access as soon as the content was streamed in China with just one click. The operators of Danube Video identified where unencrypted streams were being dumped out within the legal streaming platform, thereby isolating high-quality video content at the moment of release.

After years of expansion, Danube Video morphed into a full-service IPTV and VOD provider available on several platforms and operating systems. Rather than being a pure-play SVOD service, it became a multipurpose media platform integrating an advertising studio, shopping, games, and forums (BBS). For example, in September 2015, Danube Studio was officially established, providing external services such as enterprise website construction, web design, website promotion, Search Engine Optimization (SEO), and customization of web and graphic advertising design. Until its seizure by Chinese police in 2019, Danube Video claimed to have an extensive video library boasting a capacity of around 2PB, covering a wide range of content, including over 15,000 Chinese films, international blockbusters, popular TV dramas, trending reality shows, and new anime releases. The professional updating team worked around

[181] Ibid, 255.

the clock, ensuring the most timely updates across the entire platform. The "About Us" section on the website was no longer a personal letter from the webmaster. Instead, it said:

> As a leader in the overseas video industry, it is committed to actively setting industry standards and guiding the landscape of the video industry and the broader media era. The web version and app are perfectly compatible with various desktop devices (PC, MAC) and mobile devices (iPhone, iPad, and Android). The interface design is user-friendly and highly accessible. Utilizing cutting-edge technologies, it offers users a high-definition, seamless video experience.

It is difficult to pinpoint an exact time when Danube Video transitioned from a webmaster's passion project—helping overseas Chinese access blocked video content outside the country—to a comprehensive piracy platform. While completely silent on its illegal nature, Danube Video proudly promoted its user experience-driven ethos. Although Danube Video started to introduce a subscription plan in 2011, both members and non-members could enjoy free access to the videos. The major difference was that VIP members had access to higher-quality resources, namely 720p resolution, as opposed to 480p for free users. The so-called "freemium" model ensures a high volume of traffic, which can be monetized through advertising. To some extent, the service looked and felt very much like a legitimate site. Danube Video's streamlined interface and intuitive navigation made it easy for users to find and watch content, while the platform's smooth playback quality and minimal ads enhanced the overall viewing experience.

However, no matter how legitimate and professional the interface appears, the active advertisers illuminate the darker undercurrents of the piracy ecosystem. In the later stage of the website's development, one significant shift was the growing convergence of content piracy and

other illegal businesses, including online gambling and designer counterfeits. Given the historical links between film piracy and organized crime, terrorism, prostitution, and money laundering, it is not strange that Danube Video became a virtual marketplace for counterfeit goods and illicit services (see Figure 3.5).



Figure 0.5 A screenshot from a pirate streaming site featuring advertisements for illicit services, including academic ghostwriting, test-taking fraud, and counterfeit luxury goods. These ads are displayed alongside Chinese film content, as denoted by the dragon seal.

In 2019, following the arrest of its owners in China, Danube Video stayed offline for several weeks, an event that fueled the rise of endless “replacement” copycats. While many of the sites stepping up to fill the gap left by Danube Video looked like the real deal, many were simply incomplete replacements. The emergence of numerous copycats in the wake of Danube Video’s seizure highlights the resilience and adaptability of pirate streaming operations. While the legal and ethical implications of pirate streaming cannot be ignored, the case of Danube Video invites us to reflect on the unmet needs and desires of diasporic audiences. It also raises

questions about the effectiveness of current anti-piracy measures and the need for a more nuanced understanding of the motivations and dynamics behind pirate streaming platforms catering to diasporic communities. Since 2020, a brand-new domain, www.ifvod.tv (later changed again to www.iyf.tv), appeared on the internet with a brand-new web interface. Although it claimed to have nothing to do with Danube Video, users found old comments from Danube Video and videos embedded with Danube's logo. This has marked the rebirth of Danube Video and the iyf site is still active as of the writing of this project in 2024. Indeed, despite claiming to be a new platform, iyf.tv's own promotional materials betray its connection to Danube Video. The site displays a visitor traffic growth chart dating back to 2011—the exact year Danube Video introduced its VIP membership system. The graph shows a steady increase in visitor numbers from less than 1 million in 2011 to nearly 30 million by 2023, with particularly dramatic growth between 2015–2018. This historical data, spanning over a decade, reveals not only the platform's true lineage but also its remarkable expansion from a small passion project to a major streaming operation serving millions of users worldwide.

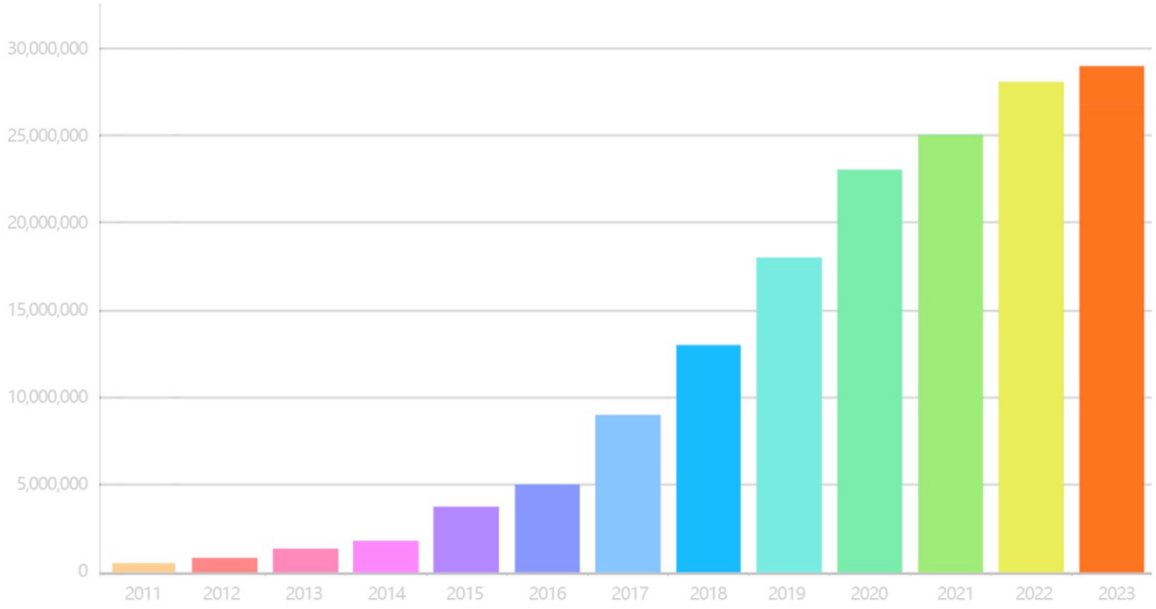


Figure 0.6 The visitor growth of the streaming platform from 2011 to 2023, showing a steady increase in traffic from under 1 million visitors in 2011 to approximately 30 million by 2023. This historical data, displayed on the promotional materials for advertisers of iyf.tv, inadvertently reveals the site's connection to Danube Video through its matching timeline. From iyf.tv data center.

The evolution of digital piracy in China from the DVD era to the streaming age reveals how the shadow network constantly adapts to shifting technological, cultural, and regulatory landscapes. As demonstrated through the case studies in this chapter, the rise of mainstream streaming platforms like Sohu Video and Tencent Video has fundamentally transformed not only the dynamics of piracy in China but also how audiences engage with media content. These platforms have emerged as powerful forces in legitimizing content distribution and shaping industry standards, yet their adherence to censorship and geoblocking restrictions has inadvertently created new niches for piracy to flourish. The shift from traditional theatrical

exhibition to on-demand streaming represents more than just a technological change—it signals a profound transformation in viewing habits and cultural consumption. While Chapter One examined the ethnic theatrical circuit and Chapter Two explored independent film festivals as physical sites of exhibition, streaming platforms have introduced a more flexible, individualized mode of distribution that allows audiences to create their own viewing schedules and spaces.

This transformation in viewing habits—from the collective experience of moviegoing to the personalized convenience of home streaming—has particular resonance for diasporic audiences. The case of Danube Video exemplifies how pirate streaming operations have evolved beyond mere content theft to become sophisticated platforms serving specific community needs. What begins as informal circumvention of geographic and regulatory barriers has developed into complex infrastructures of cultural connection, offering viewers the ability to maintain cultural ties through everyday viewing practices in their own homes and on their own schedules. Like the independent film festivals discussed in Chapter Two, these pirate streaming sites function as vital nodes in maintaining transnational flows of media and culture, but they do so through more intimate and flexible forms of engagement. The platform's trajectory from a passion project serving overseas Chinese to a comprehensive media service illuminates how shadow networks can simultaneously resist and reproduce distribution systems, straddling in the middle space between the formal and informal.

More broadly, this telling example of Danube demonstrates that piracy in contemporary China cannot be reduced to simple narratives of either theft or resistance. Instead, it must be understood as part of a larger ecosystem where formal and informal distribution channels coexist and shape each other, adapting to and reflecting evolving audience preferences for more convenient, immediate access to content. The entangled relations between streaming platforms,

censorship mechanisms, and pirate operations reveal how cultural flows persist despite—and sometimes because of—attempts to regulate and control them. In this light, digital piracy represents another crucial dimension of the shadow network through which Chinese cinema circulates globally, one that continues to evolve as new technologies emerge and viewing habits shift further toward personalized, on-demand consumption.

This dialectic tension between restriction and access, between legitimate and illegitimate distribution, speaks to the notion of shadow network elaborated throughout this dissertation project. From ethnic theatrical distribution to independent film festivals to pirate streaming sites, the shadow network consistently finds ways to maintain cultural connections across increasingly contested borders. As increased uncertainties from geopolitical tensions and changing audience preferences, understanding these informal circuits of distribution and exhibition becomes ever more crucial for grasping how film cultures persist and transform in a global context.

Conclusion: Out of the Shadows

In 2023, a peculiar storm swept through American social media. As TikTok users scrolled, they encountered clips of werewolf billionaires professing love, vampire CEOs plotting revenge, or innocent characters discovering supernatural destinies. These vertical short dramas were not fan creations or parodies but promotional clips from ReelShort, a streaming app whose melodramatic, minute-long episodes became the latest sensation. Through compelling hooks on TikTok, the platform migrated viewers to its app, where they paid to unlock subsequent episodes. Unlike previous attempts at short-form streaming like Quibi, ReelShort adopted a model inspired by mobile gaming—users purchase in-app "coins" to continue watching, driven by bite-sized, rapid-fire narratives. This model has proven astonishingly successful. Since its 2022 US launch, the purveyor of supernatural soap operas has generated $22 million in revenue and accumulated 24 million global downloads, briefly surpassing even TikTok as Apple's most-downloaded entertainment app.

Although ReelShort keeps a low profile about its Chinese roots, likely due to increasing Western scrutiny of Chinese tech companies, the app's parent company, Crazy Maple Studio (backed by Beijing-based digital publisher COL Group), has deftly adapted the successful practices from China's ultrashort drama industry to capture international audiences. The genealogy of short-form, serialized storytelling traces back to China's digital literature industry of the 2000s, where web novels pioneered a microtransaction-based model for delivering serialized content. The online serialized novels perfected a formula of rapid plot progression, emotional intensity, and constant narrative hooks, structuring each chapter to end with a cliffhanger, driving readers to make micro-payments to continue reading. Popular genres

included “level up,” where protagonists rapidly gain wealth and power; “rebirth” narratives, where characters return to the past with future knowledge; and supernatural romance featuring otherworldly love interests—tropes that would later dominate short-form video content. During China’s pandemic lockdowns in 2020, web novel practitioners began adapting their most melodramatic plots into short videos. What started as casual mobile phone recordings unexpectedly revealed how effectively these narrative structures could translate to a visual format. The compressed storytelling style developed in web fiction—rapid character establishment, intense emotional conflicts, and frequent plot twists—proved perfectly suited for minute-long episodes. What began as a simple promotional tool for web novels soon evolved into a robust format, capturing audiences beyond the typical web novel readership.

This narrative lineage explains why platforms like ReelShort have succeeded, whereas previous short-form video attempts failed in America. Rather than attempt to condense premium television or film content into shorter lengths, as Quibi did, these platforms have built on two decades of Chinese web-novel storytelling experience.[182] Interestingly, many of my film school peers are now working for platforms like ReelShort. Though they have dreamt of becoming the next Ang Lee or Chloe Zhao, achieving mainstream success in Hollywood, they find themselves grudgingly navigating a new path, building portfolios in the short-form space amid industry disruptions as a result of intensifying Sino-U.S. geopolitical tensions and the 2023 Hollywood strikes. One of ReelShort’s hit series, *The Double Life of My Billionaire Husband,* was directed

[182] Except for ReelShort, Chinese company-backed short-form video platforms include FlexTV, DramaBox, Goodshort, ShortTV, Moboreels, KalosTV, SnackShow, Meme Shorts, GalateaTV and so on.

by a UCLA film school alum. The platform taps into Hollywood's periphery by collaborating with emerging actors and recent film school graduates who bring high emotional intensity on a lean budget, typically set at $300,000 or less.

ReelShort occupies an ambivalent position in the global circulation of Chinese media. While burdened by lingering associations with low quality, piracy, legitimacy struggles, and counterfeit culture—issues that have historically shaped perceptions of Chinese media, as scholars like Fan Yang and Joshua Neves have argued—the platform succeeds precisely by embracing rather than concealing these marginal traits.[183] Unlike previous attempts at Chinese cultural export that sought legitimacy through high production values or artistic prestige, ReelShort positions itself openly as algorithmic entertainment optimized for maximum engagement. Its werewolf romances and vampire CEO dramas may seem derivative or absurd to certain critics and audiences, but they represent a timely understanding of digital entertainment consumption. By embracing potential liabilities—its association with "low culture," its algorithmic approach to storytelling, and its emphasis on addictive rather than artistic qualities—into strategic advantages, ReelShort demonstrates how Chinese digital platforms can succeed by strategically repurposing cultural stereotypes for global audiences.

In the process, TikTok serves as a powerful bridge for introducing short-form dramas like those on ReelShort to American audiences, demonstrating how China's media innovations resonate globally. Originally launched as Douyin in China, TikTok's success in the international

[183] Fan Yang, *Faked in China: Nation branding, counterfeit culture, and globalization* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015); Joshua Neves, *Underglobalization: Beijing's Media Urbanism and the Chimera of Legitimacy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020).

market can be traced back to the machine learning algorithms pioneered by its founder Zhang Yiming's first major platform, Toutiao, a news aggregator. Toutiao's algorithm-driven approach, perfected on Douyin, tailors content to individual user preferences, fostering an intensely personalized and engaging experience. By transplanting this successful model abroad, TikTok has introduced users worldwide to China's preferred media formats and engagement strategies, normalizing vertical, short, high-intensity video content. TikTok's success reflects a larger trend in the Chinese media industry, where tech giants like Alibaba and Tencent are creating integrated platforms that merge technology with the entertainment industry, redefining channels of content distribution and consumption. This media environment—where platforms and algorithms drive content discovery—illustrates how China's media industry is not only creating content but also exporting entire business models that are reshaping entertainment on a global scale.

The rise of platforms like ReelShort both extends and complicates the shadow network that has been central to this dissertation. Although shows on ReelShort exemplify non-unionized work practices, reflecting the opportunistic, flexible nature of the shadow network, ReelShort also formalizes these informal practices, transforming them into a mainstream, revenue-generating business model rather than an informal network operating at society's margins. The spectacular rise defies the common perception that Chinese media professionals have a limited understanding of international markets and audience preferences. For example, Michael Keane has argued that this deficiency in industry knowledge is because "the government has chosen to intervene."[184] In terms of short-form dramas, when the Chinese government began to tighten the

[184] Michael Keane, "Going global or going nowhere? Chinese media in a time of flux," *Media International Australia* 159, no. 1 (2016): 13–21.

regulation and censorship in 2022—after two years of unhinged growth in the domestic market, the regulatory pressure has become a key driver of international expansion for companies like ReelShort. This situation echoes but differs from the dynamics I explored in Chapter Two regarding independent films and film festivals. While independent filmmakers often sought international platforms as spaces of creative freedom from domestic censorship, short-form drama platforms are pursuing global markets as untapped "blue oceans" for expansion. Rather than simply seeking to export Chinese content, Chinese producers are now strategically adapting their proven business models and narrative formulas for international audiences.

The emergence of platforms like ReelShort in 2023 provides a timely addition to reflect upon the theoretical frameworks and empirical findings developed throughout this dissertation. This project has analyzed how shadow networks have shaped Chinese cinema's circulation in the US from 2002 to 2020. Rather than operating solely as informal or alternative circuits, the shadow networks strategically blur the boundaries between formal and informal media enterprises, between state control and market forces. Through examining three key nodes—ethnic theatrical distribution, independent film festivals, and digital streaming platforms—it is my intention to demonstrate how the shadow network sustains the dissemination of Chinese cinema across increasingly regulated borders while navigating complex institutional and market demands.

The analysis presented in Chapter One revealed how theatrical distribution operates within negotiated spaces between cultural authenticity and market imperatives. Through detailed case studies of films like *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and *The Grandmaster*, the chapter illuminated how distributors navigate competing demands of artistic integrity and commercial viability. The emergence of ethnic-focused distributors like China Lion in the 2010s further

exemplifies this complex positioning. By strategically renting screens in mainstream multiplexes located in areas with high Chinese populations, aiming for day-and-date release schedules with mainland China, and conducting targeted marketing through Chinese social media platforms, these companies built up new distribution circuits that bridged mainstream exhibition infrastructure with diaspora audiences. Their success demonstrated how shadow networks could operate effectively within established systems while serving specific community needs.

Chapter Two's examination of independent film festivals demonstrated how the post-2012 crackdown on independent film festivals in China led not to their elimination but to their reimagining in a global context. Organizations like the Los Angeles Chinese Film Festival (LACFF) emerged as new spaces for exhibiting independent Chinese cinema, operating entirely through volunteer efforts and maintaining programming autonomy through their distance from state funding. Their curatorial choices, exemplified by films like *Paths of the Soul* and *People's Republic of Desire*, demonstrated a commitment to multicultural perspectives and artistic independence rather than state-approved narratives. However, these festivals also faced challenges around cultural identity, institutional sustainability, and community engagement, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic. Their experiences reveal how shadow networks must constantly negotiate between artistic ambition, practical constraints, and evolving definitions of Chinese cultural identity in transnational spaces.

The investigation of streaming platforms in Chapter Three addressed the evolution of the digital distribution landscape within and outside China. While mainstream platforms like Sohu Video and Tencent Video established new standards for copyright protection and legitimate content distribution in the domestic market, their adherence to opaque censorship requirements created new gaps in access. The case of Tencent Video's handling of films like *Fight Club*

demonstrated how platforms often engage in pre-emptive self-censorship, leading to inconsistent content availability across different services. In response, platforms like Danube Video emerged to serve diaspora audiences, evolving from informal community projects into sophisticated piracy operations that circumvented both geoblocking and censorship restrictions. Their success stemmed not only from operating in the shadows but also from understanding and serving specific community needs while developing competent operations that rivaled legitimate platforms. This dynamic reveals how shadow networks adapt to and exploit the limitations of official distribution channels, particularly in serving audiences that fall outside mainstream market considerations.

Taken together, these case studies reveal several implications for contemporary global media flows. First, they demonstrate that shadow networks are not merely reactive but generative—forging new forms of cultural connection and market opportunities that transcend national and institutional boundaries. Second, they illuminate how these networks emerge not simply from regulatory restrictions but from the complex relations between market demands and state control. Finally, they suggest that understanding contemporary Chinese cinema requires attention not just to certain auteurs and their oeuvre but to the sophisticated distribution infrastructures that have evolved to serve diverse audience demands. This framework of shadow network thus offers an effective analytical tool for understanding the complex dynamics of global media circulation in an era of increasing geopolitical tension and technological innovation. It suggests that examining how media professionals as well as enterprises navigate between different regulatory environments and market opportunities is as crucial as studying mainstream channels. As Chinese cinema continues to seek global audiences, understanding these adaptive networks becomes ever more significant for grasping the future of global media

culture. The shadow network framework also prompts a reappraisal of the content and cultural products that have been able to transcend traditional gatekeepers and filters. Commercial films, web series, and other media forms that may have been previously overlooked or trivialized have found new avenues for international distribution and exhibition through these dynamic, bottom-up networks.

Lastly, the prevalence of the shadow network invites us to revisit the concept of China's so-called "soft power deficit," a phrase I have consciously avoided throughout this project. Originally coined by political scientist Joseph Nye Jr. in the late 20th century, "soft power" describes a nation's ability to influence others through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or force, or "hard power." At its core, soft power rests on cultural appeal, political values, and foreign policies that make a nation desirable to others.[185] American media, particularly Hollywood, has long exemplified this influence, shaping global perceptions of American values, ideals, and lifestyle. Nye argues that this cultural appeal can foster alignment with a nation's policies, fostering a favorable environment for diplomatic and economic influence.[186] However, when it comes to China, dominant narratives tend to emphasize state control, censorship, and authoritarian oversight in the creative industries, often overlooking the agency and entrepreneurial spirit that arise from the bottom up. This perspective has two problematic implications. First, it frames China's integration into the global socio-economic

[185] Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1990).

[186] Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004).

order as an anomaly, perpetuating an "us versus them" dichotomy. Second, it disregards the grassroots and entrepreneurial activities within China's media landscape, reducing all creative efforts to mere extensions of the state's agenda. Scholars like Ivan Franceschini and Nicholas Loubere argue that China has been systematically "othered" in international discourse, treated as an isolated case whose issues are uniformly attributed to the authoritarianism of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).[187] Such essentialist views portray China's ambitions to "go out" as inherently overreaching, dangerous, or power-hungry.

This project challenges the prevailing view of China as an "other" in popular and academic discourse, reframing Chinese media as an active and integral part of the world's media landscape. Focusing on the shadow networks and grassroots initiatives that propel Chinese content in the US reveals a dynamic, bottom-up network that resists simplistic narratives of state-driven soft power expansion. Instead of viewing China's global influence solely through the lens of authoritarian control, this project underscores the diversity of actors, ambitions, and innovative practices that characterize its vibrant media landscape. China's rise in contemporary global media is not a monolithic extension of state power; it is achieved through a network that—like any nation's cultural outreach—reflects the aspirations and agency of its people, moving out of the shadows and into a position of dynamic influence on the global world.

[187] Ivan Franceschini and Nicholas Loubere, *Global China as method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

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