

A Study of the Transnational Development of Chinese Art Cinema: The Production and Distribution Strategies of Jia Zhangke's Films

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to analyse the current distribution dilemma of Chinese cinematic art films in terms of the production and distribution strategies of Jia Zhangke's films. Jia Zhangke is a renowned sixth-generation Chinese director whose films have won numerous awards internationally, but have become non-mainstream in China. Most of his films could not be released in China mainland because of censorship policies. Through Jia Zhangke's films, this paper will analyse the transnational development trends of Chinese art cinema from multiple perspectives, including the distribution strategies of Chinese art cinema and Chinese art cinema and national film policies, in the context of China's national conditions and history.

Keywords: Jia Zhangke, Chinese film, art film, censorship policy, film festival, film distribution

1. Introduction

The purpose of this article is to discuss a new strategy for the survival of art film in the face of commercial cinema, in terms of the production and distribution strategies used for the film's of Jia Zhangke, and to attempt to challenge the analysis of the current challenges and new opportunities for the distribution of Chinese art films in the face of the thriving domestic commercial box office. Due to the high artistic value of Jia Zhangke's documentary style films, which express a strong humanistic sentiment, many scholars have studied his films, but less research has been conducted on the impact that the unconventional distribution of Jia's films may have on Chinese art cinema. Notably, while the Chinese film industry has seen rapid box office growth over the past decade, most research has been on commercial films with political and social relevance (Kwak & Zhang, 2011). Therefore, the focus of this article is not on the directorial approach, style or aesthetics of Jia Zhangke's films, but rather on the impact of his films' genre-appropriate distribution strategies and how aesthetic values are reflected in the promotional strategies for art films. The paper also argues that the distribution strategies of Jia Zhangke's films are closely related to the development of art cinema in China, and that although the development of art cinema has been controversial, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 slump, the challenges and opportunities of art cinema coexist in the post-epidemic era, which has driven the development of Chinese art cinema (Akser, 2020).

Jia Zhangke is a famous 'Sixth Generation Chinese Director' whose films have won numerous international awards, but have not found mainstream success in China (Nie, 2021). His films are imbued with a strong sense of the local, from *Pickpocket* (Jia Zhangke, 1997, CN) to *Ash Is Purest White* (Jia Zhangke, 2018, CN/FR/JP), from Fenyang, Shanxi Province, China to Cannes, France, Jia Zhangke uses his unique local themes and humanist concerns to profoundly convey the social impact on, and survival of, the underclass during China's rapid economic transformation (Gaetano, 2009). His various works paint a realistic picture of the lives of the Chinese working class over the past forty years of Reform and Opening Up. However, over the last forty years and, in particular, after the commercial film boom that followed *Hero* (Zhang Yimou, 2002, CN) in 2002, Chinese audiences have become more inclined towards 'Blockbusters' (Zhang, 2020), especially traditional

Chinese martial arts films and Chinese New Year comedies. In addition, ‘Main-Melody Films’, which have become popular in recent years and which meet the requirements of political propaganda, account for most ticket sales (Dai *et al.*, 2019). In other words, Jia Zhangke’s realist films have had a minor presence in the Chinese film industry, and are best described as niche.

An analysis of the transnational development trends of Chinese art cinema in multiple contexts, such as Chinese art theatres and national film policies, will help to reveal routes forward for the development of art cinema in China. The emergence of Jia Zhangke’s films triggered a boom in the creation of underground cinema in China. However, his films did not ideologically conform to national film policy, and therefore much of their content failed to pass the national film censorship system. Although Jia Zhangke made certain adjustments to bring *Mountains May Depart* (Jia Zhangke, 2015, CN/FR/JP) and *Ash Is Purest White* into commercial cinemas, the films did not achieve satisfactory box office results. This article will give examples of the distribution strategies of films that were not censored and were blocked early in Jia Zhangke’s twenty-year career, as well as the distribution of two films that were censored and released into commercial cinemas in the last decade. Both these films were entered into international film festivals and won numerous awards. This transnational development has also become crucial for the development of Chinese art cinema. In particular, a series of art films by young Chinese film directors have made a significant impact on the international stage in recent years. For example, *Kaili Blues* (Bi Gan, 2015, CN) and *Dwelling In The Fuchun Mountains* (Gu Xiaogang, 2019, CN), among others, have all found success in the international market. However, these Chinese art films still face a number of problems, such as being limited to small-scale screenings at film festivals and selling overseas copyrights, and these distribution strategies rarely generate sufficient returns for investors and are marginalised in the Chinese film industry.

2. The Commercial Failure of Jia Zhangke’s Films

Throughout Jia Zhangke’s twenty years of film-making, only a few of his films have passed film censorship and been released in mainland China. These films share the same serious distribution challenges as those of his films that did not pass censorship. This issue is caused by a variety of factors, such as film subject matter, censorship, return on investment and audience. As political aims put art and independent cinema at a competitive disadvantage with commercial and melodramatic cinema (Rosen, 2012), for Jia Zhangke’s films, which were positioned as underground and independent, this conservative perception of cinema as an ideologically important tool of political and cultural communication made these films, which expose social pathologies, extremely challenging (Feng, 2016). Furthermore, Johnson (2012) argues that film propaganda and censorship are inherently contradictory. Several of Jia Zhangke’s films have passed national film censorship but nonetheless still face a challenges in terms of both subject matter and reaching mainstream audiences.

The lack of box office appeal of Jia Zhangke’s films has much to do with genre. Early in Jia Zhangke’s career, only two of his films, namely *World* (Jia Zhangke, 2004, CN/FR/JP) and *Still Life* (Jia Zhangke, 2006, CN), were released in commercial cinemas. An example of social realism, *Still Life* explores the relocations caused by the Three Gorges Dam construction, telling the story of two ordinary people who travel from Shanxi to Chongqing in search of someone else. According to box office figures from ENDATE (2022), *Still Life* grossed only RMB16,800 in 2006; in contrast, the total box office in mainland China reached RMB 2.62 billion in 2006 (Daivs, 2010), with the top-ranked film *Curse of the Golden Flower* (Zhang Yimou, 2006, CN) grossing RMB 250 million and the second-ranked film *The Banquet* (Feng Xiaogang, 2006, CN) RMB 130 million (Chinadaily, 2007). Both were commercial masterpieces combining courtly themes with martial arts elements, and compared to their achievements at the box office, *Still Life* was a failure. The enormous success of *Hero*, a courtly martial film in 2002, which became a popular title in the post-millennium Chinese film market, has similar implications, with many scholars arguing that Chinese audiences seem to prefer blockbusters, action films or visually stunning foreign films (Bai, 2000; Guo, 2005; Kwak & Zhang, 2011). Such claims are well evidenced, with over 44% of audiences buying movie tickets to see “blockbusters” (Rosen, 2012). In contrast, Jia Zhangke’s *World* and *Still Life* are both realistic films, focusing on minor characters, with slow plots, and limited visual impact. Such films demand more from their audiences, resulting in audiences not enjoying these films. In addition, in the post-Reform and Opening era, which was characterised by rapid economic development and commercialism in China, investors focused on entertainment. As a result, although *Still Life* won many awards at international film festivals, it did not gain much popularity in mainland China.

From 2015 onwards, Jia Zhangke’s has explored commercial releases for his films, with the successive releases of *Mountains May Depart* and *Ash Is Purest White* earning strong word-of-mouth recognition. However, compared to Mainland China box office leaders *Monster Hunt* (Raman Hui, 2015, CN), which took in RMB 2.436 billion in 2015, and *Operation Red Sea* (Dante Lam, 2018, CN/MA), which took in RMB 3.652 billion in 2018, *Mountains May Depart* and *Ash Is Purest White* only took in RMB 32.21 million and RMB 69.95 million respectively (Maoyan Pro, 2022). While this is a strong result in the context of the Chinese art film box office, it

is insignificant in terms of the total box office of 44 billion RMB in 2015 and 60.9 billion RMB in 2018 in Mainland China (NBS, 2022). Since 2015, the melodrama genre has been particularly successful, with four of the top ten films in China's all-time box office leaders as of December 2022 belonging to this genre, and with the top-ranked *The Battle at Lake Changjin* (Kaige Chen, Dante Lam & Hark Tsui, 2021, CN) and *Wolf Warriors 2* (Wu Jing, 2017, CN) grossing 5.775 billion yuan and 5.694 billion yuan respectively (Maoyan Pro, 2022). In contrast, *Mountains May Depart* and *Ash Is Purest White* are films which retain Zhangke's trademarks, taking a realist perspective on the lives of insignificant people in the context of the changing times. These two art films, characterized by strong regional overtones and individualism, hardly resonated with mainstream audiences. Moreover, despite featuring high-profile actors such as Zhang Yi, Sylvia Chang and Liao Fan, the two films struggled to compete with the box office appeal of the popular stars.

The above data shows that the distribution challenges faced by Jia Zhangke's films are strongly influenced by genre, and lack of star power. Although audiences' decision to see a film are influenced by advertising, ratings and reviews (Wyatt & Badger, 1984), it is interesting to note that all four of Jia Zhangke's films have achieved strong word-of-mouth publicity and praise, but this has not translated into high box office revenues. According to IMDb (2022) and China's Douban.com (2022), the public releases of Jia Zhangke's films all scored at least seven out of ten. Feng (2017) points out that some films that underperformed at the box office received high ratings and positive reviews from audiences, but some of the lesser-rated commercial releases, such as *Tiny Times* (Guo Jingming, 2013, CN), with an IMDb rating of 3.2 (IMDb, 2022), quotas achieved significant box office success. It is noticeable that *Tiny Times* featured many of the most popular stars of the year, which was one of the key factors in its success at the box office. Moreover, the producers and distributors of Jia Zhangke's films, MK2 Productions, Xstream Pictures and Office Kitano, were not influential in Chinese commercial cinemas. Bona Film, Wanda Film, Huayi Brothers and China Film Group Corporation have become the mainstream producers and distributors of commercial films over the past decade. As a result of their dominance, Jia Zhangke's art films have been unable to compete with commercial blockbusters, from inception to realisation.

3. Censorship and Opportunity in Relation to Jia Zhangke's Films

Most of Jia Zhangke's films were never released in commercial cinemas or were banned by the censorship authorities, particularly early in his career. Johnson (2012) observes that censorship can lead to barriers in the way information is disseminated, preventing it from reaching a wider audience. Although China's market economy is gradually replacing the planned economy, and the Reform and Opening up have led to a certain relaxation of film production and distribution policies, with the inflow of overseas capital and the distribution and production of imported and exported films now being recognized by the state censorship system, the state still has strict restrictions on the import and export of films and cross-border collaborations. However, this continuing embargo did not prevent Jia Zhangke from reaching international audiences; rather, his films opened up new paths in transnational exchanges. He has strengthened the transnational spread of Chinese arthouse films by establishing close relationships with overseas investors and distributors (Johnson, 2012). The Japanese Office Kitano produced *Platform* (Jia Zhangke, 2000, CN/FR/JP), *Unknown Pleasures* (Jia Zhangke, 2002, CN/FR/JP/KR) and *A Touch Of Sin* (Jia Zhangke, 2013, CN/FR/JP), which were distributed by foreign companies such as Contact Film Cinematheek in the Netherlands, New Yorker Films in the United States and Ad Vitam Distribution in France (IMDb, 2022). These foreign production and distribution companies have thereby effectively brought Jia Zhangke's films to international audiences.

In addition, overseas box office revenue was part of the strategy for the release of Jia Zhangke's art films. Unlike other commercial releases, which achieved good results overseas as well as domestically, overseas box office success became the only significant source of income for Jia Zhangke's films, which were prevented from earning any box office revenue in mainland China. According to IMDb (2022), while *Unknown Pleasures*, which opened at the Cannes Film Festival, only grossed US\$55,000 overseas, *A Touch Of Sin* accumulated US\$854,000 in overseas box office sales. In addition, according to the European Audiovisual Observatory (2022), 11 of Jia Zhangke's films have grossed at the European box office, the most in Europe being €336,000 for *Still Life*. These early attempts at the overseas distribution of Jia Zhangke's films helped to facilitate the overseas release of *Mountains May Depart* and *Ash Is Purest White*, which were later released in Chinese commercial cinemas. *Mountains May Depart* took €219,000 at the European box office and \$82,000 at the North American box office, while *Ash Is Purest White* took €230,000 at the European box office and \$422,000 at the North American box office (European Audiovisual Observatory, 2022; IMDb, 2022). These figures show that Jia Zhangke's attempts at transnational distribution early in his career had some effect, particularly in opening up new paths for arthouse films that broke the 'political barriers' of the censors. However, these figures also show that Jia Zhangke's films still struggle to compete with commercial films overseas. *Operation Red Sea*, for example, grossed \$1.543 million at the North American box office (IMDb, 2022), but this relatively low amount was due to lack of recognition for Chinese melodramas among North American audiences. In contrast, *Hero*, which paved the way for other international commercial releases, grossed \$53.71 million in 2004 (IMDb, 2022). In the face of

commercial cinema, Jia Zhangke's art films remain in an awkward position.

Furthermore, another very important channel for transnational development is the international film festival. The festival itself is a centre of exchange, with an important transnational and social dimension (Jordanova, 2016). Such festivals have served as an alternative distribution route for Jia Zhangke's films, which have been blocked by state censors. Johnson (2012) points out that international film festivals facilitated the transnational development of Jia Zhangke's films. In fact, even early in Jia Zhangke's career, his films were regularly featured at major festivals. *Pickpocket* won the Netpac Award and the Wolfgang Staudte Award at the 48th Berlin Film Festival; *Still Life* won the Golden Lion at the 63rd Venice International Film Festival; *A Touch Of Sin* won Best Screenplay at the 66th Cannes Film Festival (Deppman, 2014); and his two most recent films released in Chinese commercial cinemas, *Mountains May Depart* and *Ash Is Purest White*, were both nominated in the main competition at Cannes. These awards not only prove the high artistic achievement of Jia Zhangke's films, but also show a particular form of globalisation has effectively supported the promotion the dissemination and development of his films internationally, and increased overseas interest in investing in Jia Zhangke's films. In addition, in 2017, Jia Zhangke founded the Pingyao Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon International Film Festival (PYIFF) in Shanxi, China, to showcase non-Western films, with the aim of increasing links between Chinese cinema and that of other developing countries. Normes (2019) argues that PYIFF has potentially influenced the future of art cinema in China. It has also contributed to the promotion of Chinese art cinema across borders, increasing the confidence of young Chinese directors to explore art cinema.

4. Censorship and the Distribution Challenges Faced by Chinese Art Films

The development of art cinema is an inherently controversial subject. Because art cinema is inherently individualistic (Bordwell, 1979), and niche values are difficult to reconcile with mainstream social values and ideological identities, art cinema has been isolated from both the audience's perspective and as a result of the censorship process. The Chinese government has imposed strict restrictions on the production and distribution of both Chinese and imported films (Park & Jung, 2005). Without official channels, these films cannot be released in cinemas (Liu, 2006). According to information from the China Film Administration (CFA, 2001):

Article 24 stipulates that no film shall be distributed, screened, imported or exported without having been censored by the film censorship body of the administrative department of radio, film and television under the State Council. Article 60 stipulates that if a foreign organization or individual independently engages in the filming of motion pictures within the territory of the People's Republic of China, the administrative department of radio, film and television under the State Council shall order the cessation of the illegal activities, confiscate the motion pictures filmed in violation of the law and the special tools and equipment used to carry out the illegal activities, and impose a fine of not less than RMB 300,000 and not more than RMB 500,000.

Moreover, the CFA specifies the penalties for unauthorised participation in international film festivals (CFA, 2001):

Article 61 stipulates that if a Chinese or foreign film exhibition or international film festival is held without approval, or if a film is provided for participation in overseas film exhibitions or film festivals without authorization, the administrative department of radio, film and television under the State Council shall order the cessation of the illegal activities and confiscate the films exhibited in violation of the law and the illegal income; if the illegal income is more than RMB 20,000, a fine of not less than 5 times the illegal income and not more than 10 times the illegal income shall be imposed; if there is no illegal income or the illegal income is less than RMB 20,000, a fine of not less than RMB 20,000 and not more than RMB 100,000 shall be imposed.

As can be seen from these regulations, the state censorship system has strict rules for independent filmmakers in terms of privately producing films and participation in international film festivals, which has put some low-budget independent filmmakers under pressure to create art films, leading to challenges with both production and distribution. A number of Sixth Generation Chinese Directors, such as Jia Zhangke, Lou Ye and Wang Xiaoshuai, have been banned from making films by the State Film Bureau for participating privately in international film festivals. This regulation was issued on 25 December 2001 and has not been amended or updated for twenty-one years. As a result, the development of art cinema in China is still at a difficult stage, especially for young filmmakers who need to make low-budget art films or independent films to make their mark. The explorations of social reality, and the criticism of social issues which these filmmakers make, do not conform to mainstream Chinese values, thus punished by the film censorship authorities. However, these challenges have stimulated the Chinese art film market as directors must innovate to find a way to achieve self-expression.

In 2016, the Nationwide Alliance of Arthouse Cinemas (NAAC) was established. It has since become an important influence on the development of art cinema in China, despite facing both restrictions on film imports and the ongoing disruption caused by online platforms (Purzycki, 2022). Ding and Zhang (2019) suggest that the

establishment of the NAAC was a major step forward for the development of art cinema in China, as it opened up a new model for the distribution of art films. The main aim of the NAAC is to ensure that its member cinemas are guaranteed a quota of 'art films', and the number of member cinemas has grown rapidly from the initial 170 to 3,100 (Purzycki, 2022). However, these efforts have not made a substantial difference to Chinese art cinema, as the so-called 'art film' quota has largely consisted of imported art films, and this is due to audiences' preferences. Statistics from Ding and Zhang (2019) show that only *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* (Martin McDonagh, 2017, UK/US) and *Manchester by the Sea* (Kenneth Lonergan, 2016, US) drew more than 10 audience members per screening, and that the attendance of domestic art films like *Old Beast* (Zhou Ziyang, 2017, CN) was so poor that many showings failed to break even. Furthermore, Eva Purzycki (2022) mentions that art films are often shot before a promotional and distribution strategy is developed, which prevents the NAAC from pinpointing audiences and gaining more ticket sales. Moreover, NAAC still censors art films before releasing them under the supervision of the state censorship system, which keeps the films of independent Chinese filmmakers on the fringes of the Chinese film industry.

5. Conclusion

In summary, although Jia Zhangke's films' lack of box office appeal is inextricably linked to film censorship and genre, they have opened up new paths for the transnational development of Chinese art cinema. The transnational development of Chinese art cinema has relied heavily on film festivals, because the economic benefits of box office and the political objectives of film officials forced art films that celebrated individual expression to find their own way (Rosen, 2012). Jia Zhangke's films have provided a new route for young Chinese filmmakers to explore the distribution of art films, in terms of both overseas festivals and commercial theatres. One avenue for distribution has been provided by the PYIFF's provision of a stage for young independent filmmakers to connect with the international scene, but their contribution to the Chinese film industry has been extremely limited, and the distribution dilemma faced by Chinese art films remains a topic meriting further in-depth study and analysis. Throughout the historical development of art cinema in Europe and America, Chinese art cinema did not find a route suitable for its own development. Lee and Stringer (2012) argue that the participation of Chinese films in international film festivals is of great importance in the history of Chinese cinema. Jia Zhangke's art films have represented the glory of Chinese cinema on the world stage, giving great confidence to young Chinese filmmakers, especially those working independently.

Chinese art films still need all kinds of support from social institutions. It is important to note that the existing data is not always clear and some of the statistics from the China Movie Database and the China Film Administration are not publicly available. According to Ding and Zhang (2019), China does not yet have comprehensive statistical data on film audiences. The NAAC could play a crucial role in this regard, providing data to support studies of the development of art films in China. Moreover, Chinese independent filmmakers can use film festivals and film festivals to seek support from production companies. Some domestic film festivals, such as FIRST International Film Festival and Hainan Island International Film Festival, or film festivals in other countries, such as Busan International Film Festival, provide financial support, which offers an important opportunity for art filmmakers to seek overseas capital to solve their distribution difficulties. Furthermore, short films are an effective option for art film directors. Although it is difficult for short films to enter theatres and earn revenue, their low cost and lack of censorship restrictions are significant advantages. In recent years, Chinese short film creators have won many international awards. For example, Bi Gan's early short film *Jingang Jing* (Bi Gan, 2012, CN) won the Special Mention Award at the 19th IFVA and the Grand Jury Prize at the 2014 Hong Kong Short Film and Video Festival, which laid the groundwork for his film *Kaili Blues*, which won the Golden Balloon Award for Best Film at the 37th Festival of the 3 Continents and the Silver Leopard Award for Best New Director in the Contemporary Filmmakers section of the 68th Locarno International Film Festival (Three Shadows, 2022). With these experiences, Bi Gan was able to secure a RMB 50 million investment for *Long Day's Journey Into Night* (Bi Gan, 2018, CN/FR; Chinanews, 2019). However, while these successes have sparked another 'new wave' of Chinese art cinema, it is nonetheless important to discuss how Chinese art cinema can survive the rapid development of China's economy, and digitalisation and globalisation more broadly, and whether new distribution channels for art cinema will emerge.

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