

# From State-Run Studios to Private Film Companies: An Analysis of the Changes in Film Reform in Mainland China in the 1990s

Ying Zhang

Film Academy of Shanghai Theatre Academy, Shanghai 20000, China.

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**Abstract:** In 2022, with the steady arrival of the post-epidemic era, the international film market gradually resumed production and consumption, but failed to completely compensate for the devastating blow to the film industry caused by the rampant epidemic in 2020. With the impact of the globalized economic downturn, national policy changes, and changes in film distribution media, the author intends to summarize the reform changes and experiences of mainland Chinese films in the 1990s, and analyze and summarize the exploration direction and breakthrough possibilities for mainland Chinese films in the post-epidemic era.

**Keywords:** 1990s Mainland Films; Institutional Changes; Market Structure

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## 1. Opening "doors" to welcome "market"

In the 1990s, China was going through an important period of social change, and for mainland Chinese cinema, this was also an important period of difficult exploration. Under the influence of reform and opening up, mainland Chinese films gradually opened the "door" of creation and the "door" of media, and embraced the two-way choice of production and the market, in response to the inevitable trend of transition from planned economy to market economy<sup>[11]</sup>.

In 1991, the common single ticket price of mainland Chinese movies was RMB 0.8-2.5, and in the same year, the total box office revenue of the mainland Chinese movie market was RMB 2.4 billion<sup>[12]</sup>, which was calculated to be nearly 14.4 billion viewers brought by less than 2,000 movie screens, far exceeding the ratio of screen attendance in the current domestic movie market. 1992, along with Deng Xiaoping's In 1992, along with Deng Xiaoping's "Southern Tour", China's economy gradually recovered, but the per capita consumption capacity and rising prices did not form a positive ratio, and the overheated economy caused a phase of inflation, with movie ticket prices entering the RMB 3-10 range in just 2 years (1991-1993), and the excessively rapid increase in movie ticket prices. The rapid increase of movie ticket prices further hindered the market-oriented consumption of local movies, and coupled with the relative cliché of local movie themes and artistic expressions and audience aesthetic fatigue, the movie market in mainland China fell into the predicament of a "waist-down" of box office revenues, and this near-collapse of the movie market caused by economic transformation also occurred in Hong Kong and This near-collapse of the film market caused by economic transformation also occurred in the film markets of Hong Kong and Taiwan.

Faced with the huge fluctuation of the film market in mainland China, in 1994, the state officially introduced Hollywood films to boost the Chinese film market and stimulate the creative competitiveness and enthusiasm of mainland films in the form of box office share. At the same time, under the influence of the "Southern Tour", the development of new and high technology spread along China's coastline, and China's Guangzhou Electronic Chip Factory produced the world's first Wanyan VCD player in 1993<sup>[13]</sup>, marking a shift in the distribution platform and media channels for mainland Chinese films from traditional theatrical channels to a more complex and diversified cross-media era. This cross-media copyright era was born in the 1990s in the Chinese mainland film market, and this revolution in film projection media has officially entered the world film market.

## 2. Enter the "door" with "meal"

In the 1990s, along with the deepening of reform and opening up and the deepening of the market economy, mainland Chinese

film studios also ushered in a period of great institutional reform, breaking through the cocoon of rebirth. The social edification and political propaganda functions of local films were also greatly surrendered in the inevitable course of their own transformation, and inspired the rise of co-productions, introducing new concepts of film creation and advanced production management experience in the context of globalization, and destined for the fifth and sixth generations of directors to break away from the limits of generational systems and start a new creative stylization and tendency to work individually.<sup>[14]</sup>

In early 1989, the first institutionalized reform of mainland China's film industry was kicked off at a film studio exchange meeting held at the Yuanwanglou Hotel in Beijing. The theme of the meeting was to boldly liberate the mind and advocate the co-existence of entertainment and commercialism in film. In December 1992, the Ministry of Radio, Film and Television convened a national conference on film work and announced for the first time "Document No. 3" - "Several Opinions on the Current Reform of the Film Industry Mechanism" and its "Implementation Rules", proposing that film production, distribution and projection enterprises must adapt to the socialist market economy system established by the 14th Party Congress. The official release of "Document No. 3" marks the change from the unified distribution of domestic feature films by China Film Corporation to direct meetings and cooperation between the production units and local distribution units, while the price of movie tickets should be liberalized in principle, the magnitude of liberalization and specific prices by local governments.

Along with the in-depth impact of the "No. 3 Document" on the reform of the film system in mainland China, production units have to face the market test head-on. Therefore, if local film studios continue to create "melodramatic" red-themed movies under the traditional concept, they will face the passive selection and abandonment caused by the perennial aesthetic fatigue of mainland Chinese film audiences, and thus encounter the disadvantage of elimination in the market competition. In the 1990s, the concept of film creation in mainland China shifted from the pursuit of recreating the artistic and aesthetic paradigm of the "tribute films" such as "Armageddon" (1991), "Heaven and Earth" (1991) and "Founding Ceremony" (1989) to the pursuit of more diversified and individualized creative themes and audiovisual system. For example, *Dragon Year Cops* (1991) attempts to unify the genre of detective film and police ode, showing for the first time the sexuality and authenticity of public security police officers, and *The Fire King Kong* (1991) attempts to unify the revolutionary heroic legend and gun battle genre, pursuing the ultimate audiovisual sensation to present patriotic heroic feelings. However, on the whole, the Chinese film studios after the reform of the market economy system failed to finally lead and call for the transformative development of mainland Chinese cinema in the 1990s, and most of the films were unable to enter directly into the competition of the mainland film market, which was oriented towards cultural and entertainment consumption. Since then, the Chinese film studio system has lagged behind in the race to reform China's socialist market economy, leaving much room for the birth and development of local private film production companies.

As a result, the film market in mainland China in the 1990s officially opened up its institutional, phased and instrumental conceptual shackles and forms of existence, shifted to a market-oriented tendency led by the aesthetic demands of the audience, and opened its "doors" to welcome the "market". In the first five-year plan (1994-1998) after the opening of the "doors" to the "market", a sincere invitation was formally extended to mainland Chinese film audiences seeking change. For a time, step into the cinema door, "enjoy" an audio-visual feast presented by the moving plot of the movie "meal", it has become a popular new standard of entertainment consumption.

### **3. Out of the "door" to watch "scenery"**

In the mid-to-late 1990s, the in-depth reform of mainland China's film studios and the rise of private film production companies, the emergence of a large number of high-quality Sino-foreign co-productions and the formation of the creative vision of the fifth and sixth generations of directors "working individually" marked the formal entry of mainland China's cinema into a period of reform, development and metamorphosis in the 1990s. Stable period. At that time, mainland Chinese filmmakers took the initiative to go out of the "door" to observe the "scenery" and learn from the "scenery", and the new concept of film creation was promising, which completely pushed the mainland Chinese film market into the world film market. The new concept of film creation has completely pushed the Chinese film market into the world film market.

In August 1979, the China Film Co-production Corporation was officially established, and mainland Chinese films officially

entered the era of co-production. With the emergence of co-productions in the Chinese mainland film market in spurts, a series of co-productions such as "Big City 1990", "Tears Of The Bridal Sedan", "Wonderful Soldiers of the River" and "Shaolin Dharma" performed well at the box office in 1990, and also at the political level and patriotic sentiment, the film cooperation between mainland China and the three places on both sides of the Taiwan Strait entered an unprecedented period of close cooperation. Of course, mainland Chinese filmmakers who experienced the painful period of reform of the state-owned film studio system in the 1990s also rediscovered and established their own artistic pursuit and stylization in the course of creating co-productions, led by the fifth generation directors. At the same time, it also led the sixth generation of directors to find the way of survival of Chinese mainland films, and formed the establishment of an aesthetic context.

The first to enter the international film arena and make a splash was the 90s Chinese mainland films, which used Chinese traditional "spectacle folklore" as a breakthrough theme. Zhang Yimou's "Ju Dou" and "Raise the red lantern" show the omnipresence of sexual repression and the struggle of human sexual instinct in Chinese folklore; Chen Kaige's "Farewell My Concubine" and "The assassin wants to assassinate the First Emperor" show the depth of compatibility, tolerance and righteousness of love across gender in Chinese folklore, opening up and broadening the audiovisual and aesthetic expectations of the international film market for Chinese traditional "spectacle folklore" films.

Secondly, the bold depiction of the survival of the little people at the bottom of society also became the focus of the collective creation of the fifth and sixth generations of directors in this period. Jia Zhangke's understanding of human nature in *Xiao Wu* and Huang Jianxin's humanistic concern in *Back to Back, Face to Face* have not only established the aesthetic tendency and subject matter choice of the stylized Chinese mainland film creation during this period, but also emerged a pioneering cinematic and audio-visual vocabulary that pursues more individuality and shows the big society by portraying the small people, establishing the "small see big" approach. "The bold attempts of mapping life during the period of social change and breaking through group depiction to confront the traditional grand narrative can be said to have subversively rebuilt the aesthetic pursuit of Chinese mainland films in the 1990s.

## 4. Conclusion

In the 1990s, changes in mainland China's cinema began with the opening of the "door" to welcome the "market" in the face of inevitable reform, followed by the selection of market-oriented competition to welcome audiences to the "door" for "meals", and finally the enlightenment and renewal of filmmakers' creative concepts to accompany Chinese films out of the "door" to view the "scenery". The bold, daring, sensitive and profound discernment and artistic creativity of Chinese filmmakers, with the help of the post-modern and globalized context of the times, have gradually extracted and burst out a new aesthetic paradigm of national cinema. From this point on, private capital was formally introduced into the revenue-generating entertainment and art industry with film as the main investment and financing, completely breaking the director-centered model inherited from the Soviet Union's political functionality in China's traditional film industry, which has had a profound impact on the landscape of China's film industry to this day.

Know the way to come, know the way to go.

The change of mainland Chinese cinema in the 1990s is an inevitable path of development to meet the centenary of the birth of cinema, and a necessary path for Chinese cinema to step into the world cinema pattern.

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