

The Development of Chinese and Foreign Literary Films – Comparison between China and foreign countries

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Abstract. Chinese literary film is a new way of expressing Chinese native culture, inheriting and carrying forward Chinese humanistic feelings in a new form. Since 1948, Chinese literary films have experienced the development, decline and recovery of literary films, and now it is the golden stage of recovery of literary films. The new generation of directors urgently needs to learn from the successful development experience of foreign literary films, add Chinese thinking and Chinese thinking on the basis of the complete foreign art film industry chain, and build Chinese literary films into a new business card of Chinese culture in the 21st century. This article reviews the development history of art films in China, compares it with that of foreign art films, and analyzes the way out suitable for the recovery of Chinese art films by drawing on the successful experience of the development of foreign Nordic art films. Try a new way to help Chinese literary films attract more viewers at home and enter the international stage. With film as the seventh art as the carrier, this paper has stepped out of the new route to carry forward the charm of traditional Chinese culture, created China's own good films.

1 Introduction

Chinese literary and artistic films are the localized name of "art films". They are regarded by the Chinese public as the carnival of some literary and artistic youth. Because of this wrong perception, even though Chinese literary and artistic films win many awards abroad, they fail to earn much money at home. For example, Jia Zhangke's "The Three Gorges Man" won the Golden Lion Award for best film at the Venice International Film Festival abroad, but its domestic box office was only a bleak 300,000 yuan. Therefore, the revival of Chinese literary films needs to learn from the successful commercial marketing cases of foreign literary films, achieve both artistic expression and commercial value in practice and study, so that Chinese art films can truly enter the public aesthetic vision, and create good films that express Chinese national and culture.

In The History of World Cinema, Christine Thompson and David Podwell say that "art films have a certain amount of institutional support, and the distribution channels are different from the Hollywood system; It has certain artistic and humanistic depth; Have a certain "author" nature [1]. It is precisely because of these characteristics that literary films can be distinguished from Hollywood films, and it is also because of their humanistic depth that such films are less entertaining and more serious than Hollywood films. At present, Chinese moviegoers define the functional nature of film as entertainment, while in Northern Europe, film is regarded as "a cultural industry that undertakes the function of public service and education, rather than a

pure entertainment industry, and emphasizes that the purpose of film is to promote the reflection of domestic issues and enhance the understanding of society" [2]. The different cognition of film function is one of the reasons for the low box office of Chinese literary films, and it also explains the backward cognition of Chinese film market. The influence of Nordic art films in the world film history is world-renowned. Nordic art films show the local culture and national spirit to the world, and most of the films are the reproductions of the real life of local people. At present, it has begun to sell Nordic culture to the global film industry and cooperate closely with the films of other countries. No doubt, the art films of Northern Europe not only show the characteristics of their own culture, but also successfully realize the commercial realization of culture [3].

From Spring in a Small City directed by Fermo in 1948 to Yellow Earth directed by Zhang Yimou in 1985 to Li Mi's Guess directed by Cao Baoping in 2008, Chinese literary films have experienced the development, decline and recovery, from the fourth generation to the sixth generation of Chinese directors, from the reform and opening up to the centennial Plan. Literary films of different periods are the best symbol and epitome of The Times. At present, the highest box office of Chinese literary films is maintained by the film Youth directed by Feng Xiaogang, with the final box office of 1.422 billion yuan, which indicates that literary films have a future in the Chinese market, breaking the public's traditional cognition of art films, and Chinese literary films will have an unexpected future in external reflection and reference [4].

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2 Chinese literary film development

Since Du Yu's *Return to Hometown* in 1925, Chinese literary films began a difficult stage of exploration. The works of the same period also included Wu Yonggang's *Waves on the Sand* and Fermo's *Spring in a Small City*. These films had high artistic aesthetics, and their portrayal of human nature vividly reflected the pathologies of The Times. At that time, these films were very limited by The Times, and the commercial value of the films was reflected in the "criticism of the films", which did not conform to the mainstream values, which triggered the public's criticism and also brought the fame of the films [5]. Under the leadership of Fermo and other creators, the early Chinese literary films laid a solid humanistic care complex for the development of later Chinese literary films.

In the late 1970s, China ushered in the reform and opening up. During this period, there emerged the fourth generation of Chinese directors. They pursue truth and beauty, both documentary and typical, and strive to be more prominent on the basis of reality, which has the characteristics of Chinese documentary aesthetics [6]. The economic development brought about by China's reform and opening up also allowed the literary films of this period to catch a free ride in history. The classic literary film "*Old Days in the South of the City*" (1983) was born under the economic environment of rapid development at that time.

In 1980s and 1990s, films created by directors of the fifth generation, represented by Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige, enjoyed great fame at home and abroad, bringing prosperity to Chinese literary films. *Yellow Earth* (1984), directed by Chen Kaige, broke people's cognition of traditional literary films, and literary films began to be sought after by audiences at home and abroad. With bold colors and highly personalized expressions, the fifth-generation directors pointed the camera at the land of China, showing the most real and difficult life of farmers. Domestic audiences had a strong resonance for the content, and foreign film festivals were attracted by the national culture with Chinese characteristics. The innovation of the fifth-generation directors in narrative and content made Chinese literary films occupy a large share in the Chinese film market at that time.

However, in the early 21st century, with the influx of foreign culture, commercial films began to erupt in large numbers, and under the pressure of capital, the brief prosperity of Chinese literary films came to an end. The fifth generation of directors turned to commercial films, such as *Hero* (2002), and Chinese literary films faced great challenges in the early 21st century. The sixth generation director realized that it is necessary to balance the relationship between business and literature, the sixth generation director Jia Zhangke said, "I have always been a commercial film director, each of my films is selling, I do not want to be a commercial film director, but because any film has its commodity attributes." There are two stages of film, one is the creation stage, which is created according to the intention of the creator. After shooting, it is necessary to take it to the industrial channel to make a good commodity, and then to promote

[7]. Under the pressure of commercial interests, Chinese literary films must realize transformation and change, and can no longer be like the fifth generation directors who only insist on expressing their own style without considering the market. At this time, the film market urgently needs to achieve a balance between art and commerce under the impact of commercial films.

Black Coal, Thin Ice (2014) is the representative of this period. It is precisely because of *Black Coal, Thin Ice* (2014) that 2014 is called "the first year of the rise of Chinese literary films" [5]. This film adds "love" to literary films that discuss human nature. Commercial film elements such as "suspense" realized the integration of literary films and commercial films, and was an excellent case of commercialization of Chinese literary films. It won 100 million box office in China that year and won the Golden Bear Award at the Berlin Film Festival internationally.

Since 1948, the commercialization of Chinese literary films has shown different success or failure in different times. However, with the continuous development of Chinese literary films, it can be found that the artistic value of films needs to balance with commercial attributes in order to create more and better excellent literary films.

3 Development of foreign art films (Taking Nordic art films as an example)

"The Companion to Nordic Cinema" mentions that the production, exhibition and distribution of Nordic art films are an important part of today's global film market [8]. Nordic films are now the name card of art films. How a region on the edge of the earth has nurtured many excellent art films in a hundred years, and has brought huge economic benefits to Northern Europe while introducing its national culture to the world through films, truly realizing the balance between "art" and "business" of art films.

The early Nordic cinema was deeply influenced by the early French art cinema, and the local government in northern Europe attached great importance to the film since the birth of the film in the 1880s. The Swedish city of Malmo also publicly screened the image of the Swedish King Oscar II shot by the French Lumiere brothers, after which the Nordic countries began to build cinemas. Based on the study of French art films, the people began their own localized film creation [9].

The development and commercialization model of art films in Northern Europe is very similar to that of France, and the rapid development of art films in both regions is inseparable from the government's high attention to such films. The establishment and improvement of the Nordic film industry system, to a large extent, draws on the experience of French art cinema and cultural security, and forms a support and funding system dominated by official institutions and coordinated by multi-level public institutions [3]. In 1911, the Swedish State Film Board was established, and an entertainment tax was subsequently imposed on cinemas, thus beginning the

commercialization of Nordic films. At that time, the government of Northern Europe not only regarded films as entertainment services, but also believed that art films could promote people's thinking. The government collected entertainment tax and continued to encourage local film creators to create art through the establishment of film schools and other ways. For example, the Svenska Film Institutet, the first film school in Northern Europe, was established in 1963 [10]. After the Second World War, Nordic films were deeply influenced by the war and began to reflect on human nature to a large extent. Therefore, the "Dogma 95" movement launched by Danish filmmakers represented by Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg in 1995 broke out. This movement shook the monopoly position of Hollywood films in the film market, triggered people's thinking about art films, especially the plight of film creators how to make films under the condition of low cost and low budget. This movement made art films, which were oppressed by Hollywood films at that time, need to change from "pure art" to the integration of "art and commerce" [8]. As a result, the Norwegian Film Institute was established in 1955, not only to train film talent, but also to distribute and exhibit films, and later to become a collaborative center for the entire commercial process of Norwegian film, production and distribution.

In order to increase the creative enthusiasm of film creators and provide a platform for the realization of good films, Sweden founded the largest film festival in Northern Europe - Gothenburg International Film Festival in 1979. In addition, with the fame of *Babettes gæstebud* (1987), which won many international awards, Nordic art films took the lead in international cooperation with Denmark. Subsequently, Nordisk Film & TV Found was established in 1990, and the commercialization of Nordic art films has achieved remarkable results. It brings art film into international film vision and realizes high commercial value at the same time.

Since the 21st century, Nordic cinemas have provided the Nordic public with greater access to local Nordic art films through the operation of film scheduling. In 2022, the Danish National Film Academy held the "Midsummer open-air Film Season" from August to September, and held classic art films such as "call me by your name" in Copenhagen and other cities. It has effectively expanded the people's attention to art films and driven the sales of the surrounding industries, which is a successful cooperation between films and businesses [11].

The development history of Nordic art films has been over a hundred years, and the important status of Nordic art films in the international film industry today is inseparable from the national government's attention to film, and the love of generations of filmmakers for their local ethnic culture. Moreover, under the impact of Hollywood films, Nordic art films have opened up a road of artistic and commercial merger.

4 The revival of Chinese literary films

China's art market is still and will be in the developing stage for a long time. China itself has a historical background of more than 5,000 years. If the film can be used as a carrier to carry forward and inherit its own national culture and history like the art film of Northern Europe, it will be very helpful for the development of Chinese traditional culture and the promotion of China's position in the international market. In view of the current market of Chinese literary films, Chinese artists should learn from the development of Nordic art films, starting from three aspects: policy, artists and marketing.

4.1 The government should attach importance to art films and give corresponding support to literary films

In the film era with the continuous impact of Hollywood blockbusters, policy leverage is an important means to achieve the autonomy of art film production [12]. First of all, the government should attach importance to the value of film as the seventh art to a country, set up a special fund to support the Chinese original artistic film directors to create art, and support the film universities to train artistic film artists. Regulate the film market to adjust the proportion of commercial films and literary films, and enable Chinese audiences to have greater access to Chinese local literary films through macro-control. Secondly, as a developing country, it is very important for China to improve the overall quality of its citizens. The government should strive to cultivate the overall cognition and art appreciation of its citizens. France, as an enlightened country in art film, has a relatively high level of education for its people, a large number of film audiences and a good cultural atmosphere for art film. This is important because the French people tend to see cinema not just as a way to relax, but as a way to learn. Compared with Hollywood's commercial blockbusters, art films themselves have a higher threshold for viewing. Therefore, the government needs to strengthen film education and cultivate more knowledgeable film talents and film audiences.

4.2 Literary film artists should adapt to the market and cannot always pursue personal style

As Zhao Jin, co-producer of *Xiaowei*, said: "The nature of the low ranking of literary films is simply because no one is watching, and many directors are looking for the ranking of films, but the actual ranking of films is arranged, and the attendance is not necessarily high." What accounts for this fact [13]? Early Chinese literary films, such as *Farewell My Concubine* (1993), are full of Western elite culture. The whole film expresses the director's sad and melancholy feelings from a top-down perspective, which is far from the real life of the people, which is also a common problem of most artists, who are accustomed to sympathizing with the masses from a top-down perspective, did not really understand the artistic

core of literary films: "Literary films are not self-imaginings divorced from reality, they express thoughts about human nature, about society and about life, which are close to real life and can arouse the audience's most sincere feelings of empathy." If the appropriate expression can be found, there will be a large market, especially in China, a country with a large population base. At present, *Youth*, directed by Feng Xiaogang, maintains the highest box office of Chinese literary films, with a final box office of 1.422 billion yuan [4]. Although the box office of 1.4 billion yuan is much different from that of other commercial films, it can still prove that literary films have a large potential market in China.

4.3 A good film needs good marketing to be seen by more people

An important factor for the success of Hollywood commercial films is the huge investment made by film producers in the promotion and distribution of films. With gorgeous and cool trailers and roadshows of starring teams, such films have been successfully introduced to the public frequently, attracting a lot of secondary audiences of films, that is, the audiences who are not such films themselves, but choose to pay for the films because of some other factors. For example, the lead actor himself has a large fan base and so on. In recent years, *Black Coal, Thin Ice* (2014), directed by Diao Yinan, is recognized as a representative of successful literary films. In addition to the high quality of the film itself, a large part of the success has benefited from the promotion of this film. *Black Coal, Thin Ice* changed the traditional way of publicity and distribution of small-budget literary films. It made use of the resources of its own film company to make high-cost publicity and distribution for this film. In the same year when it was released, it interacted with the popular variety show *If You Are the One* and jointly promoted the film with *I Am a Singer*, attracting a large part of non-literary film audiences to watch this film in the cinema. While realizing the mutual conversion of content and funds, it also attracted a large part of the audience for the literary film itself, so that many viewers with prejudice against the literary film know Chinese literary film in a new way.

The publicity and distribution team of Chinese literary films should make good use of the publicity and distribution of new media, and promote the films on many new media platforms such as Tiktok, Weibo and wechat. Besides ensuring the content quality of the films themselves, they should also study how to promote literary films well, so that more potential groups of such films can become fans of literary films.

5 Conclusion

At present, the proportion of literary films in China's film market cannot be compared with that of commercial films, and most movie audiences still like entertaining commercial films. However, from the perspective of a

nation's development and cultural inheritance, literary films are a very important part. The humanistic care and national complex contained in literary films are unique to the country's culture. A good literary film is a miniature of the people of an era, and it is also the best channel for future generations to learn from.

Therefore, the development of Chinese literary and artistic films is urgent and very important. From the fourth generation of directors to the current sixth generation of directors, this paper can see from the history that each generation of directors has made contributions to Chinese literary and artistic films. The education level of the Chinese people is also gradually increasing thanks to the efforts of the government. On this basis, this paper should learn from the successful experience of western and Northern European art films, the government should attach importance to the development of literary and artistic films, provide corresponding policy support for Chinese literary and artistic films, cultivate corresponding talents and high-quality movie-watching groups, and strive to build Chinese literary and artistic films into China's own film business card and shoot Chinese films with the most Chinese cultural characteristics.

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