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Film and TV Directing

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Contemporary Chinese Art-house Cinema and Genre Wenyi
Five case studies from 2015-2017

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Declaration

I declare that I have prepared my Bachelor's Thesis/Master's Thesis, Dissertation independently on the following topic:

Contemporary Chinese Art-house Cinema and Genre Wenyi

under the expert guidance of my thesis advisor and with the use of the cited literature and sources.

Prague, date:

.....

Signature of the candidate

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ABSTRACT

After the opening-up and the economic reform, China has become one of the largest film markets for various genres. As a result, interests towards art-house (Wenyi) cinema have also been greatly increased, especially for those which have been made based on low budgets. This research attempts to first of all examine the formation of the low budget art-house cinema in China, then trace its development from 2015 to 2017 based on five films which are considered as low budget art-house cinema to further provide an overview of the current situation of Chinese low budget art-house cinema from both aesthetic and production perspectives.

ABSTRAKT

Poté co se Čína otevřela světu a nastartovala transformaci hospodářství, stala se i jedním z nejdůležitějších center filmové produkce mnoha žánrů. S tím se pojí i fenomén zájmu o art-housové filmy, tzv. Wenyi, a v rámci nich zejména o nízkorozpočtové produkce. Tato studie má za primární cíl popsat genezi žánru nízkorozpočtových art-housových filmů v Číně, a následně stopovat tento vývoj mezi lety 2015-2017 na příkladu pěti filmů spadajících do této kategorie, pro vykreslení současného stavu v oblasti nízkorozpočtových čínských produkcí z pohledu produkčního i estetického.

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INTRODUCTION

During my time studying in Europe, I was able to attend A-list film festivals in Europe, for example, Berlinale Film Festival, Cannes Film Festival and Karlovy Vary International Film Festival. Thanks to these festivals, I was able to keep track of the freshly produced Chinese art-house films even though I have been living outside of China. I was glad to see the growing numbers of art-house productions and the increasing interests of the audience towards the art-house cinema in the context of the rapidly commercialized Chinese film market. However, to my surprise, most of these low-budget art-house films are celebrated elsewhere rather than inside of China - some of them do not even have Chinese domestic distribution.

For instance, *Underground Fragrance* (2015, Song) by Pengfei Song, which I encountered it at Karlovy Vary International Film Festival. The film won the Best Film in Venice Film Festival's Venice Days section in 2015. Song, the director, was the co-writer of *Stray Dogs*, a film by renowned director Tsai Ming-Liang and he also worked closely with Korean director Hong Sang-soo. Still, none of the glory has helped the film reach broader audience in China. Another example, *Ghost in the Mountain*, the fourth feature film by Chinese director Heng Yang, which was selected to Panorama section in Berlinale in 2017, was not released in cinemas, either was *Ciao Ciao*, the second feature by emerging Chinese director Song Chuan, which took part in L'Atelier de la Cinéfondation in Cannes and was supported by World Cinema Fund of Berlinale and selected into Panorama in the same year as *Ghost in the Mountain*.

On the other hand, *Kaili Blues* by Bi Gan, the poetic magic-realistic film which is known for its dream-like forty-minute long take, managed to create its path in the cinema circuit of China. *Kaili Blues* is a low-budget debut film, which was

awarded Silver Leopard at Locarno International Film Festival. Bi Gan, the director who has never been trained at any film academy. However, the film is still much more favored by Chinese distributors than *Underground Fragrance* (2015, Song), *Ghost in the Mountain* (2017, Yang) and *Ciao Ciao* (2017, Song). Such phenomena stirred the initial interest of this research.

This research aims to investigate how do such Chinese specific phenomena influence the filmmakers and their creations, and further to provide an overview of the current situation of low budget Chinese art-house cinema.

To begin with, Chapter One examines the definition of art-house cinema, explained why *Wenyi* is a more suitable term to use on defining the Chinese art-house cinema and the overall social-political background of China; Chapter Two to Chapter Six, introduce the case studies on five selected low-budget Chinese art-house films which were produced between 2015 and 2017.

Finally, the conclusion summarizes of the analytical study on the selected films, then provides a follow-up on the current status of the auteur directors and a guideline for projects which are either in the stage of development or distribution.

Film Selection

a. Artistic Approaches

All the selected films are either based on real social event or inspired by literature.

b. Theme

All five films chose to focus on the marginalized groups in China.

c. Film Festivals

All five films were enrolled in A-list international film festivals and important Chinese film festivals.

d. Low Budget & Theatrical Release

All five films were produced with budget less than 10 million Chinese yuan, which fit in the category as low-budget films in China. Meanwhile, all these films also managed to have theatrical release in cinemas in China, though the status of the box-office sales is different.

Methodology

In this thesis, each chapter will be an analytical study of one of the selected films and will be divided into six categories:

a. Plot

I will start each chapter with the plot of the film. The plot is essential for the analysis because it is one of the fundamental components of fiction.

b. Auteur Directors

Since authorship is one of the key features of art-house cinema, the brief introduction to the authors could provide the readers with some necessary information of the artists behind it.

c. Backstory

Backstory will not only consist of the choice of theme, the historical background of the film, inspiration for the film and more. It should serve as an extended reading for the readers to develop a deeper understanding of the motivation behind creators' works.

d. Achievements

Brief information on the selected films' award-winning statues which could support my statement of selection.

e. Production

This part will be a summary of my research on the production aspect of the selected films, and my focus will be on the distribution strategy, budget and box-office status.

f. My Review

Last but not least, in the last category, I will analysis the film on its film language, aesthetic and a general conclusion which will be based on the aspects listed above.

Limitation and Expectation

Since all the selected films were freshly produced during my research period, and three out of five films are debut films, there are only countable studies I could use for references. Therefore, my research is mainly based on existed interviews, reports, reviews and articles.

I hope this work would not only introduce a few emerging Chinese directors to the readers and motive the readers to explore more of the contemporary Chinese art-house cinema. It will also open up a discussion on the prospect of the Chinese art-house cinema. Moreover, me as the researcher but also a Chinese filmmaker, will be able to apply with what I have learned during the research on my next project.

CHAPTER ONE

Keyword: Low Budget, Art-house, Chinese Cinema, Censorship

Definition of Art-house Film

According to Collins dictionary, an art-house film is a film that is intended to be a serious artistic work rather than a piece of popular entertainment. Similar to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, the definition of the art film is a motion picture produced as an artistic or experimental venture. It is clear both definitions emphasize the artistic essence of the art-house film. David Bordwell wrote in his work *Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice* that the art cinema motivates its narratives by two principles: realism and authorial expressivity (Bordwell, 1985).

However, in Dictionary.com, apart from defining aesthetic nature of art-house cinema, the production and marketing aspects are also taken into consideration as part of the definition – art film is usually made primarily for aesthetic reasons rather than commercial profit, and it usually aims typically at a limited audience. Adding to it, according to Tom Ryall, he also acknowledged that art-house films were usually low-budget and targeted audiences outside of the mainstream demographic. On the other hand, he elaborates more on the artistic perspective of art-house cinema – that is often aligned with the latest trends in literature and fine arts, which allows filmmakers to explore the potential of cinema than just telling simple stories (Film Reference, 2018). Moreover, such films are often premiered at A-list international film festivals and circuit internationally.

To sum it up, art-house cinema is a low-budget motion picture which primarily made for aesthetic reasons, aiming at the non-mainstream audiences.

Definition of Wenyi Film

When translating the word Art-House into Chinese, it can be interpreted slightly differently from how it was defined in the western world. In Chinese language, art-house is translated as Wenyi. The term *Wenyi* (文艺) can be deconstructed as *Wen*(文) and *Yi* (艺). *Wen* literally means literary; *Yi* is referring to arts in general, as fine arts and performing arts.

According to film scholar Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh, the concept of *Wenyi* has played a significant role in the Chinese film distribution and promotion between 1920s and the early 1930s. However, until 1980s, as a sub-genre to melodrama, *Wenyi* became a popular research topic for film scholars (Yeh, 2013). *Wenyi* is defined with its generic nature as Literary and Art films which usually are adaptation of literature, and which often examining human relationship through the story-telling (Tam, 2018). In addition to that, at the time, *Wenyi* represents a sophisticated and wordily viewing experience.

However, nowadays, *Wenyi* may have become the most striking and diverse genres among the major genres in Chinese cinema which branches out from drama, romance, tragedy, social-realism, literary adaptation and many variations. Therefore, the tie with literature of *Wenyi* film no longer prevents it from being identified by its visual nature in the confines of the contemporary Chinese cinema.

In Guorong Cai's *Studies on Modern Chinese Wenyi Cinema* in 1985, he describes *Wenyi* as a genre of emotion and sentiments (Cai, 1985):

Those movies with thoughtful themes and the ability to strike a chord with the audience, along with those that could be appreciated like most artworks, are all qualified to be called *Wenyi* pictures. Insofar as they express perennial human

emotion and the sentiments of the time, genre pictures such as musicals, war epics, or martial arts can all be included within the *Wenyi* proper.

In this thesis, the five films which I selected for case studies could be all categorized as *Wenyi* films. However, in order to prevent confusion, I will use *Art-house* instead of *Wenyi* in rest of the content.

Mode of Production: Commercial Films vs Art-house Films

However, despite of the fact that art-house can be defined as a genre, it could be also seen as a mode or production. According to Bordwell, the mode of production in the context of film studies means “the particular strategies for organizing work on a wide scale” (Bordwell, 1985). Moreover, in parallel to art-house films, commercial films can be considered as mode of production as well:

Mode of Production for Commercial Films in China:

1. Before the script is written, there is already a thorough market research on target audience’s preference, in order to set the overall tone for the film.
2. Strictly follow a series of development as script developing, business planning, copyright, distribution and sales, making sure the revenue will cover the production cost.
3. Partner up with famous brand, product placement.
4. Merchandise appears, such as props in the film, online game based on the film...etc.

Mode of Production for Art-house Films in China:

1. Searching for scripts or talents.
2. Apply for script developing lab or project developing lab, depends on the stage of the project.
3. Partner up with other production companies in order to secure the production budget, or search for co-production partner oversea.
4. Apply for A-list film festivals, in wish that reviews from film critics could stir up interest from people.
5. Sell the right to oversee buyers or domestic VOD platform.

Current Status of Chinese Cinema

Since the research is aimed at examining the formation of the low budget art-house cinema in China, it is necessary to include an overview on its development from 2015 to 2017, and define what is low-budget production in the context of contemporary Chinese cinema with the specific socio-political environment of China.

Ever since Yimou Zhang's *Red Sorghum* won the Golden Bear award at Berlinale Film Festival in 1988 and became a legend in the history of Chinese box-office for its successful box-office and low production cost, a lot of low-budget Chinese art-house films have taken it as example, and hoping to gain the same festival effect which could be somewhat beneficial for its theatrical release. However, the reality now has proved otherwise - *Apart Together* by Quan'an Wang which was premiere at Berlinale in 2010 but was not allowed to be released in China due to its sensitive topic, and the previous film by Wang, *Tuya's Marriage* which won the Golden Bear award at Berlinale but when it entered the market in China, it suffered a fiasco at the box-office, same as *Still Life* by Zhangke Jia, which was awarded Golden Lion at Venice Film festival. The market for Chinese art-house

films are worrying, Xiaoshuai Wang, the acclaimed Chinese director of the Sixth Generation said in one interview from *Economic China* that he did not concern how his films would be received at the box office, as long as it could get a chance for theatrical release (China.com, 2017).

March of 2014, apart from two major Hollywood productions launched in the cinemas, seventeen Chinese art-house films had their theatrical release. Therefore, several media raised the question whether the phenomenon has indicated the "Golden Period of Chinese Art-house" has come, for instance, titled *Is It a Golden Age for Chinese Cinema?* on BBC, titled *Golden Period for Low-Budget Chinese Movies* on China Daily. A month earlier, *Black Coal, Thin Ice* by Yi'nan Diao which won Golden Bear at the 64th Berlinale Film Festival was the major winner at the box-office of China with sales of one billion Chinese yuan (Chinese Box Office, 2014).

The reason why *Black Coal, Thin Ice* is not taken as one of the case studies is due to the fact that its budget has exceeded the standard of low-budget production. According to one article on Mtime on production of *Black Coal, Thin Ice* – the production cost was about 15 million Chinese yuan, and part of the production cost was covered by international sales which do not often happen for Chinese art-house films (Mtime, 2014). However, the success of *Black Coal, Thin Ice* did prove a single spark can start a prairie fire. The industry believed that 2014 may become the first year of the rise of Chinese art-house cinema. According to China Daily, low-budget films such as *Finding Mr. Right*, *So Young* and *No Man's Land*, all surpassed Hollywood blockbusters such as *Man of Steel*, *The Wolverine* and *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* in cinemas in China in 2013.

Moreover, the amount of screens has increased from 24,304 in 2014 (Dianyingjie, 2015) to 49,000 in 2017 (Ifeng, 2017). China has surpassed the United States to become the country with the largest number of screens in the

world. According to the National Bureau of Press, Publication, Radio, Film, and Television in China, by November 20th, 2017, Chinese film annual box-office exceeded 500 billion yuan, creating a new record in the history. The number of people watching films has reached 14 billion. According to article named *Ten Strange Phenomenon of Chinese Art-house Films in 2017*, the total national box office in 2017 will exceed 550 billion yuan, and the number of people watching films will exceed 15 billion. By the end of 2017, it was expected to reach 80% in North America and four times in Japan (Sohu, 2017).

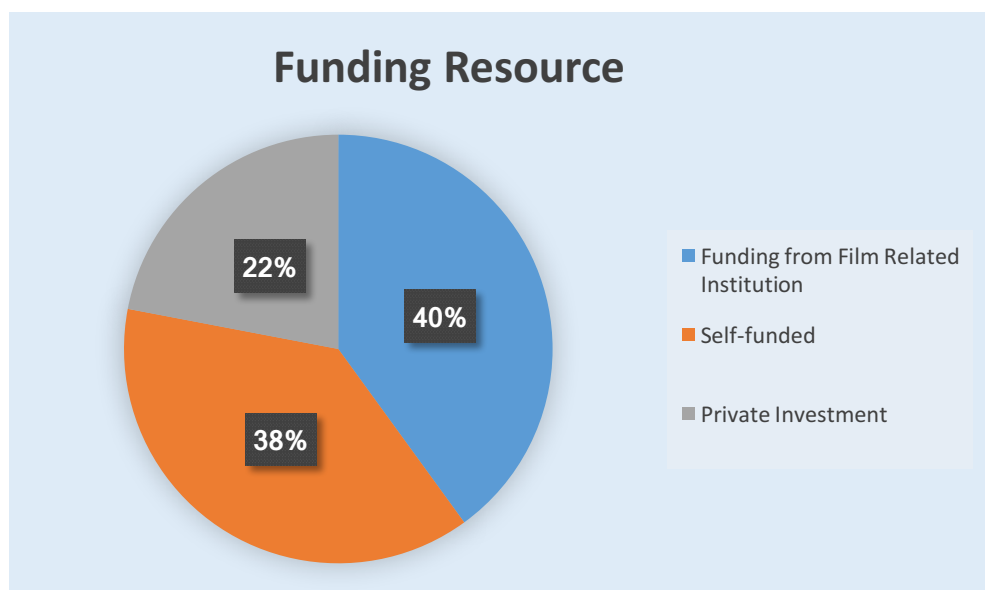
All the statistic mentioned above have indicated the bright feature of Chinese cinema. However, the screen space for Chinese art-house films was still insignificant in the scale of the percentage. Differ from the United States or France, where art-house films are provided with the similar commercial distribution, Chinese art-house films are still struggling to find its share screen as its low-budget nature usually keeps it from the commercial distribution. Moreover, due to the fact that there are not established art cinema chain, art-house films are playing in the commercialized cinemas along with blockbusters. In addition to that, director auteurs of art-house films often have to deal with censorship which is making it even more challenging to have the theatrical release, since the government wants to maintain a certain level of control over ideology in films. Paradoxically, art-house cinema presumably follows through artistic expression and free thinking.

Obstacles for Young Filmmakers

HoWide, an online platform which is dedicated to creating a knowledge-sharing platform for professionals who work in the Chinese film industry, invited 60 young Chinese directors (age below 40) for an interview in order to draw an overview on their current status which also reflects on the obstacles with which most of the Chinese filmmakers are still facing.

There are some interesting statistics which worth mentioning on who they are – 83% of them are male, 75% of them are known by people from film festivals, 38% of them graduated from Beijing Film Academy, 18% have over-sea educational background while 25% of them used to work on different fields than film. Moreover, 43% of them became a director after 2013, which proves that 2014 was the significant years for Chinese cinema.

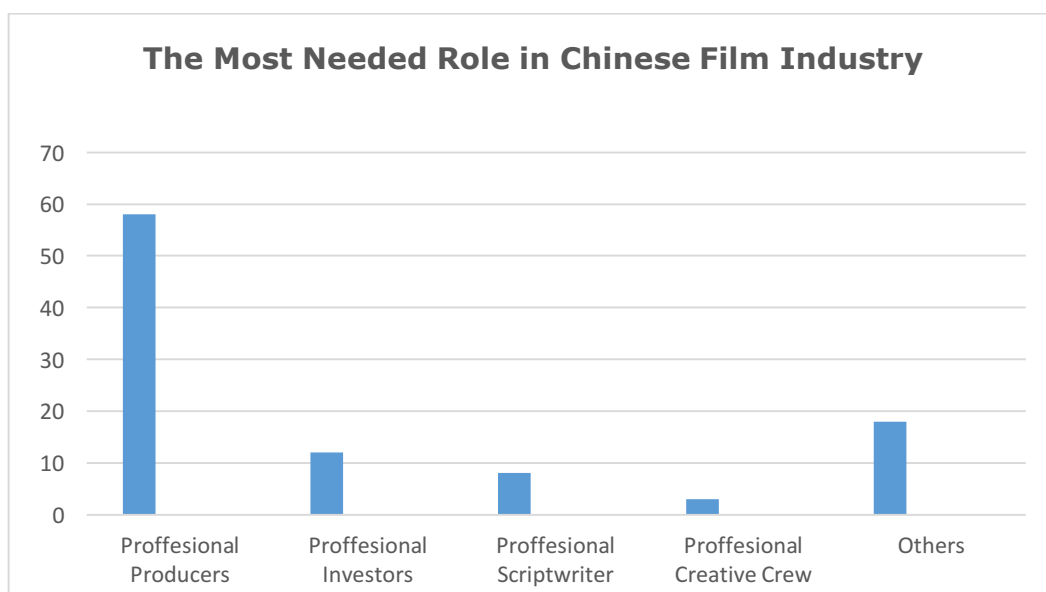
When it comes to funding, 41% of them managed to fund their debut film within a year, but most of them waited for average one or two years, some waited three years to gather enough funds in order to start shooting. As for the funding resources, 40% of funding for debut films comes from film-related institutes, 38% of the funding usually comes from the directors themselves and 22% of the funding comes from private investors.



1.1 Statics from HoWide: *The Report of the Current Statues of Chinese Young Directors, 2017*

In the interview, the 60 young Chinese directors were also asked what they thought would be the most needed role in the Chinese film industry. 58% of them agreed on the answer as professional and experienced producers.

In addition to that, 40% of them have experienced suspension of their project, when the reason mostly is because of the pull-out of investors unexpectedly. In this case, it is easy to understand why 58% of them thought it is most urgent to have a professional and experienced producer involved for their projects. The survey also shows that 50% of the directors have somewhat fixed crews, 40% of them are working with the same production companies.



2.1 Statics from HoWide: *The Report of the Current Statues of Chinese Young Directors, 2017*

When comes to the what they value the most from their works, the answers are varied. 45% of the directors think what they concern the most is whether they are satisfied with their works. 32% of them care more about the reaction from the audiences. Less than 10% of the young directors values the award-winning at film festivals or big sales at box-office the most.

Last but not least, HoWai also interviewed the directors on their opinions on the censorship system. 10% of them think there should not be any interfering with art in any ways. Another 10% think some rules could be altered and 17% refused to answer this question. However, looking from the bright side, 68% of them believe that the motion picture rating system should be introduced to China.

The Censorship on Film

Unsurprisingly, censorship has become an obstacle for Chinese art-house cinema in the past few years. Early in 2014, the 11th Beijing Independent Film Festival was disrupted by the local police (NY Times, 2014). Lacking the rating system of the motion picture in China, all films must be submitted to the censor in the stage of the script to have it approved in order to get a license for the shooting in the future. After the film is completed, the film must be considered suitable by the censor in order to be shown in the cinemas in China.

According to the *Film Industry Promotion Law of the People's Republic of China* which was issued in July, 2016, the purpose of the content control is to maintain the harmony and stability of the society. The State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SARFT) endorses these values by examining each film, starting with the script, and then the three-step process:

- The filmmakers need to submit the screenplay or finished film to the Censorship Board for review for shooting permit or theatrical release permit. The board has 15 days to offer a response.
- SARFT then comments and often suggests filmmakers alter the film in order to meet criteria of the censor. The filmmakers are provided the opportunity to modify the script or film to comply with any suggested changes.

- The script or the film shall be submitted back to SARFT for review of the changes and finally an approval decision.

If the filmmakers disagree with the results of the review, they can appeal for an additional review. In addition to it, it is not advised what filmmakers should do by SARFT. However, what filmmakers should not include in their films are somewhat clear – films containing any of the following content must be cut or altered:

- Distorting Chinese civilization and history, seriously departing from the historical truth; distorting the history of other countries, disrespecting other civilizations and customs; disparaging the image of revolutionary leaders, heroes, and influential historical figures; tampering with Chinese or foreign classics and distorting the image of the important figures portrayed therein;

- Disparaging the image of the people's army, armed police, public security organ or judiciary;

- Showing obscene and vulgar content, exposing scenes of promiscuity, rape, prostitution, sexual acts, perversion, homosexuality, masturbation and private body parts including the male or female genitalia; containing dirty and vulgar dialogues, songs, background music and sound effects;

- Showing contents of murder, violence, terror, ghosts and the supernatural; distorting value judgment between truth and lies, good and evil, beauty and ugliness, righteous and unrighteous; showing deliberate expressions of remorselessness in committing crimes; showing specific details of criminal behaviors; exposing particular investigation methods; showing content which evokes excitement from murder, bloodiness, violence, drug abuse and gambling; showing scenes of mistreating prisoners, torturing criminals or suspects;

containing excessively horror scenes, dialogues, background music and sound effects;

- Propagating passive or negative outlook on life, worldview and value system; deliberately exaggerating the ignorance of ethnic groups or the dark side of society;
- Advertising religious-extremism, stirring up ambivalence and conflicts between different religions or sects, and between believers and non-believers, causing disharmony in the community;
- Advocating harm to the ecological environment, animal cruelty, killing or consuming nationally protected animals;
- Showing excessive drinking, smoking and other bad habits;
- Opposing the spirit of the law.

The unclear criteria of the system and censorship process, together with the lack of public oversight have discouraged largely the artistic expression of Chinese films. Established directors like Zhangke Jia (*The Guardian*, 2011) and Xiaogang Feng (*NY Times*, 2013) have criticized the censorship system as a form of cultural naiveté which damages the artistic quality of film productions. Zhangke Jia said in one interview with BBC after the screening of his film *A Touch of Sin* (2013) at BFI Film Festival, that he believed to establish the rating system for motion pictures will not only be the protection of youth but also it will guarantee the right of the filmmakers (BBC, 2014). However, in the foreseeable future, the ideological control will not be loosening on films.

CHAPTER TWO

The Coffin in the Mountain by Yukun Xin

Keyword: Low Budget, Young Director, Social-Realism, Debut Film

Plot

The story takes place in one remote village in China. The fates of several people are linked by one unidentified remain which was found on top of the mountain. One of the families come for the identification, think the body belongs to their son who was working in the city, but when they are about to bury the son, he shows up at the funeral.

About The Director

Before the film *The Coffin in the Mountain* (2015, Xin) was released, most of the people might never hear about the director's name, Yukun Xin. After enrolling in the one-year training program at Beijing Film Academy, Xin realized there is no space for young filmmakers in the film industry in China (Tencent, 2014). He did not have the chance to shoot a feature at all. Sometimes he might have some commercial to shoot, but most of the time his wife was the one who supports the family financially (Sohu, 2015). Starting from 2013, Xin decided to give himself a chance by writing a script for a year, and by the end of the year, the script was completed (People.cn, 2015).

Backstory

The film was based on a true story. Xin found it interesting how a dead body changes the life and decisions of three different families and how it connects all

of them. He set the story in the contemporary countryside and decided to use non-linear narrative to tell the story. He explained in one interview with Sohu that the society of China is the society of etiquette and favor which turning human relations into more complex content (Sohu, 2015).

Achievements

After finished the editing, Xin sent *The Coffin in the Mountain* to First Youth Film Festival, and surprisingly he got very positive feedback. After that, he brought it to Venice Film Festival, Busan International Film Festival and also the Golden Horse Awards. Xin was surprised the film could join in the queue of commercial films lineup in cinemas. He was planning to have countable screenings in cinemas, wasn't expecting he could regain the investment back from the box-office revenue. *The Coffin in the Mountain*, was put on tag - Three Noes, no big production, no big stars, no famous director (People.cn, 2015), although at the end it earned seven million at the box office. It is one of the first time in Chinese film history that a film with such small budget can have such a blast at the box office. According to the interview of the head of distribution of *The Coffin in the Mountain*, Qi Tian, he said in the interview with Mtime on the strategy of art-house film distribution, that before the film went to commercial cinemas officially, they selected ten cities for roadshow screenings. Most of the screenings were for free for cinephiles (Mtime, 2015). Therefore, the positive feedbacks from the first batch of the audience started to spread around on social media. When it came to the roadshow screening for another twenty cities, a lot of audience were either saying that they heard about the film from the internet that it has an excellent reputation or they have been following up the film since a year ago. It is evident that the reputation of *The Coffin in the Mountain* was gradually growing after the roadshow screenings.

In order to win more fans, at almost every screening, Xin participated for at least forty minutes Q&A section with the audience. Even though, there are a lot of details worth discussing in the film regarding the plot, audiences were also interested in knowing director's artistic choices, for instance, the use of hand-held camera. And others were very curious about how the film was completed with such small budget.

Production

In the beginning, the budget of the film was only around 1 million Yuan, which is below the line of the budget for standard independent films. However, to the director, it was already massive amount of money. Xin, as a young filmmaker, who did not have any connection in the film industry, only friends of him who were businessman, willing to invest in the film. However, right before the shooting, most of them turned their back on Xin. They were afraid their money would go in vain. Xin said in the interview with Sohu that he made all the possible calls, trying to borrow money from family and friends, in the end, he collected 1.7 million Yuan in order to start the shooting (Sohu, 2015).

Location for the shooting was the village where one of the producers came from. Therefore, they saved a tremendous amount of money for location rental. Moreover, the budget for actors is only two hundred thousand Yuan, which makes this impossible to hire professional and well-known actors. As a result, Xin decided to cast actors from the local theatre which was a bold choice since most of the Chinese audiences only go to the cinemas for films which cast celebrities or films by the famous directors (Mtime, 2015).

To make the film livelier and vivid, Xin used a lot of handheld camera. When it comes to the exterior scene, there are hardly any set design and lighting, which saved a huge amount of money for the production. As for art direction, Xin only

spent fifty thousand Chinese yuan. Moreover, Xin decided to edit the film by himself after the shooting was completed.



2.1 Still from *The Coffin in the Mountain* (2015, Xin)

Review

When I was watching the film in the cinema, there were always people whispering, discussing the story, despite the fact that this viewing manner was disturbing for other people in the cinema, it also showed how much the audiences were engaged while watching the film.

The film consists three parts: Son fled away with his lover after getting to know her pregnancy, middle-aged lovers' affair got exposed, chief of the village tried to save his son from getting arrested. Each part of the story leads out the night when everything happened.

There are three turning points around the real identity of the body. In the end, it all comes to the silent reconciliation. It involves the inevitable problem in contemporary society in China, which is commonly happening in rural areas, the domestic violence, oppression from the father to son and from husband to wife, young men went to the city to make more money but ended up gambling.

Everyone in the story is trying to escape and trying to survive, from the corpse, from the village and from his or her dilemma.

For Chinese audience who are usually more used to the linear narration, the multi-line narration and jumping back in time bringing the audience a different viewing experience. At the same time, the complicated relationship between characters keeping the audience's attention and interests. When I was checking the information on *Douban* (website with movie ranking in China), *The Coffin in the Mountain* (2015, Xin) was rated as 8.6/10, which has the one of the highest scores among all the Chinese films which were completed in the past three years. Even though the seven million sales at the box office is insignificant, comparing to the box office of those big production commercial films. What was behind the victory is as long as the story is smart, the storytelling is appealing, there will be still audiences who are willing to go to the cinema to watch a film, even though it was created by young directors with unknown actors.

In conclusion, there is no absolute strategy for young directors who works with a small budget to succeed at the box office. An excellent and exciting story is always a start, and with the limited budget for distribution, roadshow screening with director's active participant is worth considering.

CHAPTER THREE

Kaili Blues by Bi Gan

Keyword: Low Budget, Poetic Cinema, Young Director, Non-actor, Debut Film

Plot

Kaili Blues (2016) tells the story of the past, present and future of a poet and doctor Chen on his way to find his nephew and his wife, but somehow gets lost in the time and space. In this fictional little town Kaili in southern China, Chen works there as a doctor. After finding out his nephew is missing, Chen gets on the journey by train to find his nephew Weiwei who is abandoned by Chen's brother. On his way to Zhenyuan, Chen comes across this fictional place called Dangmai where time is reversible. He meets his deceased wife who looks still young and works in a hair salon, and he runs into his nephew when he is already a young man. Chen experiences his history and the future. After Chen arrives at Zhenyuan, he realizes Weiwei who is already a young man has moved on with his life from the absence of his father. Chen decides to stay away and to try to figure it out if he should believe what he sees and experiences and if he should stay or go back, and where is the actual present for him.

About The Director

Born in 1989, Bi Gan grows up in a small town in Guizhou Province of the southern China, which is called Kaili. Dreamt of being a basketball player but because of the limitation of his physical condition, Bi had to give up on the dream. While Bi was reaching the age of fifteen, he started to write poems, and when words were not enough anymore for his expression, Bi started to be interested

in filmmaking (Sina, 2017). In the college, Bi got accepted to major of Editing and Directing of Television and Radio which he later realized it had nothing to do with the actual filmmaking. Bi decided to explore it on his own (Sina, 2017).

In 2008, he directed his first short film *Tiger*, which was awarded at the 8th Chinese Independent Film Festival. After graduated from the college, Bi worked in a commercial company but got fired by the boss not long after. Then he formed a wedding service company, specializing in doing the making of video for weddings. This experience also didn't last long. The company was shut down (Sina, 2017). However, this experience somehow became the Kick-starter of making *Kaili Blue*.

Backstory

Director Bi Gan is also a poet. Bi writes all the poems that Chen recites in the film. The actor for Chen is the uncle of Bi, along with many roles which were portrayed by non-actors in the film, they are either Bi's family members or local people who live there. Kaili, which is part of the title of the film is the hometown of the director and also the primary location in the film (Sina, 2017). Moreover, the use of poetry in *Kaili Blues* is also very interesting, and it has become an essential part of Bi Gan's story-telling style. His experience of working in a wedding service company provided him the experience to work with the camera in a very spontaneous and flexible manner.

Achievements

After director Bi Gan won The Best New Director from Golden Horse Awards, and Special Mention for First Feature and Silver Leopard from Locarno Film Festival in 2015, *Kaili Blues* went up to the top of the most wanted film among

the film-lovers in China. After going around the world for almost a year, on July 15th *Kaili Blues* finally had its premiere in the cinema in China. Maybe this is not intentionally scheduled from the producer and distributor that they waited until the film had enough reputation, but somehow for most of the low-budget art-house films, this is the only and the best way to squeeze into the line of domestic commercial films and Hollywood films.

However, then how come it could not get a better result at the box office? 3.94 million yuan, is the first-weekend-box office of *Kaili Blues*. According to Maoyan, the schedule rate of *Kaili Blues* from July 15 to 17 were less than 1% (Maoyan, 2016), which is in high contrast with its reputation among the critics. It had won the Golden Horse Award for the Best New Director. Also in the same period, all the online film magazines started to publish reviews of the film and interviews of the director. For instance, Cahiers du Cinema spoke highly of the 27-year-old director Bi Gan, calling him "The successors of Jia Zhangke" (Cahiers du Cinema, 2016)

Production

According to the interview with the director, before *Kaili Blues* was officially released in China, they already earned the 10.8-million-yuan investment through oversea copyright selling (Bi, 2016). Therefore, the poor performance at the box office in China was not really in the director's or producer's concern. What they have concerned more is how to produce high-quality, art-house film with unique viewing experience for the audiences. Bi Gan also mentioned that in his interview with People.cn, 10-days schedule in the cinema is more than enough, especially for a film which is somewhat private and personal (People.cn, 2016). Qi Tian, head of distribution of the film, also head of the distribution for *The Coffin in the Mountain* (2015, Xin), confirmed that they only made ten days copy for the

cinema and how it was shown at the box office was better than his expectation, since there are no rules to follow in the market for art-house films (Mtime, 2015).

Unlike *The Coffin in the Mountain* (2015, Xin), *Kaili Blues* (2016, Bi) was not doing any roadshow or free screenings in universities in order to gather "free public praise". Because when *Kaili Blues* (2016) was released, it happened to be the summer holiday for the school. The director Bi Gan then went with his film on tour to over 20 cities in China and held Q&A section at the end of every screening to try to have interaction with the audience as much as possible (Xu and Wu, 2016). However, due to the limit of time for Q&A, the host even set up groups in WeChat for each screening, the audience who would like to know more about the film can continue the discussion of the film with the director. Qi Tian, said there were not so much for them to do for *Kaili Blues* (2016) regarding the distribution, due to the budget and also the timing. However, the roadshow with Q&A somehow work. It brings the audience closer to the film and the author, especially when the film is artsy and obscure. Tian also added that managers of cinemas in first-tier cities are much more sensitive to the media and press. Some big cinemas even arrange ten screening per day for *Kaili Blue*. As for second-tier cities, the schedule for the film is more dependent on the influence of the distribution company. However, for the third-tier and fourth-tier cities, the managers of the cinemas are still more keen to have Hollywood films and commercial films scheduled (Mtime, 2015).



3.1 Still from *Kaili Blues* (2016, Bi)

Review

The film is exceptionally poetic and obscured at the same time. The highlight of the film is the 40 minutes long shot of Chen's journey searching for nephew Weiwei. Without a doubt, the cinematographer Tianxing Wang did a stunning job. We follow Chen on a bike, foot, and boat uninterrupted, and everything flowed seamlessly emotionally. Technically, the long shot is not perfect, but how Bi Gan planned the shot, the mise-en-scene to build out the surrealistic time and space of one man's past, present and future was incredible.

If *The Coffin in the Mountain* (2015, Xin) opens up a window for the low budget feature film in Chinese cinema, then *Kaili Blues* examined to its extreme with its extraordinary visual style.

However, unfortunately, the success in media and the awards from festivals of the film did not transfer into box office, and it is possibly because the level of appreciation to the film of the mainstream audiences is not high enough, especially when the film itself has a relatively high artistic expression. Also, when it comes to the geographical complex Chinese audiences, filmmakers should take

multiculturalism and diversification into consideration in order to meet the requirements of the market. Secondly, finding the target audience also becomes very important for this type of cinema. In fact, I think, *Kaili Blues* (2016) has found its target audience. However, the actual schedule in cinema is still relatively too short for the scale of its target audience. For people who do not live in the big cities, it is not easy to find the film at the nearby cinemas. Perhaps, in this case, the online distribution platforms could be the way out for such art-house films in China.

CHAPTER FOUR

Tharlo by Pema Tseden

Keyword: Low-budget, Established Director, Tibet, Censorship

Plot

It is a story about a lonely shepherd from a small town in Tibet, who has been single all his life until he runs into a girl in the hair salon while he comes to the city in order to get his identity card done. The encounter with the girl completely changes his lifestyle. At the end, he gets lost in the searching of his own identity.

About The Director

Pema Tseden, born in 1969 in Qinghai Province is a director also a writer. His literary works were first published in 1991, later on, his novels won him few awards in writing contests in China. Tseden directed his first short film in 2002, *The Silent Holy Stones*. Three years later, his debut which has the same title as his short, won the Best Directorial Debut at the 25th Golden Rooster Awards, Asian New Talent Award for Best Director at the 9th Shanghai International Film Festival (Tibet.cn, 2005).

Backstory

Tharlo (2015, Tseden) is the fifth Tibetic language film which is based on a short story director Pema Tseden wrote. According to Tseden in his interview with Caixin Press, the reason why the film is shot in black and white is actually due to the fact that they missed the season which was planned and with the

limited budget, the crew were not be able to wait for another year (Caixin, 2016).

Achievements

After the premiered in Horizon selection in Venice International Film Festival and was nominated for Golden Lion Award, *Tharlo* has received three nominations at the 52nd Golden Horse Awards in Taiwan - Best Feature Film, Best Directing, and Best Cinematography, and won Best Adapted Screenplay.

Production

Apart from the fascinating story of the film, the film crew of *Tharlo* also catches my attention. The producer of the film is Xuebo Wang (director of *Knife in The Clean Water*, which I will also analyze in the following chapter). The cinematographer is Songye Lu, an emerging cinematographer who also shot *August* (2016, Zhang) which won the Best Feature at First Independent Film Festival in 2016 and *Ghost in The Mountains* (2017, Yang) which was premiered in Berlinale's Panorama selection in 2017. However, when it comes to casting, differ from *Kaili Blues* (2016, Bi) and *The Coffin in the Mountain* (2015, Xin), where both casted non-actors, Tseden decided to use relatively experienced actors for *Tharlo*. The actor who played Tharlo, Shide Nyima is a very famous Tibetan director, writer, and actor. Leading actress Yangshik Tso was featured in Pema Tseden's debut documentary *The Silent Holy Stones* (2005, Tseden) when she was only 14.

Review

To Tharlo, everything is simple as black and white. Girl from the salon convinces Tharlo to trade all his sheep so they could move away together from this deprived town to Lhasa and then to Beijing. For whom has never been in

love, the girl and everything she brings along presenting a different world for Tharlo. He then shaves his head, getting rid of his most significant feature, his ponytail and sells all the sheep. Tharlo innocently believes that this is a once-in-a-lifetime chance. However, again, fate plays a cruel joke on Tharlo. The girl disappears with all the money he gets from selling the sheep. At the end of the story, Tharlo is back to the police station again, trying to retrieve his first identity card. He does not report it to the police on the missing money. Instead, he asks the chief of the station again, if he looks like a bad guy now with the shaved head and if he will no longer be able to die as someone significant. Chief of the station then comforts him that he looks more like a bad guy with the ponytail. He makes Tharlo recite Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung again in front of his other colleagues to show them his remarkable memory skills. However, unexpectedly, Tharlo is no longer able to recite as fluently as he uses to. The chief feels like Tharlo makes him look like a fool in front of his colleagues, therefore when Tharlo asks him for his identity card, the chief sends him back to take another formal headshot because he looks entirely different now from the photo which is on his identity card.

It was not difficult for the Chinese speaking audience to notice that the Cultural Revolution is playing an essential role in the backstory. The film starts with a super long take, fixed camera position and wide angle shot of main character Tharlo reciting the Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung in Mandarin at the police station. The way how Tharlo is reciting almost sounding like he is reciting sutra. From the conversation he has with the chief of the station we get to know Tharlo was once in school, and Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung was the only "textbook" he had, that is why thirty years after he still can remember it crystal clear. The ancient Chinese writer Szuma Chien said: Though death befalls all men alike, it may be weightier than Mount Tai or lighter

than a feather. Moreover, later on, re-interpreted by Mao Zedong in Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-tung, "To die for the people is weightier than Mount Tai, but to work for the fascists and die for the exploiters and oppressors is lighter than a feather. Serve the People" (September 8, 1944), Selected Works, Vol. III, p. 227. The quotation mentioned above becomes Tharlo's primary concern throughout the film, whether he could also die for serving people in order to have a significant death which is weightier than the Mountain Tai.



4.1 Tharlo reciting *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-tung*, 1944

Tseden said in one interview that for him the story is not for one specific ethnic group, because apart from Tibetan, Han Chinese, there are a lot of other ethnic groups just in China. For him what's more important is the approach to tell the story. Tseden also mentioned that as a Tibetan director, of course, it is easier to reflect the real Tibetan life in their films. However, when it comes to identity issues, it is inevitable for the film to encounter discussions involving political topics, even beyond the film itself. Tseden said he was surprised when they were given the permission to shoot the film by the The State Administration

of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SARFT). Because as a Tibetan director, making a film based in Tibet and it is about the impact of cultural revolution on Tibetan people, the level pressure is undoubtedly higher than usual. The censor requires a complete screenplay, therefore you will have to be discreet on each line, Tseden added. After all the years of learning and practices, he has to have a better understanding of the censorship system, and a so-called self-censorship system is formed. Therefore, when writing a script, it is necessary to consciously avoid touching some sensitive historical topics or express it in a somewhat euphemistic way (Tseden, 2015).

But not as lucky as *Coming Home* (2014, Zhang) which has set in the same historical time period, on the box-office success, the percentage rate of screening schedule of *Tharlo* in the cinema was mostly under 0.1%. In total, the box-office was merely one million Chinese yuan (Chinese Box-Office, 2016). It would be reckless to drop the conclusion that the celebrity effect still does have a significant impact on the box-office of arthouse cinema in China, based on the success of *Coming Home* (2014, Zhang). However, to have some well-known casts would not do any damage to the films either, especially for those which are limited by its theme to reach wider scale of audiences.

CHAPTER FIVE

Knife in Clear Water by Xuebo Wang

Keyword: Young Director, Poetic Cinema, Muslim, Debut Film

Plot

The story takes place in an ordinary village in Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region. When Ma Zishan is still in the mourning process of the death of his wife, his son asks him to kill the family bull which has accompanied Ma for over a decade to feed the guests at the coming up purification ceremony, making the fortieth day of his mother's death. Due to the extreme circumstances of the environment, Ma's family can hardly sustain themselves. Ma is left with no choice, and his grandchild has already looked forward to eating the bull. However, in the first three days of the purification, the bull sees the knife that is about to slaughter him from the reflection in the drinking water. He begins to stop eating and drinking, almost as if he is trying to purify himself, which as result, adding more pain into Ma's struggle.

About The Director

Born in 1984, Xuebo Wang is a producer-turn-director. He started his career working with Tibetan filmmaker Pema Tseden. His producing credits include *The Hammer and Sickle Are Sleeping* (2013), *Tharlo* (2015) and *Free and Easy* (2016). *Knife in the Clear Water* (2016) is Wang's feature debut, which was premiered at the Busan IFF (Ifeng, 2016).

Backstory

Knife in the Clear Water is an adaptation on the eponymous short novel written by renowned Hui writer Shuqing Shi. The short novel won the 2nd Luxun Literature Award, which is one of the most important literary awards in China. According to Wang in his interview with Tencent, Shi told him in the past decade there were few directors approached to him, wanted to bring it on the screen, but never worked out at the end until Wang came to him with the script (Tencent, 2016). The original novel has only six thousand words. And, Shi wrote it in a very minimalistic manner.

Back in 2007, Wang was studying in his third year in Northeast Normal University, major in Editing and Directing of Radio and Television, his classmate Yanwei Shi recommended the short story *Knife in the Clear Water* to him. Wang has always interested in the traditions, religion, and geography of the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region. The two decided to make it into a short film (Jiemian, 2016). Lacking funds and crews, Wang and Shi launched a crowd-funding campaign on the internet to raise some funds and also to attract some talents who would be interested in joining the crew. Luckily, the campaign went very smoothly and had helped them find the producer, art director, and actors (Sohu, 2016). A nearly thirty minutes long short film was completed, and later on, it was selected to the 7th International Student Film and Video Festival of Beijing Film Academy.

Achievements

The Knife in the Clear Water won The New Current Award at 21st Busan International Film Festival in 2016, and Best Director at Beijing International Film Festival.

Production

In 2010, Wang decided to make it into a feature film. He stayed in the remote village in Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region for ten months, and the experience brought him a lot of inspiration for the feature. However, when the shooting was about to happen, problems have occurred. The non-actors were not able to deliver on set. Wang decided to postpone the shooting.

Return to his hometown, Wang decided to start to work as a producer. The short film *The Hammer and Sickle Are Sleeping* directed by Jun Geng and produced by Wang won the Best Film at the 51st Golden Horse Award in 2014. A year after, Wang teamed up with Tibetan director Pema Tseden on his feature film *Tharlo* (2015) which was premiered at Venice Film Festival. In the same year, Wang decided to return to his unfinished project *The Knife in the Clear Water*.

The experience of working as the producer was helpful for Wang in order to search for funding of *The Knife in the Clear Water*, and few investors signed the contract just by reading through the synopsis (Sohu, 2018). According to his interview with Jiemian, Wang said when the renowned Hong-Kong director Er Dong Sheng heard about Wang's project and decided to step in as one of the producers, same as Pema Tseden (Jiemian, 2016). Moreover, in these five years, villagers from the village in which Wang wanted to use as the primary location for the film were more open towards the idea of filming.

Review

It is evident in the film that the crew was spending a lot of time in the village, to observe and record what is happening in their life. When I was reading the original novel written by Shuqing Shi, I realized a large part of writing was focused on the psychology of the characters, which provides a lot of space and freedom

for Wang to visualize it, yet also challenge for Wang while working with non-professional actors. I believe he did a very great job in turning it into a film. Moreover, with its very minimalistic dialogue and often non-expressive faces of the non-actors, the audience is given freedom mainly in deciding what emotions the characters are having.

Though Hui is the second biggest minority ethnic group in China, it is hardly represented in the feature-length format. Even though *Knife in the Clear Water* uses local Hui sacrificial tradition as the framework, it did not emphasize on the ethnic or the religious contents. Instead, the director took a different perspective on the relation between the Hui people and their land.

Besides, the cinematography by Weihua Wang was stunning. He not only captures the harsh realities of Ma's everyday life but also the beautiful, misty landscape of western China. The choice on choosing 4:3 ratios do not seem to be a random choice, but more of a statement that *Knife in the Clear Water* is not a landscape film which is a pure exploitation of the exotic geography and culture. Also, the composition, color palette and light of film remind me of the painting of Jean-François Millet, if I may assume that might be the sources of the visual references.



5.1 Jean-François Millet – Gleaners 1857



5.2 Still from *Knife in the Clear Water*, Xuebo Wang 2016

On top of that, the box-office was somewhat disappointing, considering the theme and the angle was quite a breath of fresh air among the cinema line-up, which is usually packed with high-budget domestic commercial films or Hollywood productions. Two years after the film was premiered at Busan International Film Festival, *The Knife in the Clear Water* was finally launched in the Chinese cinema in April 2018. However, according to a record from Chinese Box Office, the box-office of the film is only nearly six-hundred thousand Chinese yuan (Chinese Box Office, 2016). Even though, Xuebo Wang has said in one of the interviews that he was not concerned about the box-office, what he wished it is for more people to watch the film (Wang, 2016). Just like other young directors in China, Wang does not concern about the box-office of the film so much, for them, to have the theatrical release of their films in the cinemas in China is already miraculously.

CHAPTER SIX

Angel Wears White by Vivien Qu

Keyword: Female Director, Social-realism Cinema, Controversial, Real Event

Plot

Set in a seaside resort in southern China during the off-season, one night, Wen Qi, a 15-year-old undocumented migrant who works as a cleaner in the hostel, witnesses a man forcing his way into room with two schoolgirls over the security cameras, while she ends up substituting her older co-worker Lili who takes off to meet with her boyfriend. She captures the evidence with her phone, thinking one day she might be able to use it to blackmail the man in the video for money. Wen Qi believes that with the money she can finally get an identity card, so then she could get better-paid jobs. However, it turns out that the two girls are underage, and the attacker is a high-ranking officer.

About The Director

Vivian Qu (Wen Yan), born in Beijing, is a Chinese film producer, director, and screenwriter. After graduated from Beijing University, majored in the science subject, Qu moved to the New York to study graphic design and film at Parsons School of Design - The New School in the 90s.

In 2003, Qu returned to Beijing, in order to become a film producer, and to pursue her interest in helping independent filmmakers, Qu started to work as producers for Chinese art-house films, such as *Night Train* by Yi'nan Diao, the story of a young, widowed prison guard who takes a night train to a dating service. The film was screened at Cannes Film Festival in 2007. The following year, she produced the film *Knitting*, a romantic drama told from a female perspective and

based on the Chinese myth of the cowherd and the weaver girl. Six years later, she produced *Longing for the Rain*, a story about a woman living in a loveless marriage until a man in her dreams appears. In 2014, Qu teamed up with Yi'nan Diao again as the producer on his feature *Black Coal, Thin Ice*, which won that year's Golden Bear Award at the Berlin International Film Festival (Ifeng, 2014).

As Qu was working actively and creatively with independent film directors as a film producer, she decided to direct. She directed her debut feature *Trap Street* in 2013. The film was selected to Critics' Week at Venice Film Festival (Ifeng, 2013). Four years later, her second feature *Angels Wear White* entered the main competition section of the 74th Venice International Film Festival, and later won her a Golden Horse Award for Best Director in Taiwan in 2017 (Ifeng, 2017).

Backstory

Qu has always worked with a somewhat controversial topic which could be easily censored in China. Her directing debut, *Trap Street*, tells the story of a young map-maker who discovers his digital maps have been mysteriously altered after he becomes obsessed with a young woman, who he later finds out working for China's intelligence service.

Qu said in her interview with Shanghai Observer that she wanted to reflect the changing reality in modern society in China in her film, in which social media services such as Facebook, Twitter becomes inaccessible, communication services like Google is also banned in China (Shanghai Observer, 2017). People start to notice that there are certain words which they are not able to type into searching engines. However, for most of the younger generation in China who did not live through such periods as the Cultural Revolution, it is hard for them to understand what is happening and as a result, it is also difficult for them to take it seriously (Ai and Dan, 2017).

In *Angels Wear White*, Qu again draws her attention to a subject which deserves more awareness and discussion, such as the sexual assault of minors. Coincidentally, right before the premiere of *Angels Wear White*, an extremely disturbing scandal was all over internet in China - RYB Kindergarten in eastern Beijing, run by a New York-listed company has been inundated by a wave of public accusation and fury after parents exposed that their children were forced feeding pills, abused with needles and forced to strip naked (South China Morning Post, 2017). This scandal pushed up the popularity of the *Angels Wear White*. According to the data on *Maoyan*, it was marked as the second wanting film in the ranking when the first was blockbuster Justice League (Maoyan, 2017).

Achievements

Festival-wise, *Angels Wear White* was selected into the main competition of Venice Film Festival. Vivian Qu won the Best Director award with it at Golden Horse Awards. On Douban, Chinese online database of film and music, *Angels Wear White* was rated 8.6 out of 10 by more than 117000 users (Douban, 2017).

Production

Angels Wear White was a major production of Qu's company Adventure Film. After the script was completed, the producer Sean Chen invited four other production companies to join. According to Qu, the total investment from all five companies was around 10 million Chinese yuan. Also, it took four years for the film to be completed (Shanghai Observer, 2017). Before the premiere at Venice Film Festival, the domestic distributor of *Angels Wear White* was already confirmed, which was one of the leading distribution company in China, the J. Q. Pictures, which has distributed award-winning films such as *The Golden Era* (2014) by Ann

Hui, *Dearest* (2014) by Peter Chan (J. Q. Pictures, 2017). When it came to the communication with The State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SARFT), J. Q. Pictures has played a significant role on getting the film permit for public screening.

Later with the heated discussion on the Kindergarten Event, many managers of cinemas decided to make space for *Angels Wear White*. Even in some third-tier city, the screening schedule of the film was pushed up to 20% of all films. For a low-budget art-house film with such controversial topic, the act was exceptional. In the first four days after the theatrical release, the box-office was 14 million Chinese yuan, and the average screening schedule was raised from 1.5% to 5.2% (Chinese Box Office, 2017).

In the interview with Ifeng, Qu said it was not difficult to finance *Angels Wear White* since the production cost was relatively low. She thinks even though the return on the investment of art-house films takes longer time than of commercial films, the risks of investment is usually lower (Ifeng, 2017). Moreover, due to the low-budget nature of art-house films, the revenue usually can cover the production cost. In contrast to that, commercial films which have high paid-off are not so many.

Review

Angels Wear White is one of the very few Chinese films which tackles social injustice without touching issues that would break the rules of state censorship. It is certain that *Angels Wear White's* success has a lot to do with Qu's more than a decade of experience working as a producer for Chinese independent films. As a consequence, the film was not difficult to get it financed. Even though the box-office was primarily influenced by the scandal which happened right before the premiere of the film, it adds in an extra layer of resonance to this story which

reveals how power can play out even in the little seashore town in southern China where the location of the film takes place.

Angels Wear White is also an artistically executed film. Qu has chosen cinematographer Benoît Dervaux who has worked closely with the Dardenne Brothers on *Two Days, One Night* (2014) and *The Unknown Girl* (2016). It is not hard to realize their film languages, and visual style influences Qu's film. In *Angels Wear White*, there are no establish shots – as in there is no wide-shot which introduces the space and environment, then comes the characters. Instead, Qu decides to point the camera directly to the characters. Besides, there are mostly long shots in the film with the hand-held camera and used mainly of natural light.

However, what distinguishes *Angels Wear White* is that, even though it was plotted like a suspense thriller, Qu's effective storytelling skill is keeping the story from falling into a lurid melodrama. Qu is more interested in showing the indifference and cruelty women are usually facing on a regular basis due to the sexism which appears in their everyday life and the abuse of power. For instance, Lili's boyfriend once tells Wen Qi that he could introduce her to plenty of people who would be willing to claim her virginity for a significant amount of money. As for the mothers of the two girls who were sexually assaulted, they care more about the fact that they are no longer virgins and the comments from other people. For example, Wen's mother, a bar dancer, blames her daughter for being raped, taking out her anger by cutting Wen's hair and tearing her clothes.

For the international audience, the harshness of the film might seem ordinary for a realistic drama which intends to expose the dark side of humanity. However, putting it in the confine of the whole censor system, it was a miracle that *Angels Wear White* gained the permit to be screened in cinemas, no matter there has been altered or not on specific sequences. One of the only pities is that, due to the fact that there is no rating system for films in China, many parents did

not take their children to watch the film because they were worried that there might be sex and violence scenes in the film, while the film was actually rated as PG-13 in Singapore.

CONCLUSION

Keyword: Art-house Circuit, Video On Demand, Festival Platforms

To begin with a summary of the box-office performances of the selected 5 films: *Angels Wear White* by Vivian Qu had received more than ten-million Chinese yuan at box office. *Kaili Blues* and *The Coffin in the Mountain* both created sort of miracle in the history of the box office of Chinese low budget art-house, the box offices of both were several times more than the production cost. In contrast, the box-office record of *Tharlo* and *Knife in the Clear Water* are rather mediocre, although both of the films have contributed unique aesthetic values to Chinese Cinema.

The research shows the following aspects reflecting the current situation of Chinese art house cinema: first, receiving awards in international film festivals can be helpful for young filmmakers who have not yet introduced to Chinese audience. Secondly, casting does not define the quality of the film but it does help to have professional distributor engaged in the early stage of development and later reach out to wider audience. Third, the directors of the selected films all chose to be on a road-show with their works. The active participation in Q & A and panel discussions after the screening is proved to be an efficient way to gain reputation. It also shortens the distance between the audience and the auteur directors. The directors then have a chance to talk about their creation process and provide a venue to the audience in understanding their films, especially when the concept of art-house cinema is perceived as something 'too obscure to understand.' by the Chinese. Therefore, such activities encourage more Chinese movie-goers to sway their attention on art house cinema.

For young Chinese auteur directors whose projects are at an early stage of development, applying to project markets or pitching forums organized by Chinese film festivals could also be an excellent way to get financial support for the production. Here are the three major project markets and pitching forums for Chinese films:

Golden Horse FPP at Taipei Golden Horse Film Festival

Time: November

Eligibility:

- Feature-length project (feature, documentary or animation) for theatrical release.
- The project is filmed in Chinese, or attached with Ethnic Chinese Director/Producer or shot on location in Taiwan.
- The project has an attached director or producer.
- With a director, producer and a production company attached.
- The project director has not submitted multiple entries for FPP.
- Priority will be given to projects that have not been selected into any other project markets.

(Resources from official website of Golden Horse Awards, 2018)

FIRST Lab at FIRST International Film Festival Xining

Time: July

Eligibility:

- The director who has made no more than three features films.
- The film has to be at least 60 minutes in length or more.
- The project has to be Chinese Film.
- Completed script or treatment.

- Completed financing plan but not yet complete the goal.
- Director and producer attached.
- Priority will be given to projects that have not been selected into any other project markets.

(Resources from official website of FIRST International Film Festival, 2018)

SIFF Project Lab at Shanghai International Film Festival

Time: June

Eligibility:

- Feature film project intended for theatrical release (not including animations);
- Chinese language production, or co-production with China;
- Any project that is not completed before June 2018, including that is under development, financing, shooting and post-production;
- With a finished script or treatment (project with finished script is preferred);
- With a budget plan (project that has secured over 20% of the total budget is preferred);
- Attached with a director and a producer;
- Project that has not participated in any other Chinese project market is preferred;
- A Chinese language production;
- The first or second feature film of the director.

(Resources from official website of Shanghai International Film Festival, 2018)

For projects which are ready for distribution, it is worthy to take a look at the alternative choice, for instance, the Video On Demand (VOD) service. The

growing Video On Demand (VOD) services could be the safe way for low-budget art-house films which do not have a big budget on distribution. Notably, some of the VOD services are not limited for internet user anymore. For instance, *Elephant Dian Ying*, founded in 2017, has completed 2410 screenings of art-house films. The strategy of the new mode of VOD in China is a bit similar as the concept of crowd-funding, whether the screening of the film will happen or not it completely depends on whether there are enough people are willing to pre-pay the ticket. I think this change has indicated a brighter future of the distribution of art-house films, especially for auteur directors who are not aiming for box-office but still would like to reach out to a larger scale of audiences. Adding to that, cinemas are also more willing to screen art-house films since VOD platform has secured the sales.

Last but not least, the number of art-house cinema chains are also growing over the past three years. The United Screening of National Art-house Films was founded in 2016, with around 100 cinemas around China joining, Chinese art-house films are insured to have at least three screenings per day in those cinemas. This year, The Capital Art Star: United Art-House Cinema in Beijing was introduced to cinephiles who live in Beijing. 20 cinemas in Beijing, including four university cinemas, have joined the league (Yuan, 2018). In addition to that, Capital Art Star is making sure there will be at least two screening of art-house films per week in the cinemas which have joined the league. It seems like the market starts to make space for art-house films, I cannot help wondering what the directors of the films I selected are doing now, and if these new changes actually have an impact on their new works, here are what I discovered:

Yukun Xin, director of *Coffin in the Mountain* (2015) completed another film *Wrath of Silence* in 2017, which again is a crime story. However, this time, the

production budget was over 20 million yuan, and box-office was around 50 million yuan (Chinese Box Office, 2017).

Bi Gan, director of *Kaili Blues* (2016), just had a premiere of his new film *Long Day's Journey into Night* (2018) at Cannes Film Festival, and was nominated for Un Certain Regard Award. There is still no news on the theatrical release of the film, but I assume with the cast like Tang Wei, the famous Chinese actress who is known for her role in Ang Lee's film *Lust, Caution* (2007), the box-office will not let us down.

Pema Tsenden, director of *Tharlo* (2015), teamed up with Wong Kar-Wai (as executive producer) was just selected into the Horizon section in Venice Film Festival this year with his new film *Jinpa* (2018) as one of the only two Chinese films which got selected to the festival. *Jinpa* is also based on literature, this time it is an adaptation combining the short story *The Killer* written by Tibetan writer Tsering Norbu and a short story called *I Hit a Goat* written by director Tsenden himself.

Xuebo Wang, the producer of *Tharlo* (Tsenden, 2015) and director of *The Knife in the Clear Water* (2016), has no news yet regarding a new project. However, in one interview from 2016, he mentioned in one interview with Beijing Film Academy Newspaper that he has been preparing for a new film which will be a magical-realistic crime story. He wrote the script of the film back in 2010 (Beijing Film Academy Newspaper, 2017). I sincerely hope with the success of *Knife in the Clear Water* (2016), the new film of Wang will be realized soon in the near future.

Vivian Qu, director/writer of *Angels Wear White* (2017) is preparing a new film according to one of the interviews. There is not yet information about her new film which is understandable, since it has been merely a year when *Angels Wear White* (2017) had its premiere at Venice Film Festival.

In conclusion, directors who were mentioned are still working with medium or rather a low budget production. I suppose, even though budget cannot define the quality of the films, it does somehow define the extent of the popularity of the themes and the potential audiences. It is a long way to cultivate audience taste on art-house films. But if we could start with integrating the film rating system into the censorship system, it would definitely have a positive impact on the variations of films which people could watch in the cinemas. Let us hope this day will come soon, so filmmakers in China compromise less when it comes to choosing between box-office and their artistic expressions.

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