

Deciphering the Commercial Miracle: The Research on the Marketing and Distribution Process of Chinese Youth Films after 2010s

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Abstract. Youth Films (qingchunpian), which are characterized by nostalgia and coming-to-age narratives, expanded its influence after 2010s in Chinese film market. The considerable profits of youth films derived from low budget and substantial box office returns. Compared to main melody films (zhuxuanlv) and traditional comedies which are supported by the government and own large amounts of budget, the commercial success of youth films is unique in Chinese film industry. Although there is existing research on the entire trend of Chinese film market and content analysis of youth films, the internal logic and marketization process remain opaque. Exploring the marketization process of youth films and the reasons of their success can help in understanding the new trend in Chinese film industry in which how films with low budget can live. Therefore, the research conducts an interview of industry insiders to visualize the backstory of distribution process. After demonstrating the interview and analyzing the existing statistical data, the research argues that three factors affecting success of youth films (and those new rising film genres in China) are: the time to release the film, the integration of marketing and distribution companies, and the use of IP (development of existing IP and marketizing IP through use of theme songs).

1. Introduction

Starting from the 2010s, there has been an upsurge of youth films (qingchunpian) in the Chinese film market. *You Are the Apple of My Eye* (2011), shot in Taiwan, led the trend and grossed \$24.5 million. Compared to the considerable box office return, the official-released budget was \$1.7 million. The relatively low production cost was because youth films mostly framed the campus, tracing back the characters' growing-up journey. The market acceptance and substantial profits soon appealed to directors from mainland China. Zhao Wei's debut, *So Young* (2013), was an outstanding case, which gained \$118 million (No.3 at the box office in 2013 in mainland China).

In the following year, youth films ascended to one central pillar of the Chinese film market. Han Han's debut, *The Continent* (2014) grossed \$100 million and ranked No.10 at the box office in mainland China that year. Other youth films that entered into Top 20 box office in 2014 included *Fleet of Time* (2014), *Tiny Times 3* (2014), and *My Old Classmate* (2014). In other words, 20% highest grossing films in 2014 were youth films. The left 80% of top-grossing films were divided up into comedy, martial arts films, main melody films (zhuxuanlv), or imported blockbuster films. In other words, youth films have become one profitable genre film in the Chinese film market.

While other top-grossing genre films mostly required big-budget production and utilized the grand production scale to draw moviegoers' attention, youth films with low budgets can be an avenue for new rising directors to live. An increasing number of amateur directors started to flush into the film industry. Han Han was one example who previously worked as a writer and later transitioned to a director. Singer and actor Alec Su also produced his debut, *The Left Ear* (2015), which was a youth film and earned \$77.91 million.

However, the relatively unprofessional production team and an increasing number of homogenous coming-of-age narratives caused the market acceptance of youth films soon reached a bottleneck period. (The general narrative structure of youth films would split the film into two parts: the first part would be a reminiscence of characters' campus life, and the second part would be the cruel reality after entering the workplace. The core of storyline mostly would be a nostalgia of pure relationship on campus with the confusion after facing the reality.) Admittedly, films, such as *The Left Ear*, *Tiny Times 4.0* (2015), *Forever Young* (2015), and *Our Times* (2015) still gained box office return at an average level from \$40 to \$80 million. Compared to the stagnated revenue of youth films, the total box office Chinese film market rises from \$4.2 billion in 2014 to \$6.3 billion in 2015, rising nearly 50%. To put it simply, youth films lost its previous market share in 2015. If filmmakers would want gain profit from making youth

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films, they need to evolve to change in the coming-of-age narrative grounding.

René Liu's *Us and Them* (2018) that grossed \$209 million seemed to open up another era of youth filmmaking. Later, *Better Days* (2019) harvested both profits and praise. (Before that, youth films were tended to be labeled as bad movies due to the jejune plot.) The box office of *Better Days* was \$230 million and the film was chosen as the official entry for Hong Kong at the 93rd Academy Awards. *Better Days* (2019) focused on not only the campus life (the pressure Chinese students faced before the college entrance exam) but also highlighted the trauma caused by school bullying. In other words, the plot of youth films started to expand, deviating from only nostalgia and centering more on realistic themes.

The expansion of youth films' themes also enlarged the target audience. In the primary stage of youth films' development, the target audience mainly consisted of moviegoers in 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, since the campus life was a reconstruction of their memory. With the rise of contemporary thematic pursue, an increasing number of younger generation (Z-generation) has been attracted to youth films. Even during global pandemic period (2019-2022), youth films kept an impressive market position. Youth films (qingchunpian) with commercial success during this period included *The End of Endless Love* (2020) with grossing \$42 million, *Upcoming Summer* (2021) with grossing \$50 million, *Love Will Tear Us Apart* (2021) with grossing \$56 million, and *My Blue Summer* (2022) with grossing \$19 million.

Notably, the overall box office returns from mainland China decreased from \$9.2 billion to \$2.9 billion, shrinking more than 3 times. Although the temporary relief of government policy in 2021 revived the film industry and the total box office returns was \$6.7 billion, the tightened policy of moviegoing in 2022 caused the entire grossing slided to \$4.3 billion. Most filmmakers during this period commented that the situation of Chinese film market has fallen down to an all-time low point. Large amount of market share was taken up by main melody films that were supported by the government. In other words, the survival of youth films was difficult and the increasingly mature release and publish system contributed to this market success.

2.Literature review

Accompanying with the enlargement of the overall Chinese film industry and increasing number of moviegoers, the film marketing, release, and publishing process become more and more mature and systematic. Therefore, scholars in film studies started to analyze the marketing and exhibition process, instead of only focusing on film content. Leung Wing-Fai and Sangjoon Lee utilized statistics in 2018 to prove the booming film market in China, explaining that China's box office \$8.9 in receipts at that year second only to North America's \$11.38 billion. According to them, the rapid growth of Chinese film market later attracted scholars to seriously

study Chinese film industry in English-language academic circle, whereas one major difficulty to update relative research is to keep pace with the fast changing and ambiguous state policy [1]. Owing to the special economic policies China has (market economy with Chinese characteristics), the film industry could operate as a profit-driven market but need to cling to national priorities of state control both industrially and culturally.

Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh and Darrell Willaim Davis made a case study of China Film Group (CFG) to illustrate the paradoxical issue Chinese film industry faced while marketizing a film [2]. On the one hand, CFG, as the largest media conglomerate, is the most powerful and effective leading enterprise in the country. On the other hand, it is responsible for carrying out state policy, including propaganda functions, cultivation of markets and co-production development. According to Yeh and Davis, it is in this dual capacity that discerning the tension and dialectics between marketization and protectionism of the national film industry [2]. The legacy issue is that the new and small businesses were hard to enter the film industry, which was controlled by a state-controlled leading enterprise, resulting in the inactive competition and less space for free market.

Prior studies have shown that marketing efforts, distribution networks, and audience participation are crucial to a film's success in China. According to Wang Xiaomei, product, pricing, venue, and advertising are four of the most important factors in determining whether an audience chooses to watch Chinese films [3]. However, owing to the unique market situation of Chinese film industry (the dilemma between free market and central control), the most effective marketing and distribution strategies to release films (especially for those who are new to the industries) still remain opaque.

In addition to the research on the overall industry, there were also content analysis on youth films. Cai Shenshen traced the youth discourse in the history of Chinese film industry, contending that youth has been a common theme also in works of Fifth Generation directors and functioned as a way to protest against the lack of freedom in socialist China [4]. Following the fifth generation directors, sixth generation directors also make effective use of youth. Youth with the pure and rebellious nature of that age period, becoming the escaping avenue for consumers. Youth films allow the consumers to revisit their collective nostalgia of sweet campus life and forget the cruel reality for a while.

Nevertheless, the consistent commercial success of youth films could not only attribute to the nostalgic emotions of consumers. Youth films' business success largely depends on a systematic inner logic of marketization, distribution, and exhibition. As more and more companies in Chinese film began to integrate and unite the marketization and distribution process (xuan fa yi ti), analyzing the marketization and distribution process of youth films can be a case study reflecting the contemporary Chinese film industry's working mode. The research also aims to forecast the trend of film market after the pandemic period. Because of the unique characteristics of marketization and distribution process

in film industry (in which some statistics are not public available), the research will study the marketization and distribution process of youth films in China after 2010s through interviews of industry insiders in order to analyze and predict the development of Chinese film market.

3. Methodology

In the way of convenience sampling, the research firstly targets to 10 interviewees working in film marketing and distribution companies. Half of the interviewees worked in the industry for over 10 years. In order to get an understanding of the entire marketing and distribution processes, the research targets 4 interviewees from Beijing working in the marketing department, 4 interviewees from Beijing working in the distribution department, and 2 interviewees from Zhengzhou from the theatre circuit (yuan xian) working for the exhibition. Eight interviewees participated in at least one youth film's marketing, distributing, and exhibiting process.

The average interview duration was from 15 to 30 minutes. The interview questions always started from collecting the basic information, such as the specific department they work for, the years of working, and the prior projects they worked for. (The research focused on projects with high grossing. Typically, the film professionals would label the films with high qualities as "S-level" project in China. The characteristics of "S-level" projects include professional staffs, the existing IP, and relatively more budget compared with the same genre.) The follow-up questions would expand from the projects interviewees work for and dig the details. The final analysis results derive from their common comment with support of statistical data.

4. Results

According to the interviewees working for marketing and distribution departments, the time to release a film would hugely influence the box office performance in Chinese film industry. Scholar Lu Yi asserts that most other big-budget Chinese blockbusters have used wide release as a distribution pattern and relied on first-week box-office performance [5]. Lu's statement is based on the public available data, and the trend of relying on first-week box-office return is still obvious in recent years. For instance, blockbuster *The Wandering Earth* (2019) grossed nearly \$0.3 billion in the first week after being released, accounting for approximately 40 percent of the total grossing. The entire box office return of it was \$0.7 billion. The majority of the blockbusters in China followed the similar trend as *The Wandering Earth*.

The importance of first-week box-office performance is also proved by interviewees who work for the distribution process. Therefore, the time to release a film in China is one of the most critical decision distributors would consider before taking actions. Based on feedbacks collected from interviewees, insiders in Chinese film industry characterize several golden times

(huangjin dangqi) to release a film, which are Chinese New Year, National Day (7 days nationwide holiday), Summer Holiday period (July and August), May Day (3 days nationwide holiday), and other holidays or weekends. The order here is from the best ones to the less great ones. Chinese New Year serve as the best period to release, since the general audience are all available. Even people who are not used to go to theatres would probably buy a ticket.

Selecting the appropriate time period to release a film would lead to commercial success. The top grossing films until 2023 in mainland Chinese film market all released during the so-called golden times to release a film: *The Battle at Lake Changjin* (2019, released during National Day holiday, No.1 in top grossing films), *Hi, Mom* (2021, released in Chinese New Year, No. 2 in top grossing films), and *Detective Chinatown 3* (2021, released in Chinese New Year, No. 3 in top grossing films). However, interviewees generally view the youth films are not suitable for Chinese New Year or National Day holiday to release. There are three reasons. Firstly, these two periods are usually controlled by the government. It is hard to get permission to release during these periods. (In order to protect the domestic production, periods with the most consumers would leave for big-budget comedies or main melody films.) Secondly, the themes of youth films (nostalgia, rebellion, romance, and friendship) are not suitable for the festival vibes. If releasing during such time period and competing with large-budget films, the box office performance would probably not as good as releasing in other period. Thirdly, competing with large-budget films means to push production team to invest more on marketing and distribution process (more input on advertisements and derivatives). In other words, while releasing youth films (especially debut with low budget), the distribution team needs to consider a balance between effectiveness and base number of audience available.

To be more specific, each golden time period connotes different audience characteristics. Youth films, which target young adults and the teenagers, are usually released during the summer holidays. For instance, *Tiny Times* series all released in June, July, and August. Although *Tiny Times* Compared to that, youth films highlighting nostalgia, aiming to reach audience born in 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, often released during May Day holidays. *So Young* (2013), *My Old Classmates* (2014), *The Left Ear* (2015), and *Us and Them* (2018) all chose to release during May Day holidays. Some other youth films with romantic theme might choose Christmas or other holidays for couples to date to publish their films.

Besides, interviewees from both marketing and distribution departments claim that the integration and cooperation of marketing and distribution are significant. To be more specific, in the previous years, the majority of film publishing companies specialize in either marketing process or the distribution process. The split of two departments induced obstacles to communication. For instance, while designing the marketing and

distribution strategies of *Love Will Tear Us Apart* (2021), the distributors decided to release this film in days with romantic connotations. This is because *Love Will Tear Us Apart* (2021) tells the twisted love story of the girl Ling Yiyao and the boy Lv Qingyang. They meet in high school and share a very pure and deep relationship with each other. However, the sincere love of the couple is consistently challenged by the cruel reality, such as the montage, the difficulty to find jobs, and the pressure to get married. It is a contemporary common issue in China, particularly for young couple. Director Sha Mo of this film explains later in one interview that the love story in this film also reflect some struggles he faced with his lover while he was young. The final publishing date of the film is on May 20th, 2019. Since 520 is a metaphor for “I Love You” in Chinese, couples would probably choose to watch this love story together. After confirming the publication date, marketing department needs to formulate an applicable and effective rhythm to release their materials, such as trailers, behind-the-scenes footage, and interviews of production team. If two departments did not collaborate closely, either marketing department or distribution team could not react in time to cope with emergencies. For example, if distribution team notices the backstage data of active consumers inclining to watch films does not meet the expectations, the marketing team could not react in time and adjust marketing strategies in the case they do not work closely together. Therefore, interviewees explain that the integration of marketing and distribution (xuan fa yi ti) can become a trend later in the Chinese film industry.

The expected integration does not only restrict in marketing and distribution. Interviewees explain that distribution companies nowadays in China pursue improvements (or changes) under the unchanging policies. They view the distribution as a central point linking production and exhibition. Therefore, distribution companies also seek to initiate their projects from script development. While exploring the potential script, the distributors usually aim at works with IP. For instance, Xiao Ying argues that youth films that address youthfulness under the digital turn in the 2010s in China complicated and intersected with a new category of IP film [6]. The representative youth films after 2010s, such as *So Young* (2013), *Tiny Times* series, and *Us and Them*, all took advantage of IP. Typically, “IP” in China means the original works have already accumulated existing fans. *So Young* (2013) and *Tiny Times* series were adapted from best-selling novels. Similar cases of youth films adapted from existing best-selling novels include *Fleet of Time* (2014) and *The Left Ear* (2015). *Us and Them*, on the other hand, benefited from director René Liu’s song Hou Lai. (Before entering film industry, René Liu has already amassed certain amounts of fans as a singer. Her most famous song Hou Lai, later used as the theme song of *Us and Them*, promoted the nostalgia among the audience.)

René Liu’s success represented a trend in Chinese film marketing process, especially youth films, as explained by interviewees. Not only does René Liu makes effective use of her unique IP and personal

influence, but also she marketed her film with the aid of theme songs to promote the nostalgia emotions among the audience. Using theme song to promote films was not a new invented method after 2010s. The first film using a theme song as a marketing strategy in China was *Wild Flower* (1930). At that time, there was a slogan in China called “the union of sight and sound” (shengse lianyin) [7]. “Sheng” means “sound” in Chinese. “Se,” which directly referred to “eroticism,” could also be understood as “images” here. “Lianyin,” means a marriage. In other words, “the union of sight and sound” represented a pursuit after the invention of sound – to unite the scenes and the soundtrack together. Theme songs, therefore, played a significant role in exploring using sound in films. Scholar Zhang Zhen explains one critical reason why using theme song can be useful in film marketing process that the songs can break the barrier between public and private places [7]. In 1930s, the audience could not bring the movie screen back home, whereas they could practice the theme song in their own places. Therefore, the theme song could carry the cinematic texts, lingering in the audience’s memories.

In 2010s, the “union of sight and sound” in China gradually developed as a binding relationship between film and music industry, instead of only a bond between images and soundtrack. The new music streaming services and portable music devices influenced such a transformation. Founded in 2005, QQ Music’s market share among Mainland China’s music platforms increased to 75% by 2018. Chinese users view QQ music as a Chinese version of Spotify. Officially released in 2014, the “We Sing” app contributed breaking the bound between public and private places. (Users can practice songs and publicly post their works on “We Sing”). In the light of new devices, the invention of the iPhone 4 in 2013 was not only a game changer in the telephone market. Meanwhile, the music quality of it could compete with devices like mp3. Because of its versatility and portability, an increasing number of consumers started to listen to music on daily basis.

Music, as a marketing medium that links the public space in the cinema and the private space outside the cinema, became the place articulating nostalgia. According to Xiao Ying, traditional media and new technologies confront each other in the films, while visions of a nostalgic past are juxtaposed with representations of a postmodern reality. This gives rise to an ambivalent form of the Chinese Millennial Bildungsroman that is, at one, poignantly reminiscent, yet resolutely progressive and forward-looking. [6] In other words, the confrontation of old and new inserted in the theme song stimulates nostalgic emotions. According to one interviewee who worked for film marketing for over 10 years and worked for over 20 S-level projects in China, using theme songs to marketize a film is a necessity instead of an ornament nowadays.

According to interviewees, in order to achieve a commercially success film in the late 2010s, the marketing strategies (e.g., using theme songs) need to maximize the influences through platforms (e.g., Weibo, TikTok, Maoyan). Chinese film industry began to

transformed into a new era: platformization (where affective contacts with and among the audiences are generated, captured and framed by the algorithmic infrastructure of platforms). [8] Imitating Hollywood distribution system, the distributors would supply the appropriate advertisements according to statistical analysis of user characteristics on platforms. Over half of the interviewees claim that the Chinese film market require new workers who understand both statistical analysis and films. Also, to achieve a baokuan film in China (referring to movies are known in China for their extremely high domestic box office takings and overwhelmingly positive online word-of-mouth from audiences), distributors would consider how to improve reputations among the audience. [9] According to Yang Xiao, the roles of film audience and marketers are continuously blurring nowadays [9]. In the interview, the distributors explain that they would take strategies like previews to let some targeting audience to watch the films first and later increase the reputation.

5. Discussion

The emphasis on golden times to release a film and the struggles distribution team faced revealed the legacy paradoxical issue again: how to balance flexibility of free market and central control under the market economy with Chinese characteristics. Until today, CFG still holds the superior power to limit the market entry and market share. From the interview, one reason that producers of youth films would not choose to release their films in Chinese New Year is due to the difficulty to get the permission to release in this time period. Youth film, as a buffer zone among main melody films, its difficulty to release in market will result in a market without liveness. Especially after the global pandemics, an increasing number of homogeneous main melody films in the market has already caused an aesthetic fatigue. For instance, the later two sequels of “National Day trilogy” – *My People, My Homeland* (2020) and *My Country, My Parents* (2021) grossed less than the first one *My People, My Country* (2019). The imported films are also restricted. The contribution of imported films’ box office return to the Chinese film grossing decreased from 44.6% in 2016 to 20.9% in 2021 [10]. Main melody films took control of the Chinese film market. In this case, the difficulty of releasing youth films could reflect the obstacle the entire industry faced. The strict central control with ambiguous examination process would, in turn, leave less survival space for the new rising production team.

Meanwhile, the fast-paced integration of production, distribution, and exhibition also bring problems. The emerging trend is highlighting the distribution process whereas paying less attention of the quality of production. Due to the obscure examination process of films by the government, more and more distribution companies do not want to work for projects with realistic criticism. The focus on IP films further induced the attention on existing works, like previous novels.

Since the marketing and distribution process and the internal logic tended to be unattainable through the public data, the research demonstrates an interview of insiders to decipher the commercial success of youth films in China. Some parts of interviewing questions are related to business privacy so that the final results might be not comprehensive due to the information unavailability. Besides, the research focused more on Mainland Chinese film industry. The further research might focus on overseas and transnational film circulation.

6. Conclusion

The commercial success of youth films in China after 2010s largely rely on its promotion of nostalgia. To maintain the success of youth films, the distribution companies seek to expand targeting audience from the original 1970s to 1990s to including younger generations. In this process, the first step is to design an appropriate time to release their films to reach the targeting audience. While choosing the time to release, two factors to consider are the effectiveness and the base number of audience available in this time. Facing the downturn of low-budget films, the marketing and distribution department began to cooperate and formulate a new distribution process called xuanfa yiti (which means marketing and distribution companies collaborate together as one part). The vertical integration in Chinese film market, especially in youth films, also touch upon an integration from production to distribution. The distributors started to develop their youth film projects with IP and maximize the influence of IP through the use of theme song. In this case, the resonance of film and music industry, as well as the platformization in China, brought new opportunities and challenges. The gradually mature distribution system needs the progressing quality of film production to main the activeness of film market.

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