Challenges For Chinese Film Directors In Contemporary Film Industry

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the challenges and threats faced by Chinese film directors in maintaining relevance within the contemporary film industry. Through in-depth interviews with 25 directors, this research identifies key issues affecting their careers, including the tension between artistic expression and commercial demands, career instability, censorship constraints, financial pressures, and systemic industry deficiencies. The study highlights how directors struggle to balance personal creative vision with audience preferences, particularly in an era of shifting market trends and the rise of fast-paced media consumption. Industry instability, marked by unpredictable work cycles and low salaries, forces many directors to seek financially stable careers outside filmmaking. Censorship further restricts creative freedom by limiting the exploration of sensitive themes. Additionally, intense domestic and international competition often prioritizes film festival recognition and commercial success over originality. Cultural barriers, such as persistent stereotypes in Western perceptions of Chinese cinema, hinder the global reach of Chinese films. Financial pressures, exacerbated by high celebrity salaries and budget constraints, push the industry toward commercially viable projects at the expense of artistic innovation. Furthermore, the lack of a well-developed support system and professional training opportunities impedes the growth of emerging filmmakers. Despite these challenges, directors continue to explore innovative ways to sustain their craft. This study underscores the need for systemic reforms to foster an environment where artistic freedom and industry sustainability coexist. The findings suggest that strengthening institutional support, improving international collaboration, and encouraging diverse storytelling are essential for enhancing the global relevance of Chinese filmmakers. Future research should explore the evolving impact of digital platforms, government policies, and international market trends on the careers of Chinese directors.

INTRODUCTION

Relevance of Chinese film directors in the contemporary film industry faces significant challenges and threats amidst globalization. Cross-cultural communication, vital for navigating cultural differences and reaching global audiences, presents opportunities and also obstacles for directors (Jianwei & Jianguo, 2023). While globalization enhances the international exchange of films and fosters cultural integration, it also intensifies competition and exposes filmmakers to risks of cultural misrepresentation and misunderstanding. In the balance of cultural authenticity vs international market, they often contend with limited resources, shifting audience preference, and the dominance of Hollywood storytelling conventions (Leung & Lee, 2019). These challenges necessitate a deeper investigation into strategy and role of Chinese directors to maintain relevance in a rapidly evolving global film industry.

Chinese directors play a vital role in cross-cultural communication by participating in international film festivals, creating diverse narratives, and collaborating with global filmmakers (Ford & Fei, 2023). Their efforts enhance cultural understanding and challenge stereotypes, yet they also confront significant barriers in producing high-quality films that resonate with diverse audiences (Lu, 2022).

Since the 1980s, China's film industry has undergone market-oriented transformation, including private capital investment, digitalization, and adoption of cinema chains, which enables the industry to expand internationally. Today, the super-giant China film market is showcasing artistic innovation plus technological advancement (Liao, Peng & Shi, 2022). Directors tackle diverse themes, explore international co-production, adapt techniques appealing to global audiences, and enrich cultural exchange (Yao, Chen & Zhong, 2023).

However, strict censorship and low-quality online films limit creative freedom and cross-cultural engagement (Moon & Yin, 2020). Challenges such as language barrier, distribution issue, and limited global exposure further hinder Chinese cinema's global reach. But to the inspiration of young generations, iconic filmmakers like Zhang Yimou and Ang Lee demonstrate the potential of blending cultural heritage with universal narrative.

Hence, we intend to answer this question hereby: What are the threats faced by China film directors when keeping relevance in the evolving film industry of China? We examine the impact of market competition, shifting audience preference, alternative entertainment platforms, strict censorship, and tension between artistic integrity and commercial demand. Additionally, we investigate how these factors affect directors' ability to innovate, create high-quality content, and adapt to technological and global industry changes, offering insight into threat to their sustainability and competitiveness.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Chinese film directors face significant threats in cross-cultural communication, including language & cultural barrier, aesthetic difference, and stereotypical perception, which hinder their ability to connect with global audiences. These challenges are compounded by strict censorship, shifting market dynamics, and the pressure to balance artistic integrity with commercial demand. This chapter examines these threats and their impact on storytelling, filmmaking practice, and international audience reception, providing a foundation for analyzing strategy of directors to navigate obstacles and maintain relevance.

Cross-Cultural Communication Challenge & Barrier for Chinese Cinema

Chinese film directors face significant challenges in cross-cultural communication, including language barrier, cultural difference, and regulatory disparity (Zhang, 2022). Language proficiency issues often hinders effective collaboration with international teams, while cultural nuance and aesthetic

disparity can lead to misunderstanding (Minkov, 2024). Adapting to diverse market regulations, such as censorship standards, further complicates global dissemination (Wang, 2023).

Cultural differences, such as distinct values and social custom, present obstacles in crafting films that resonate globally. Misinterpretation of Chinese cultural elements, like family values, may impede understanding among foreign audiences. To overcome these challenges, directors can employ translators & cultural consultants, and explore genre filmmaking to balance authenticity with international appeal (Huang & Huang, 2023).

Political tension and geopolitical influence also affect the global distribution of Chinese film, shaping storytelling choices and collaborative dynamics. Internally, China's ethnic diversity poses unique cross-cultural communication challenges, as highlighted by directors like Wanma Caidan, who bridge minority tradition and mainstream narrative (Waitan, 2023).

Financial and distribution constraints are additional barriers, given the high production cost and limited international market access. Scholars recommend strengthening international collaboration, participating in film festivals, and leveraging digital platforms to expand global reach of Chinese film (Chalaby, 2024).

As Chinese cinema navigates globalization, directors must refine their cross-cultural communication skill and storytelling approach. Embracing diversity, fostering partnership, and leveraging technological advancement, Chinese filmmakers are able to create compelling narratives that resonate with a global audience (Krampe et al., 2022).

Managing Threat to Remain Relevant in Chinese Film Industry

Chinese film directors continue to overcome industrial challenges by embracing innovation, adapting to shifting audience preference, and delivering compelling cinematic experience. As the industry evolves, they push boundaries, explore diverse storytelling techniques, and address social issues, ensuring their relevance in the global film landscape (Mengying, 2023).

Rise of online streaming and digitization reduced production cost and facilitated widespread dissemination, enabling low-budget production like micro-movies to thrive on digital platforms (Hennig-Thurau, Ravid & Sorenson, 2021). Shift in consumer demographics, especially with coming-of-age of post-2000 generation, injects youth into China's audience base. However, competition from short video and digital games demands that filmmakers innovate. Provided with 80,000 screens nationwide, enhanced movie-going experience, and varied distribution channel, Chinese cinema is poised for growth and an optimistic future (Jiang, 2022).

Directors face stringent censorship regulation, requiring a balance between creative expression and government guidelines (McIntosh, Antes & DuBoi, 2021). Competing with Hollywood's global dominance, they integrate universal storytelling elements and pursue international collaboration (Leung & Qi, 2023). Addressing piracy and intellectual property challenges, directors employ technology and partner with anti-piracy platforms (Ibrahim et al., 2020). Rising production costs necessitate an innovative financing model, while market saturation drives a focus on quality over quantity (Wang & Xu, 2023).

In the digital age, filmmakers adopt advanced technology such as virtual reality and leverage online streaming platforms to diversify narrative and cater to diverse audience interest (Hu, 2022). Global collaboration enriches the appeal of Chinese film by integrating diverse perspectives and talent. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of remote work, digital distribution, flexible production schedule, and risk management protocol, ensuring uninterrupted film production (Chan, 2023).

Directors remain committed to creating high-quality films with global resonance, moving beyond regulatory compliance. Strategic partnership, international influence, and creative financing address

challenges like censorship and market saturation. Technological advancement, such as virtual reality and online platforms, enables experimentation with innovative storytelling techniques (Leal Filho et al., 2022).

Therefore, Chinese filmmakers navigate the evolving landscape through adaptability, prioritizing quality and audience understanding. Embracing innovation and fostering global collaboration, they ensure vitality of Chinese cinema and its role in cross-cultural communication (Xing et al., 2023).

Conceptual Framework

This study develops a comprehensive framework (Figure 1) to examine the cross-cultural communication challenges faced by Chinese filmmakers in producing and promoting high-quality films, particularly in navigating international partnerships. Despite these challenges, Chinese filmmakers demonstrate resilience in maintaining relevance. By integrating theoretical insights with practical strategies, the framework aims to enhance filmmaking practices, facilitate cross-cultural adaptation, and expand the global influence of Chinese cinema (Osborne & Grant-Smith, 2021).

Cross-cultural communication plays a crucial role in shaping the artistic vision and global impact of Chinese directors. Personal experiences, cultural backgrounds, and professional interactions directly inform their storytelling, enriching narratives with authenticity and depth (Rifeser & Ros i Solé, 2022). However, directors must navigate language barriers, cultural norms, and shifting industry dynamics, all of which influence audience reception and market success (Aririguzoh, 2022). The challenge lies in balancing cultural authenticity with universal appeal.

Despite these obstacles, Chinese directors remain resilient, producing high-quality films that transcend cultural boundaries and engage global audiences (Parc & Messerlin, 2021). Their mastery of cross-cultural communication allows them to anticipate audience preferences, adapt storytelling techniques, and integrate diverse cultural elements, ensuring both artistic integrity and international success (Ford & Fei, 2023).

Furthermore, directors continuously innovate, experimenting with new storytelling methods and technologies to stay ahead in the evolving film industry (Raithel et al., 2021). Their adaptability not only strengthens Chinese cinema's global standing but also inspires future filmmakers (Henriksen et al., 2022).

Therefore, Chinese directors play a vital role in bridging cultural divides through cinema. By overcoming industry challenges with innovation and collaboration, they enhance the global reach of Chinese films. Moving forward, fostering a supportive industry, investing in talent, and leveraging digital advancements will sustain growth. Balancing cultural authenticity with universal appeal, they will continue to shape the global film landscape.
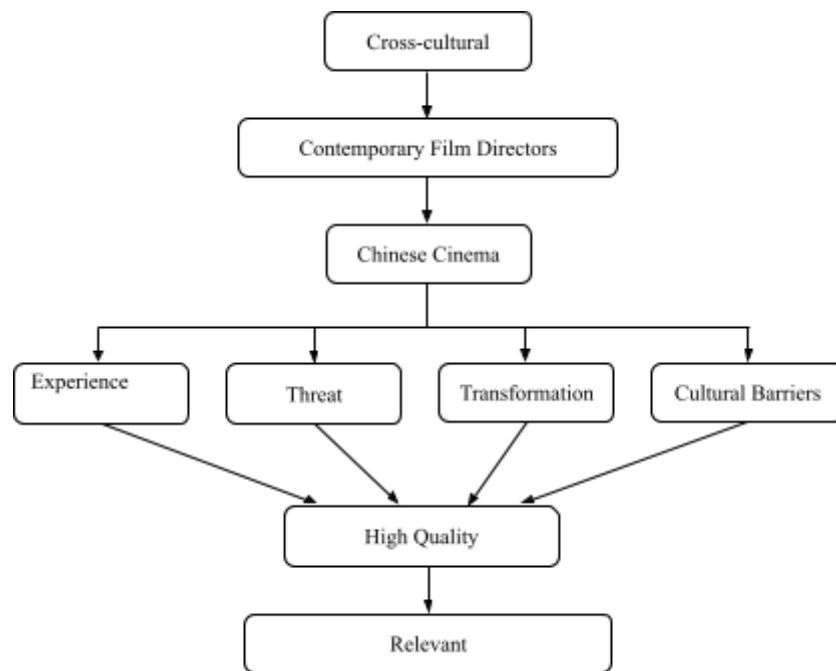
Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of the cross-cultural challenges of Contemporary Film Directors in Chinese Cinema

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative in-depth interview with Chinese film directors has been applied herein to explore their roles, challenge, and strategy within the Chinese film industry, wherein open-ended questions facilitate detailed understanding of their experience, offering insight into cross-cultural collaboration and industrial dynamics. We aim to establish a standardized film art framework adaptable across diverse media platforms and cultural contexts, enriching creative processes and contributing to global cinema discussion.

The research design provides a systematic framework as study guide, cleared with objective, methodology, and implementation steps (Hunziker & Blankenagel, 2021). Qualitative phenomenological approach is employed as a framework, enriched with in-depth interviews to explore whistleblowers' perspective of the Chinese film industry. The participants, with media background or as we-media users, share insight into utilizing transmedia platforms for cinematic dissemination.

Purposive sampling is used to select participants with relevant characteristics, ensuring alignment with research objective, and finally 25 Chinese film(F) directors(D) are selected and labeled as FD1 to FD25, characteristics ranging from background, genre contribution, to influence within the industry. Data is analyzed thematically with an inductive process to identify patterns and themes emerging organically, wherein qualitative data is organized and coded with NVivo 14 to facilitate extraction of meaningful insight and enhance interpretative depth.

This approach captures subtle nuance, nonverbal cue, and lexical choice, providing profound understanding of evolving dynamics in the Chinese film industry (Priya, 2021). Integrating whistleblowers' experiences, the research explores innovative use of transmedia platforms, offering nuanced perspective on cinematic dissemination and its intersection with the changing media landscape.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

For decades, Chinese cinema remained constrained by political ideology and lacked international perspective, but things changed since the 1980s. In the era of globalization, Chinese filmmakers must engage in cross-cultural dialogue to enhance cultural exchange and transmission, addressing challenges from Hollywood dominance and significant cultural deficit since China's WTO accession (Leung & Lee, 2019).

This research, by interviewing 25 directors, explores strategies to navigate cultural barriers and create films that resonate globally (Knott, et al., 2022). Findings reveal a focus on blending local cultural elements with universal themes to bridge divides effectively. Inspired by 5th generation filmmakers like Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige, directors manage to integrate contemporary perspectives to evolve Chinese cinema's global narrative (Teng, 2023).

High-context Chinese culture, rooted in proverbs and rituals, contrasts with low-context Western frameworks, necessitating a shift toward universal visual language (Chen, Ma & Guo, 2022). Balancing local authenticity vs global appeal, as exemplified by Ang Lee's Crouching Tiger & Hidden Dragon, remains crucial (Gao, 2022).

Globalization offers opportunities for cultural exchange but risks homogenization. Chinese filmmakers must innovate while preserving cultural identity, using strategies that emphasize adaptability and storytelling. These efforts position Chinese cinema to thrive globally, fostering cultural understanding and appreciation.

The Chinese film industry is now at a critical juncture, where innovation and adaptation are crucial for survival. Directors must navigate evolving audience preference, fluctuating market trends, and external pressure which shapes their creative landscape (Park, 2024). Censorship remains a significant barrier, limiting creative freedom and restricting contemporary themes. Competition from established and emerging filmmakers, coupled with cultural barriers, complicates efforts to connect with diverse audiences (Ford & Fei, 2023).

Systemic challenges further exacerbate the situation, including inflated star fee, financial pressure, and the incomplete industrial structure that leads to low-quality production (Sun, 2021). Rise of non-expert talent in key roles threatens professionalism, impacting film quality. Career instability adds to the uncertainty faced by directors, who must continually innovate to remain relevant (Okonkwo, et al., 2023).

Table 1 provides an overview of the 25 interviewed film directors (FD1–FD25), highlighting their diverse backgrounds in age, gender, education, expertise, and industry experience across different regions, reflecting a broad spectrum of perspectives within the Chinese film industry.

Table 1. Informants of Interview

Informant (*FD*)	Age/Gender	Profile
1	66M	Currently residing in Hong Kong. 40y+ filming career. 40+ feature films as director and 80+ films as producer.
2	39M	Guangzhou. Focus on left-behind children, war veterans, pneumoconiosis, mental disabilities, and LGBTQ+ community.
3	32M	Xi'an. 4 years of directing experience.
4	43F	Australia. Director & screenwriter. Studied feature film directing in University of Melbourne.
5	66M	Melbourne. Director & screenwriter Experienced in television. Produced digital and short films through his Beijing studio. Studied Chinese in Sichuan University.

Informant (*FD*)	Age/Gender	Profile
6	31M	Nantong. Independent filmmaker & documentary director. Bachelor of Transportation & Civil Engineering from Yangzhou University.
7	41M	Changsha. Bachelor of Advertising.
8	53M	Wuhan. Professor in Wuhan Textile University. Ph.D. of Film Studies from Wuhan University.
9	39M	Beijing. CG artist specializing in digital effects. Bachelor from Beijing Film Academy.
10	36M	Wuhan. Studied filming in Beijing Film Academy, Shanghai East China Normal University, and Wuhan Media College.
11	42M	Shanghai. Xinhua News Agency journalist & documentary director.
12	27M	Nanchang. CCO at Licheng Interactive Entertainment, & Director at Yunwu Media.
13	44M	Beijing. Graduator from Wiesbaden University of Applied Sciences, Germany.
14	27M	Shanghai. Graduator from Department of Film, National Taiwan University of Arts.
15	63M	Hong Kong. Worked at a television station after high school. Director of popular comedy films as classic hits: *King of Comedy, God of Cookery, Shaolin Soccer, Flirting Scholar*, and *Licensed to Steal*.
16	40F	Hefei. Studied history in Wuhan University.
17	32M	Changsha. Studied Broadcast & Television Directing in Hunan Normal University.
18	22M	Chongqing. Young film director, screenwriter, and producer. Bachelor of Drama and Film Directing.
19	25M	Beijing. Graduate student specializing in film at Communication University of China.
20	37M	Guangzhou. Studied Chinese in college.
21	29M	Beijing & Vancouver. Studied Art and Design in Carr University, Canada.
22	24M	Macau. University teacher specializing in film and television directing.
23	29M	Beijing. Studied Broadcast & Television Directing in Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts.
24	30M	Beijing. Film director and signed director with ARC LIGHT Alliance.
25	38F	Wuhan. Master of Communication Studies from Huazhong University of Science and Technology.

These are revealed by interviews with 25 directors, highlighting concerns about censorship, funding for independent films, and non-expert talent. Despite all the hurdles, directors persist in blending traditional Chinese culture with modern storytelling to stand out (Weber et al., 2024). Their resilience reflects broader cultural shifts, emphasizing the need for adaptability to sustain relevance and foster global competitiveness in the ever-evolving industry.

As in Table 2, Chinese directors face threats while maintaining relevance in the industry. These keywords are extracted from interviews with 25 directors & informants, including shifting audience preference & market trend, career instability, censorship constraint, competition, cultural barrier, distorted star fee, financial pressure, incomplete industrial system, low-quality production, and influx of non-experts. These 10 factors not only impact directors' creative freedom and career development but

pose challenges to global competitiveness of Chinese cinema.

Table 2: **Themes discussed by interviewee regarding Threats Faced by Chinese Directors in Maintaining Relevance in Film Industry**

No.	Theme
1.	Audience Preference & Market Trend
2.	Career Instability
3.	Censorship Constraint
4.	Competition
5.	Cultural Barrier
6.	Distorted Star Fee
7.	Financial Pressure
8.	Incomplete Industrial System
9.	Low Quality
10.	Non-Professionalism

Audience Preference & Market Trend

In an era of rapid technological change and evolving viewer habits, filmmakers face the challenge of balancing creative aspiration with the demand of a fragmented, impatient audience (Ciarli, et al., 2021). Rise of digital platform and short-form content has reshaped narratives to cater to fleeting attention span and market-driven preference. Films now often serve as outlets for societal debate, reflecting frustration and tension, pressuring more on directors to maintain authenticity while achieving commercial success (Zeng, et al., 2023). As in the excerpts from interview:

"Some directors focus on self-expression, others chase commercial success: I try to balance both. Films today reflect societal frustrations; they become outlets for public anger and platforms for debate, and highlight deeper issues." (FD9)

"Media consumption can narrow perspective, as it often shows only what others want you to see. Growing up disliking TV, I still avoid it, finding it limit imagination even as I work in the industry."(FD25)

This tension is evidenced by directors' experience. FD9 notes how societal frustrations influence cinema, transforming films into a platform for public discourse. FD25 critiques modern viewing habit citing "information cocoon", warning against how excessive media consumption narrows imagination (Zhuofan, et al., 2023). These reveal the difficulty of staying relevant while navigating shifting audience behavior.

Understanding the audience is crucial. FD1 attributes early career success to connecting with viewers and gauging their sentiments. This aligns with the view that market trends inspire creativity but risk diluting authenticity (Shavitt & Barnes, 2020). However, dominance of technology and short-form content threatens traditional storytelling. FD8 argues that overreliance on AI risks eroding emotional depth, while FD7 highlights the decline in patience for slower, emotionally driven films due to platforms like TikTok (Jarzebski, et al., 2021).

Economic pressure complicates filmmaking even further. FD15 emphasizes the need for entertainment-driven content to secure funding, while FD20 notes the risk of inauthentic narrative failing to resonate with the audience (Carroll & Kovács, 2021). FD7 observes the struggle of long-form content, like documentaries, to hold attention in a fast-paced digital era.

In conclusion, technological innovation, shifting audience behaviors, and market pressure present opportunity plus challenge for filmmakers. As audience preference leans toward instant gratification, sustaining cinematic storytelling requires directors to adapt while preserving emotional depth and authenticity. Balance between creative integrity and commercial success remains at the core of the filmmaking dilemma.

Career Instability

Filming industry's inherent instability poses a significant challenge for directors balancing artistic vision and financial security. Unlike stable professions, filmmaking offers unpredictable income, long production cycles, and fierce competition for funding (Chen, et al., 2022). Such uncertainty often drives directors to explore alternative careers like new media or advertising, which provide better financial stability but risk diminishing their creative relevance over time (Nyarko, 2023). As in the excerpts from interview:

> *"Many graduates make short films for festivals but struggle to gain visibility, leading some to shift career to more financially stable new media industry, despite hoping to return to personal projects."(FD22)*

> *"The film industry struggles to retain directors, as studios can't keep them on staff without ongoing projects, prompting many to seek better-paying opportunities elsewhere."(FD5)*

Frequently faced is tension between personal projects and market-driven demand. Many lament the lack of visibility for artistic works, especially short films, which pushes them toward commercial endeavors for financial survival (Elliott et al., 2018). As one director notes, the production cycle could span years, leading to waning audience interest and professional burnout. Another emphasizes the importance of network and self-promotion, acknowledging that inconsistent work schedules makes filmmaking less sustainable than regular employment.

Rise of industries like gaming and new media exacerbates the talent drain, offering creatives higher pay and stability (Meriläinen, 2023). Emerging talents, including directors and cinematographers, often transition to these sectors, leaving the film industry struggling to retain its cultural and artistic workforce (Leung & Lee, 2019). One director observes that while such roles provide financial security, they can lead to self-doubt and compromise a filmmaker's ability to pursue meaningful projects.

Despite these challenges, some filmmakers advocate perseverance. They stress the need to continuously refine skills and create works, anticipating future opportunities (Ivanov, 2022). However, addressing systemic instability in the film industry is crucial. This includes providing financial support, promoting emerging talents, and creating platforms for artistic films to thrive.

In conclusion, while the film industry offers unique creative opportunities, its unpredictability forces many directors to choose between artistic ambition and a stable career. To sustain cinema as an art form, the industry must foster an environment where filmmakers can pursue their vision without sacrificing financial security or long-term relevance.

Censorship Constraint

Censorship significantly influences Chinese cinema, shaping its creative and thematic boundaries (Ruan, 2023). Directors face strict regulation, complex approval process, and political sensitivity, often at the expense of artistic freedom. This state-controlled system affects production schedule and film distribution, compelling filmmakers to compromise to secure approval (Box-Steffensmeier, et al., 2022). Consequently, censorship becomes a defining force, limiting innovation and diverse storytelling.

Despite these challenges, some directors argue that adherence to regulation is a professional responsibility. They believe true obstacles lie in a lack of passion and resilience, viewing censorship as a test of their creative adaptability (Jianwei & Jianguo, 2023). As one director explained, "Ghost films, popular in Hong Kong, are prohibited in mainland China due to ideological restrictions, despite our expertise in this genre" (FD1).

Unpredictable approval process exacerbates these challenges. One filmmaker shared, "Even ideologically compliant films like Fooled for a Lifetime face delays. Personal relationships often influence approval, creating frustration beyond content-related issues" (FD15). Such unpredictability discourages investors, stifling innovation and promoting homogenization (Li, et al., 2023).

Another director noted, "Committees without cinematic expertise stifle creativity, especially on sensitive topics. Investors fear censorship risks, leading to cautious filmmaking" (FD5). This culture of caution limits thematic diversity and undermines industry sustainability (Leung & Lee, 2019). Directors must balance artistry with state guidelines, knowing missteps could jeopardize their work (Xiao, 2013).

Pressures extend beyond regulation. "In today's self-media era, backlash risks amplified scrutiny, pushing us to prioritize risk management over creativity," one filmmaker stated (FD20). Political tension further compounds these issues. "Rising East-West tensions make sensitive topics riskier. Without the dragon seal, even festival participation is impossible," another director shared (FD9).

In conclusion, while censorship challenges filmmakers, many persist in finding creative solutions within constraint. However, the growing political pressure and rigid regulatory environment threaten the diversity and cultural richness of Chinese cinema (Ford & Fei, 2023). Open dialogue between regulator and filmmaker is vital to foster greater creative freedom and ensure the industry's global resonance.

Competition

Fierce competition in the Chinese film industry creates a toxic environment where directors are pressured to outshine each other, leading to a cycle of self-harm (Moon & Yin, 2020). Such competition fosters an adversarial mentality, hindering collaboration and innovation, and prioritizes personal achievement over collective growth (Fu, et al., 2022). The "survival of the fittest" mindset suppresses creative risk as directors fear deviating from conventional narrative, which could threaten funding or recognition. This is even exacerbated by focus on commercially viable projects, compelling filmmakers to pursue market trend and compromise authentic voices (Kazlou, Cherp & Jewell, 2024). As in the excerpts from interview:

"With fierce competition and limited resources, I strive to create projects that reflect my passion while appealing to investors, balancing storytelling with market demand."(FD23)

"Amid intense industry pressure and shrinking budget, I focus on historical theme and government-sponsored content, which simplifies funding and alleviates production challenge."(FD12)

In this context, many directors turn to government-backed content to simplify negotiation, which further limits creative freedom (Leung & Lee, 2019). As resources shrink and funding more selective, directors are caught between maintaining artistic integrity and meeting commercial demand, risking the richness of storytelling. Independent filmmakers, especially in the short film scene, feel intense internal competition, leading to self-doubts and anxiety (Schoales, 2022).

Ultimately, the unrelenting pursuit of funding and recognition stifles creativity, undermines directors' ability to innovate, and compromises their unique artistic vision. This competitive pressure,

combined with the shift towards government-supported projects, threatens the diversity of narrative and the core of artistic expression in Chinese cinema.

Cultural Barrier

In the time of globalization, Chinese filmmakers face significant cultural barriers when attempting to share their stories internationally. These barriers, rooted in differing worldviews and values, often hinder effective cross-cultural communication (Aririguzoh, 2022). While Chinese filmmakers strive to tell authentic stories, they are challenged to bridge the gap between Chinese culture and overseas sensibility, as misunderstanding may grow (He, 2024). Filmmakers often feel torn between domestic pride and the desire for international recognition, with many perceiving Western awards as politically motivated rather than genuinely supportive of Chinese cinema (Berry, 2021). As illustrated by the excerpts from interview:

"There's a perception that Western awards favor films showcasing China's less glamorous side, rather than celebrating Chinese culture. Some filmmakers view international accolades as politically driven, reflecting a broader cultural divide." (FD15)

"Telling a Chinese story internationally is tough due to cultural barriers. It's like a chicken and a duck talking past each other—we can't often find common ground ideologically." (FD9)

Language barrier also exacerbates these challenges as translation issues can obscure the intended message of Chinese film (Lu, 2022). Directors face difficulties when conveying culturally specific content to international audience, as many foreign viewers try hard to fully understand Chinese value and context (Dai, et al., 2022). As highlighted by the excerpts from interview:

"Language is the main challenge. If the translation accurately conveys my message, I consider it a success, but many films struggle with this." (FD22)

"Cultural differences heavily influence filmmaking. For example, The Wandering Earth *focuses on collective survival, while similar Western films emphasize individual escape." (FD10)*

Filmmakers also face challenges in balancing authenticity with expectation of foreign audiences. Legal and cultural restrictions in various countries, such as religious regulations in the Middle East, further complicate this process (Xiao, 2023).

In conclusion, cultural barriers significantly limit the global success of Chinese film. Language, ideological difference, and misconception about foreign audiences create obstacles that hinder Chinese filmmakers' ongoing path for international recognition (Zhuofan et al., 2023). Without addressing these barriers, Chinese directors would risk losing relevance on the global stage and compromising their artistic integrity (Ford & Fei, 2023).

Distorted Star Fee

Exorbitant actor salaries, particularly for "traffic stars," now constitute a significant challenge for the Chinese film & television industry, posing threats of sustainability (Zhang, Zhang & Chan, 2022). These high fees consume 70-80% of production budget, leaving little for other essential roles like screenwriter and director, and undermining the potential for creative innovation (FD1). As FD1 noted, the imbalance is reminiscent of Hong Kong film's 1990s decline, driven by over-investment in stars and underfunding content (Kang, Peng & Anwar, 2022). As revealed in the excerpt from interview:

"High actor salary and shifting power dynamics hinder directors' creative control, prompting the need of streamlined studios for lower reliance on celebrity talent and more independent filmmaking." (FD15)

Film industry's increasing reliance on star power over artistic quality makes it harder for independent filmmakers to thrive. Directors often struggle to find talent aligned with their vision, as actors dominate casting choice and financial pressure pushes for higher budgets (FD15). This shift risks overshadowing original storytelling and stifling creativity (Peng, et al., 2019). FD15 advocates for streamlining production to reduce reliance on celebrity and foster creative freedom (Regal, et al., 2023).

While some directors are shifting focus toward experienced actors over "traffic stars" to prioritize talent and authenticity, high actor salaries remain a barrier for emerging filmmakers (FD12). Rising production budgets create opportunities for veteran actors but new filmmakers still find limited access to star power, which is crucial for industrial recognition. FD12 emphasizes that this shift could refocus the industry on genuine acting talent so as to promise higher production quality and ensure long-term sustainability.

However, for young directors working with short films, a high actor salary is not always an issue. Some well-known actors are willing to collaborate at lower fees for exposure, making star fees less of a concern in independent projects (FD17). Nevertheless, the broader market's reliance on stars presents a challenge in balancing talent with budget constraint (FD14).

In conclusion, exorbitant star fees threaten the creative freedom and sustainability of the Chinese film industry. To foster innovation and ensure industry growth, a more balanced approach that prioritizes quality storytelling and supports emerging talents is necessary.

Financial Pressure

Financial pressure is for certain a significant challenge for filmmakers, especially those in independent and art cinema. Directors often face difficulty securing consistent funding and are forced to compromise creative vision for quicker financial return. Market volatility worsens this issue, with filmmakers adapting to shifting audience preference at the expense of artistic integrity. Even critically acclaimed directors struggle to finance new projects, narrowing their path to relevance. As FD14 notes, financial pressure and piracy undermine the revenue, with platforms like iQIYI not fully powered to protect against copyright violation. FD4 highlights how financial interests now dominate film festivals, prioritizing political correctness over artistic merit, and laments the commercialized environment that stifles creativity. As narrated in the excerpts from interview:

> *"The pandemic stalled my projects, highlighting financial pressure and the impact of piracy on revenue, despite legal acquisition by platforms like iQIYI and Tencent. Weak copyright awareness calls for better education & more collaboration with overseas cinema."(FD14)*

> *"International festivals increasingly prioritize politics and profit over art, leaving filmmakers struggling financially. Art films face constant financial challenge, unlike mainstream films which are favored by star power and mass appeal."(FD4)*

The shift to more stable careers as directors grow older, often influenced by social pressure like marriage & family, further intensifies the challenge (Akkermans, et al., 2024). FD5 points to the high elimination rate in the film industry and the increasingly tougher path to success. FD20 adds that many new directors struggle to secure funding and find their visibility and continued filmmaking less certain. FD9 shares the pressure under investor expectation, resulting in poorer creative freedom, while FD2 expresses concern about audiovisual quality of grassroot films due to budget constraint.

Additionally, festival entry and long way journeys could cost directors too high to win visibility, as seen in FD2's struggle to attend festivals. FD17 and FD10 highlight the role of strong network and funding in sustaining a director's career, but even internationally recognized directors face challenge in maintaining creative freedom due to financial pressure (Loots, et al., 2022).

Therefore, financial burden obliges many directors to prioritize commercial viability over creativity, threatening diversity and the future of independent filmmaking. Innovation is restrained thereby and filmmaking talents forced out of the industry, risking the loss of unique voices in cinema.

Incomplete Industrial System

The Chinese film industry comprises significant structural flaws that hinder filmmakers' long-term success. Unlike Hollywood's well-established, genre-specific system, China's industry lacks specialized support, limiting creativity and genre exploration. This is especially evident in sci-fi filmmaking, where directors struggle without requisite expertise or technology. As FD6 notes, "Directors, particularly in art films, struggle to explore genres like sci-fi due to limited industrial support." Moreover, new filmmakers are impeded by the industry's demand for featured film experience, with few entry-level roles available (FD17).

Though invested in short film incubators, weak distribution and profit mechanism in comparison with Europe makes it difficult to sustain a career in short film. Financial pressure, technological gap, and the aftermath of pandemic have further exacerbated these issues and stifled innovation (Sharma, et al., 2024). As FD7 highlights, "Despite affordable cameras, few embrace modern technologies like AI, relying on traditional editing software only."

Moreover, many directors face a career deadlock, and few are positioned with the opportunity to pursue dreams. FD3 shares that "Many filmmakers I know leave the industry by 35, forced to work on projects dictated by others instead of pursuing artistic vision." Deficiency of international collaboration also isolates Chinese filmmakers, hindering their global engagement (FD5).

In conclusion, the underdeveloped structure of the Chinese film industry limits filmmakers' opportunity and stifles creativity. The absence of specialization, inadequate funding, and lack of international exposure induce a cycle where new talent struggles to thrive. As FD6 observes, "The system lacks Hollywood-style specialization," preventing both emerging and established directors from realizing their full potential. Without systemic reform and global collaboration, the growth and international influence of Chinese cinema shall remain at stake.

Low Quality

Prevalence of low-quality films in the Chinese film industry undermines directors' relevance and career sustainability. As filmmakers prioritize quick profiting over artistic integrity, the market becomes flooded with repetitive, uninspired works that fail to engage audiences. Audiences fatigued thereby, this saturation decreases the directors' chance to secure funding for ambitious projects or gain international recognition (Kang, Peng & Anwar, 2022). As one director states, "The Chinese film industry struggles with producing innovative contents ... leading to over saturation of similar, low-quality works" (FD6).

Local market orientation plus economic consideration has created a polarized industry dominated by either blockbuster or low-quality film, leaving few opportunities for mid-tier production (Leung & Lee, 2019). This imbalance restrains creativity and limits international appeal. As one director notes, "Quick profiting prioritized over artistic integrity for many filmmakers leads to low-quality production" (FD8). Inferior originality and repeated sounding tropes have also weakened audience engagement. As another director points out, "Films are repetitive, with no new elements" (FD15).

The decline in quality turns international promotion for low-budget films even more difficult. "International promotion ... has become more difficult ... Festivals seem to have shifted focus away from Chinese films" (FD7). This diminished visibility hampers directors' ability to reach global audience and limits the industry's competitiveness (Yang & Higbee, 2024).
For the sake of trend reversal, directors must advocate for higher standards, embrace originality,

and seek innovative ways to engage with both domestic and international audiences. Or, the Chinese filmmaking industry shall risk an irrelevant future, with even fewer opportunities for upcoming filmmakers.

Non-professionalism

Significantly the directors' relevance is threatened by non-professionalism in the Chinese film industry in a rapidly evolving cinematic landscape. Given the industry flooded with aspiring filmmakers of minor formal training, storytelling quality declines and professional standards diminish. This creates a cycle where directors struggle to assert their artistic vision, often against decisions made by people with little filmmaking experience, such as a celebrity actor or an executive prioritizing personal preference over artistic integrity. The influence of non-expertise leads to content homogenization and commercial over artistic focus. Furthermore, many directors are of non-professional backgrounds, hindering their capability to handle filmmaking complexities, which lessens their credibility and stifles innovation (Wu & Dong, 2021).

Dominance of non-experts in decision-making limits directors' creative freedom and influence (Cohee & Barnhart, 2024). As one director explains, "Directors often face frustration as their ideas are dismissed by laymen in filmmaking" (FD1). Another director notes, "The power rests with producers, and the director's vision is often undermined by arbitrary decisions on script, effect, or casting" (FD8). This lack of professional input exacerbates the cycle, limiting directors' connection with the audience. A third director points out, "Feedback from non-industry friends is helpful, but outsider influence can stifle creativity" (FD14).

Additionally, the lack of formal training forces many directors to rely on experimental trials, exposed to significant challenges when producing impressive narratives under tight constraints. As one director shares, "I learned filmmaking through trial and error, and the process is rewarding and also challenging" (FD16). This highlights the need for stronger industrial education to foster professional development (Moin, 2022).

In conclusion, poor professionalism in Chinese cinema impedes directors' power of innovation and compromises industrial growth. To sustain relevance and foster creativity, systemic reform shall be a must, including more inclination upon formal education and professional development.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the critical challenges Chinese film directors face in maintaining relevance in a rapidly evolving industry, including the tension between artistic expression and market demand, career instability, censorship, financial constraints, and weak industry support. The dominance of fast-consumption media, such as short videos, further pressures filmmakers to compromise creativity for audience expectations. Career instability, marked by long production cycles and low earnings, pushes many directors toward more stable alternatives like advertising and digital content, sidelining creative talent. Strict censorship restricts storytelling on sensitive topics, leading to film delays, modifications, or removals. Additionally, the industry's emphasis on festivals and awards often undermines originality, while cultural barriers and stereotypes limit global reach. Rising star salaries and financial pressures further constrain resources for innovation and quality script development, with creative control frequently disrupted by inexperienced producers. To address these issues, the industry must develop a more integrated and sustainable ecosystem, fostering structural reforms that support balanced storytelling, international collaboration, and creative freedom. Future research should explore policy reforms, alternative financing models, and the impact of emerging digital platforms on Chinese filmmakers, offering strategic insights to enhance their global competitiveness and long-term industry viability.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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