

## **A State-led Chinese Cinema: Low-quality Chinese Films in Relation to Censorship**

Both the public and the major media outlets such as People's Daily have pointed out that the quality of most of the postmodern Chinese films has taken a downturn in quality compared to their predecessors in the late 20th century<sup>1</sup>. One would probably expect a higher standard of quality from Chinese films given that the transnational status Chinese cinema has always held would catalyze higher levels of filmmaking among Chinese filmmakers. However, it is important to note that transnationality in the context of Chinese cinema carries distinct dynamics. Meanwhile, Chinese cinema is under extreme censorship imposed by the Chinese Communist Party, which may have been one of the causes for the decreasing quality because the scope of topics and artistic expression allowed in Chinese films are severely limited. This paper seeks to examine the quality of several Chinese blockbusters and provides a context in which the filmmaking landscape is influenced by the state censorship.

Chinese cinema remained rather inactive and close-bordered for much of the 20th century compared to what was transpiring in the Western hemisphere. It was not until the Open Door Policy set forward by Deng Xiaopin and the pace of globalization gained momentum that Chinese cinema started to blossom, producing films that made global appearances, winning international awards, and importing large flows of foreign movies at the same time. Berry has set forth the concept of Sinosphere cinema, arguing that Chinese cinema is not to be viewed as a homogeneous totality, but rather a diverse combination of

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<sup>1</sup> Ryan Fergus, "Chinese Media Blames Spate of Poor Quality Films for Flagging Box Office |," [chinafilm insider.com](http://chinafilm insider.com), 2016.

four categories: 1) foreign films produced overseas and directed by directors of non-Chinese descent, 2) Chinese-made films that are not based on Mandarin, such as films in Cantonese and Minnanhua, 3) overseas films directed by Chinese directors, 4) the quintessential Chinese films featuring ethnic Chinese and is in Mandarin<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, Chinese cinema is such a broad term that does not necessitate that Chinese films are always Mandarin-speaking and starring ethnic Chinese. It is to be mindful that the postmodern Chinese films in this paper refer to the films that are directed by Chinese nationals and in Mandarin so as to not discredit high-quality, award-winning Chinese films.

The claim that modern Chinese films, mainly those made from 2005 and up until now, are low quality is not groundless. Numerous media outlets as well as the public have expressed such views<sup>34</sup>. Some of the quintessential examples of low-quality modern Chinese films include the *Tiny Times* series by Guo Jingming, *Snow Girl* and the *Dark Crystal*, and the *Wolf Warrior* series by Wu JIn, all of which generated over nine figures of box office revenue in yuan since their appearance. Although film appreciation is relatively a subjective matter, it may be safe for us to rate certain movies as low-quality because of the detrimental effects of the ideological and moral connotations they have on the public, especially when there are similar voices suggesting the same. Together, the aforementioned examples of modern Chinese films demonstrate the so-called “fan economy” and a leaning toward

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<sup>2</sup> Chris Berry, “What Is Transnational Chinese Cinema Today? Or, Welcome to the Sinosphere,” *Transnational Screens* 12, no. 3 (September 2, 2021): 183–98.

<sup>3</sup> Ryan Fergus, “Chinese Media Blames Spate of Poor Quality Films for Flagging Box Office |,” [chinafilm insider.com](http://chinafilm insider.com), 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Clifford Coonan, “Chinese Films, TV Shows Lack Quality, Says Regulator,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, November 19, 2014.

imitation of Hollywood movies in Chinese cinema, potentially reflecting the level of film appreciation among mainland Chinese audiences, as the renowned Chinese director Feng Xiaogang remarked that “crap movie suits crap audience”<sup>5</sup>, and how Chinese films are leashed and censored by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

Tiny Times series, films adapted from Guo’s novel of the same name, follow the life trajectory of four upper-class young Chinese females in Shanghai. The extravagant lifestyle and the occasional sexual themes made the movie devoid of any far-reaching or enduring cultural or social significance. It has been regarded as the Chinese version of “Gossip Girl” and “Sex and the City”<sup>6</sup>. Despite their corny display of wealth and the maximalist style of directing, the series still grossed more than 300 million dollars since its inception. Given that the movies’ audience is largely composed of fans of Guo and the crew<sup>7</sup>, the success of the Tiny Times reflects the fan economy in which the commercial success of entertainment industry is dictated by the image promotion and status of the producers and actors as opposed to the quality of the production itself <sup>8</sup>. Chinese youth born after the 1990s, the major audience of Tiny Times and fans of Guo, are able to project their materialistic fantasy onto the movie, though the materialism portrayed in the movie stands in stark contrast to the average salary among Chinese youth born after the 1990s, which is below \$1000 a month<sup>8</sup>, making the film’s value promotion more of an illusion for the majority of youth audience.

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<sup>5</sup> Clifford Coonan, “China’s Feng Xiaogang Calls Critics of Latest Film ‘Cultural Nazis,’” *The Hollywood Reporter*, December 30, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Tom Brook, “Tiny Times: China’s Sex and the City?,” [www.bbc.com](http://www.bbc.com), 2014.

<sup>7</sup> Nan Wu, “‘Shallow’ Chinese Movie Tiny Times Rouses Critics and Fans of Writer Guo Jingming,” *South China Morning Post*, July 6, 2013.

<sup>8</sup> C. Textor, “China: Average Monthly Income 2017 by Generation,” *Statista*, 2020.

Aside from the display of fan economy and unrealistic nor healthy wealth fantasy in the case of *Tiny Times*, the interspersed use of English words and Western luxury brand-infused scenes further show how much of an influence westernization has had on Chinese films.

Another attribute that dominates Chinese cinema yet reflects low-quality filmmaking practices is the overuse of poor CGI. This can be seen in movies like *The Snow Girl* and the *Dark Crystal* directed by Peter Pau and Tianyu Zhao and *L.O.R.D: Legend of Ravaging Dynasties* by Guo. Critics have bombarded the two's unrealistic, almost "laughable" visual effects<sup>9</sup>. It is not that low-quality CGI is non-existent in movies produced in other countries. In fact, even the U.S.-produced movies have their fair share of low-quality CGI<sup>10</sup>. It is just that the robust visual effects in Chinese films are not in proportion to their budget and box office revenue. Guo's *L.O.R.D: Legend of Ravaging Dynasties* by Guo has a budget of \$110 million, but its visual effect is really in the same league as those low-quality online video games that randomly pop up when people browse the Internet. Critics have indeed compared the trailer of the movie to "pop-up ads for online games that plague" Chinese streaming sites<sup>11</sup>. There are certainly Chinese films that possess great visual effects out there, one being *The Wandering Earth*, a film that secured critical acclaim for its breakthrough visual effects<sup>12</sup>. Nonetheless, such Chinese films remain scarce.

Notably, modern Chinese films have a leaning towards imitating Hollywood style. The *Wolf Warrior I and II* by Wu Jin are quintessential examples of this leaning. Featuring a bad tempered, bullet-proof, lonely ex-special forces soldier named Leng Feng (literally translated

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<sup>9</sup> Jiayun Feng, "China's First CGI Film: L.O.R.D It Looks Bad," #SixthTone, 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Luc Haasbroek, "10 Good Movies Ruined by Bad CGI, according to Reddit," Collider, September 12, 2023.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Xueting Christine Ni, "The Wandering Earth and China's Sci-Fi Heritage," *BBC News*, April 28, 2019.

to Cold Blade), Wolf Warrior I tells a story of how Feng fought back a group of American Navy Seal-led mercenaries and eventually killed the leader, an ex-Navy Seal named Tom Cat. In Wolf Warrior II, the villain is still an American national, only this time, his name was “Big Daddy”, the finest macho American name. Generating \$89.9 million and \$874 million respectively, the blockbuster series bears close resemblance to the adrenaline-infused mise-en-scene and tough guy narrative of Hollywood movies. Some have described it as being similar to Rambo movies<sup>13</sup>. Interestingly, although the director Wu Jin himself seemed determined to construct an image of a Chinese superhero, denying its association with Hollywood films, his comment in an interview speaks for the influential role that Hollywood has had on the global film industry, including his own creation of Wolf Warrior. When asked what he thinks of the comments regarding the unrealistic heroism portrayed in Wolf Warrior, Wu remarked: “Well, Americans can do it, they can be bulletproof and single-handedly fight multiple opponents at a time, why not us Chinese?”<sup>14</sup>. Given that the original comment that sparked Wu’s response did not mention America at all, it sort of shows how Wu has internalized the benchmark role and the influence that Hollywood has on the global film industry.

So far, this paper may have been off-putting to some, especially given its relatively subject ‘rant’ on the quality of Chinese films. Therefore, the following sections are dedicated to discussing a more prominent theme, that is, how has the CCP influenced Chinese cinema.

First and foremost, despite the fact that Chinese cinema has always been transnational in nature wherein foreign films inundate the domestic market, Chinese business tycoons acquire

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>14</sup> Viola Zhou, “This Guy Is China’s Answer to Captain America,” Vice, December 14, 2021.

cinema business overseas, and even Hollywood has tailored its practices to cater to the Chinese market, its biggest customer, much of how Chinese cinema operates is controlled by the CCP. To put it into perspective, CCP has set up the China Film Association under the Publicity Department to keep a close eye as well as a leash on Chinese films. Following Xi Jinping coming to power in 2012, the censorship has even tightened more, banning sensitive topics including those tainting the image of CCP and China altogether<sup>15</sup>. It is also worth a moment's attention that censorship practices are not clearly defined either, meaning that what is to be censored or not ultimately depends on the decision of the China Film Association, which is oftentimes arbitrary. Such practice is not only directed toward the film industry but also in terms of the social narratives regarding Xi and the government, and such practice is so strict that when you search for anything spoken against CCP in China on the Internet, nothing returns. Moreover, CCP has shown its determination to make globalization, specifically the "going out" policy, a state-led movement. This can be seen in cases where the Chinese business tycoon Wanda Media Group attempted to acquire cinematic businesses overseas but was forced to withdraw due to pressure from CCP<sup>16</sup>. When you have these leashes from the government, the creativity and the scope of the topics that Chinese films are able to address are ultimately limited, thus decreasing the overall quality because great movies often tackle controversial issues and sensitive topics.

Perhaps the best way to put it is Berry's categorization of two models: one is the state-led development in China; the other is market-driven advancement in countries like the

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<sup>15</sup> Siying Bai, "Recent Developments in the Chinese Film Censorship System," 2013.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 2.

U.S.<sup>17</sup> What you get from the omnipotent state censorship is the overly repetitive appearance of themes like patriotism, anti-Americanism, anti-colonialism, and other major historical narratives embedded in Chinese history, as can be seen in Wu's Wolf Warrior movies where the eternal nemesis of the Chinese superhero Leng Feng is some American villain with military background. Another example showcasing similar patriotism is the inundation of Chinese films and television programs that feature the Second sino-Japanese war, a genre termed as anti-Japanese war drama in China<sup>18</sup>. It is estimated that over 200 anti-Japanese war dramas were produced in the year alone<sup>19</sup>. The producers of these programs, despite the often ludicrous plot within their work, get more recognition and exposure, making it to various local TV stations by playing safe according to what CCP promotes and wants, despite the public is tired of these war dramas. Besides, CCP has this unusual infatuation with the country's history and culture, especially the part where it helped unite the modern day China. This can be seen from the prevalence of films and TV programs that praise the CCP and its leaders as well as those centered on Chinese history, culture, and ideologies. Meanwhile, the portrayal of foreign culture and history are scarce or inaccurate at best. Therefore, the CCP and the state-led Chinese cinema is to a large extent ethnocentric, nationalist, and propaganda-driven.

Adhering to the CCP censorship standard is a must for producers and directors who want their work to be seen on screen in the domestic market. This in turn limits the scope of topics

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Jemimah Steinfeld, "Screened Shots: The Chinese Film Industry's Obsession with Portraying Japan's Invasion during World War II," *Index on Censorship* 44, no. 1 (March 2015): 103–6.

<sup>19</sup> Ernest Kao, "State Broadcaster CCTV Slams Anti-Japanese War Dramas," *South China Morning Post*, April 11, 2013.

a film can address and the artistic expression used in the film<sup>20</sup>, which certainly has forced certain if not all filmmakers to choose to play safe instead of producing work that truly echoes their filmmaking and artistic persona. As a result, instead of making films that are going to be severely cut or completely banned, Chinese filmmakers might as well choose themes that echo the dominant narratives that the CCP promotes, catering to a tightly regulated market in a politically correct way, which almost feels flattery at times. Given that Chinese filmmakers' freedom and reputation are completely at the hands of the CCP, as can be seen in the arrest and persecution of filmmakers tackling sensitive topics, the playing safe act among filmmakers is insofar justified. Interestingly, the Chinese public also seems to possess this strong nationalistic and patriotic tendency, so much so that when Wolf Warrior's director Wu made an online post using Apple's product, he was ridiculed and called out by Chinese netizens for being a traitor to both his movie and the country<sup>21</sup>.

It is expected that some ramifications of transnational cinema would be broader narrative and themes, more experimentation of genres, the mixture of local and exotic filmmaking practices, and ultimately a more inclusive and diverse cinema. However, globalization has not democratized Chinese cinema. Chinese cinema has remained monotonous under the influence of state-led globalization and strict censorship. This has also impacted how outsiders view films made by the Chinese diaspora. Chloe Zhao's *Nomadland*, though not carrying a political overtone nor addressing dominant narratives promoted by the CCP, still

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<sup>20</sup> Sarah Rodes, "Cinema and Censorship: Artistic Limitations in Chinese Cinema Cinema and Censorship: Artistic Limitations in Chinese Cinema," December 9, 2022.

<sup>21</sup> Ilsa Chan, "Chinese Actor & National Hero Wu Jing Slammed by Netizens for Being an iPhone User," TODAY, 2021.



has been viewed by some as something that has a ‘Chinese side’, that is, the avoidance of discussing sensitive topics such as race, labor, and partisan politics<sup>22</sup>. Zhao has mentioned in her speech how she grew up surrounded by lies in China, which resulted in the censoring of her Oscar Award in mainland China<sup>23</sup>. Ironically, Zhao has also gone to great lengths throwing in Chinese culture and history in her Oscar speech<sup>24</sup>. These three facts combined just show how far-reaching the CCP influence is and how infamous the CCP-led Chinese cinema has become globally.

In conclusion, it is perhaps the time for the CCP to take a step back and allow greater freedom of artistic expression in Chinese cinema. Patriotism and nationalism are not inherently negative, but when they are over-promoted, the results are distorted, awkward artworks that do not seem genuine and can be toxic to the public.

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<sup>22</sup> Gina Marchetti, “Chloé Zhao and China: The Nomadland Moment,” *Film Quarterly*, April 28, 2021.

<sup>23</sup> Amy Qin and Amy Chang Chien, “In China, a Backlash against the Chinese-Born Director of ‘Nomadland,’” *The New York Times*, March 6, 2021, sec. World.

<sup>24</sup> Aynne Kokas and Jeffrey Wasserstrom, “China-Born Chloe Zhao Sought Common Ground in Oscars Speech,” *Nikkei Asia*, 2021.

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