

Chinese Audiences' Perceptions of Social Reality in the Comedy Film Successor

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Abstract: Comedy films continue to thrive in China's film market, and the genre is breaking out of its original form with innovative reforms. In addition, the market for realistic films is further expanding in China. The film *Successor*, which was released in mainland China this summer, became a hot topic during its release. This paper examines Chinese audiences' reactions to social realities reflected in *Successor* through the survey. The audience is the most important factor in determining the success of a film, so it is extremely important to pay attention to the audience's comments and reactions to a film. Comedy films are the audience's favorite genre and realism is a popular theme at the moment, combining the two produces a surprising effect. Social media is an important channel for film distributors to promote their films, but some issues are discussed more negatively on the internet. The film, as a relatively pure vehicle, can better reflect the real situation.

Keywords: Chinese Audience, Social Reality, Comedy Film, Social Media.

1. Introduction

The film *Successor* is directed by Yan Fei and Peng Damuo, and starring Shen Teng and Ma Li. The film releases in China in the summer of 2024. The story is about a wealthy couple who hide their wealth from their son in order to motivate him to study hard and create a "Truman's world" for him, which he eventually discovers. In the end, the son chose a lifestyle that he really enjoyed and forgave his parents. *Successor* promoted and marketed on numerous social media platforms, such as TikTok, Weibo, and Little Red Book. Officials posted teasers, bloopers, and other content on platform accounts to attract viewers to cinemas. As of 14 August 2024, *Successor* has grossed a total of 3.071 billion yuan in its 30 days of release. Compare this to the other films in the same time frame, such as *A Place Called Silence*, *The Traveller*, *Deadpool & Wolverine* and *Despicable Me 4*, where *Successor* ranked number one at the box office.

Previously, Yan Fei and Peng Damuo have collaborated many times in directing the stage play *Crazy Stone*, the film *Goodbye Mr. Loser* and *Hello Mr. Billionaire*, etc. One of the film's producers, Mahua Funage, was founded in 2003 and has created more than a hundred comedy stage plays that have been performed across China. Their team has also performed many sketches on the stage of the Chinese New Year Gala. In 2015, Mahua Funage produced its first comedy film, *Goodbye Mr. Loser*, which was a film adaption of the stage play. Once the film was released it became popular throughout China and became a phenomenal film at the time. Since then, this company produced a succession of

comedy films, such as *Mr. Donkey*, *Never Say Die*, *Hello Mr. Billionaire*, etc. Not to mention *Almost A Comedy*, which was nominated for the Golden Rooster Award. All of these films were well-received in the industry.

Unlike other films produced by Mahua Funage, *Successor* incorporates more social realities. While making people laugh, it also triggers the audience's thoughts. The depiction of Chinese education in *Successor* caused a lot of discussion among audiences. There have been comments on many social media platforms about the educational issues reflected in this film. Of the film's many plot points, the most discussed are the hidden rich identities of the parents, the vast underground surveillance space, and the fake grandmother who has been with her grandson for years. There is also the ironic image at the end of the son participating in a marathon race where he starts picking up plastic bottles due to childhood memories. The audience laughed and laughed at most of these plots. Although there are some discussions and reflections on social issues such as education, most of them are rather one-sided and negative.

Comedy films are an important part of the Chinese film industry. In recent years, the subject of realism has also attracted a lot of social attention, and comedy films have begun to incorporate this subject into them, such as *Successor*. In the past four years, comedy films have appeared in the top three of China's total box office list. *YOLO*, *Pegasus 2*, *Successor* in 2024, *Full River Red* in 2023, *MOON MAN*, *Too Cool To Kill* in 2022, and *Hi, Mom* and *Detective Chinatown 3* in 2021. All of the above films are classified as comedies, and all were in the top three of the year.

Nowadays, the majority of people rely on online promotional content and reviews or recommendations from friends to go to the cinema, so researching the audience's attitudes towards the main themes of a film is an effective way to help create a commercially successful film.

2. Literature Review

Comedy films play an extremely important role in the overall market of Chinese cinema, and many scholars and experts have made studies in the field of comedy films.

Through the releases of *Johnny Keep Walking!* and *If You Are the One III* in 2023, it can be seen that Chinese comedy films show the characteristics of "comedy + reality" or "comedy satirizing reality". The technique of using comedy to carry reality and thus express it in depth can be successful [1]. Zhang Yan and Yang Xuetao point out that comedy films in 2023 have not only added a variety of elements to the genre but also added subjects such as history and reality. Using comedy as a medium to criticize social reality and dissolve the pain of reality in a comedic way [2]. Wang Yuan also find that comedy innovated its creative style and presentation. It began to try to incorporate elements of black humor to satirize and reveal social reality. Thus deepening the connotation of comedy films and making them more diversified, three-dimensional, and personalized [3].

While the studies found the trend of adding realistic elements to comedy films, Zhang Rongkai found in his study that comedy films precipitated its tragic core by adding realistic grief through spectator perspective and abstraction. *Hi, Mom* used comedy to reflect the impermanence of life and wrote about a tragic life that ended up creating a 5.4 billion box office record [4]. *Too Cool To Kill* is an absurd comedy film by Mahua Funage. The film portrays its protagonists with subtlety and vividness and uses dislocation and parody of old films to present absurd realities, thus provoking the audience to deeper thoughts [5]. Meng Qi points out that comedy films have a rich expansion of genres because they are not limited by fixed patterns. The tragic undertones that are added to comedy films are better able to show sadness because they are set off by joy. Most of the tragic plots in comedy films nowadays are inspired by the conflict between the pressures of the real world and people's desire for a better life. The tragedies in the films have also evolved with the times [6]. Yu Fan considered *Successor* as a creative attempt at transformation, a continuation of Mahua Funage's established model of comedic construction and commercial operation. In addition, the challenge of

Successor interprets poignant social issues in a comedic framework with a critical gesture, allowing the audience to laugh while experiencing the sting and distress beyond the genre's experience [7].

B Palmer argues for a new definition of comedy by Chaplin, Keaton, and the Marx Brothers based on analyses of the camera styles, narrative manipulations, and audience constructions of their films, as well as their distinctive approach to chaos, that is, the signature that allows a film to elicit feelings of pleasure and good humor is laughter while discussing the specificity of comedic films in engaging the audience in reflection [8].

VN Bedenko considers modern comedy cinematography as one of the manifestations of the culture of laughter. This genre of cinema has been combined with the laughter culture of earlier historical periods, thus creating a counter-cultural form that reflects the dark side of the surrounding world. Most of them focus on social aspects [9]. In W Costanzo's research, it was found that African comedy cinema has evolved from the rich oral history tradition of Black Africa, with several prominent African filmmakers, such as Flores Gomes and Adama Drabo, shaping a cinema that reflects the way in which the local people see themselves and their place in the world, while at the same time incorporating social realities, such as social satire and political humor, into their films [10].

Although there is a lot of literature on comedy films, most of the studies focus on the development and structure of comedy films. There are relatively few studies exploring the effects of presenting social reality issues in comedy films. There has not been much attention paid to the way films are promoted the marketing strategies, and the important role of social media in film promotion. Moreover, few studies have focused on audience acceptance of a film's content and theme. But a film's popularity with the audience is the key to the box office and the main criterion for a film's success.

The purpose of studying Chinese audiences' attitudes towards the social realities presented in comedy films is to help film producers understand the psychology of the audience and the channel through which the audience obtains information about their films, so as to create films that are more in line with the audience's preferences and to carry out highly effective film promotion. In addition, this study will enable the Chinese and even global film markets to better understand the trends in film themes and to innovate more diverse film genres to cater to the audience's preferences. In order to realize the expected results of this research and to make the key findings of the research genuinely available to the film industry. This study will examine Chinese audiences' reflections on the social realities presented in comedy films by means of a survey.

3. Methodology

In this thesis, a survey was used to design 20 questions about the evaluation and opinion of the film *Successor* and other films with similar themes on Questionnaire Star. It also compares several other films in the same time frame as the film *Successor*.

After the survey was designed, it was posted on Weibo and Little Red Book to collect samples. The survey distribution cycle was 5 days, and 76 questionnaires were collected, of which 74 were valid. Two of the questionnaires were invalidly filled out, with multiple-choice questions showing obvious patterns and fill-in-the-blank questions filled in with irrelevant content. The criteria for invalid questionnaires were that all the answers were the same, had answers that were not relevant to the question, or that there was a clear regularity in the answers.

4. Result

Among the 74 valid questionnaires were 35 males and 39 females respectively, and most of them were concentrated in the age group of 20 ~ 45 years old.

With 72.37 per cent of people having watched *CJ 7*, this option is the most popular among the options for films with educational themes. Meanwhile, 52.63 per cent of people have watched *Successor*, and 50 per cent of people have watched *Les Choristes*. In addition, 39.47 per cent have watched *No One Less*, and 34.21 per cent have watched *Looking Up*. Of all the options, fewer people chose *Song Of Youth*, *Dead Poets Society* and *Freedom Writers*.

Among Stephen Chow's films, people's favorites are *Hail The Judge* and *Kung Fu Hustle*. More than half of those who participated in the questionnaire had watched the film *Successor*. And of those, 82.93% chose to watch the film because of its cast, another 58.54% went to watch the film because they were curious about the plot. Most of the audience knew about *Successor* through social media such as TikTok, Weibo, and Little Red Book. Others saw the posters and schedules of the cinema, others got recommendations from their friends. Three-quarters of people with positive attitudes towards how and what films are promoted on social media, and they would be interested in going to the cinema.

The most popular words in reviews of *Successor* are 'education', 'comedy', 'kids', 'realistic' and 'Shen Teng'. However, the discussion on social media on the issues of Chinese education is rather negative. Of the films from the same production company as *Successor*, people are more likely to watch *Goodbye Mr. Loser*, *Hello Mr. Billionaire*, and *Never Say Die*. 23 people in the questionnaire have watched *A Place Called Silence*, which was released at the same time as *Successor*. 19 people have watched *Deadpool & Wolverine*, while 16 people have watched *Despicable Me 4* and 11 people have watched *I Am Nobody*. 47.37% of audiences are glad to watch films that include educational issues and support the inclusion of plots reflecting social realities in comedy films.

5. Discussion

The most-watched film in the educational genre in this survey was *CJ 7*, and the second most-watched film was *Successor*. There is a time span of nearly twenty years between these two films, which is explained by the fact that there have been fewer educational films created by China in recent years. And as the education level of the Chinese people increases, people's concern for education and other social issues is also on the rise, so now more people are willing to go to watch educational films. In addition, films with broad content focusing on educational issues lack entertainment, and the main reason for the public to watch films is to be entertained and relaxed, so commercial films are more popular. Such a phenomenon may lead to the homogeneity of film genres, and the audience is tired of watching assembly-line-produced films. Moreover, this will cause the Chinese film market to fall into a slump and the aesthetic level of the audience to decline. Therefore, Chinese film should seek innovative changes to integrate social realities such as education with other genres such as comedy films. Producers should adopt an edutainment approach to give the comedy film a deeper meaning.

Although *CJ 7* is the most watched of the educational films listed. However, the number of people who chose *CJ 7* among several of Stephen Chow's famous films was low, and most of them chose comedy films such as *Hail The Judge* or *Kung Fu Hustle*. Though *CJ 7* is a sci-fi comedy film, it's largely about a father and his son getting along, and the father teaching his son. So, compared to Stephen Chow's other relaxing and absurd comedy films, *CJ 7* does not have a large audience. But film for the audience is not just a tool for fun, it carries the ideas and expectations of its creators. A good film can be thought-provoking and inspiring. The success of a film is measured not only by the box office but also by whether the content of the film is thought-provoking and captures the pain points of society. A comedy film that only talks about laughter is superficial. A comedy film should go from shallow to deep and use laughter as the surface but actually reflect the current social situation.

Successor has achieved 3.304 billion yuan at the box office in the two months since its release, which is undoubtedly another success for commercial cinema. The phrases that appear most frequently in the *Successor* review word are 'Shen Teng's humour', 'The film is interesting', 'The

plot is good', 'Chinese education' and so on. This shows the importance of casting and plotting for a film. The popularity of *Successor* is not only due to the tacit cooperation between Shen Teng and Ma Li but also because of the film's satirical view of Chinese education and parental manipulation of children's lives. Although Mahua Funage is just one of the participants in *Successor*, the main producer of *Successor* is Xihongshi Film. But Mahua Funage's publicity radiates to Xihongshi Film. This film is a transformation of Mahua Funage, refracting the social reality while maintaining the usual density of laughs. Even though the method of presenting and dealing with Chinese family and education issues in *Successor* is not mature, this attempt offers a new possibility for Chinese comedy films. Furthermore, a great cast is a huge plus for a film. But the creative team cannot just rely on familiar faces, they should actively cultivate the younger generation of actors and actresses to pass on Chinese comedy.

The most popular of the films contemporaneous with *Successor* is *A Place Called Silence*. This film is a crime thriller about a tragedy caused by school violence. Although these two films are of different genres, their contents reflect different social realities. This shows that audiences nowadays pay more attention to realistic films. Another film with a high number of viewers was *Despicable Me 4*, a comedy animated film. As can be seen from the genres of several high-grossing films this summer in China, the most popular films with audiences are comedies and realism. Moreover, in the questionnaire survey, most people supported the reflection of social realities in the film. So, combining these two forms of screenwriting is the next creative idea that film producers can focus on.

Digital gadgets are an indispensable item in today's society. The vast majority of people use social media on their mobile phones to keep up with social information including film information. People often get information about the film from social media to go to the cinema and post reviews and feelings on social media after watching the film. That is why film distributors should focus on the operation and management of the film's official accounts on social media. Compared to social media, film as a relatively independent and undisturbed vehicle may be able to better carry some social realities. If a film's initial buzz comes from the film's cast and plot setup, the film's ability to stay in the heat depends on whether audiences rate it as good or bad. For example, *Formed Police Unit*, which was released on May 1 this year, initially attracted a lot of viewers because of the star power of YiBo and Johnny Huang. However, due to the lack of script and acting skills and many other aspects, it only ended up with 511 million yuan at the box office. And it lost to *Twilight of the Warriors: Walled in*, which collected 684 million yuan in the same period of time. Therefore, the producer should keep an eye on and collect audience reactions after the release of the film. In order to accumulate experience and lessons for the preparation and production of the next film, so as to achieve its success.

6. Conclusion

This study takes Chinese audiences' reflections on the social realities in *Successor* as a starting point to examine content innovation and promotional channels for Chinese comedy films. According to the survey results, comedy films are still perennial winners in the Chinese film market. *Successor* was a commercial success by adding social realities about education and family to comedy. At the same time, the film has generated widespread public discussion on Chinese education and family because of its theme.

Most people in this study support the inclusion of mapping of social issues in comedy films. People are no longer satisfied with watching purely superficial comedy films but seek deeper and more meaningful film art. This phenomenon also proves that the public's level of artistic aesthetics has risen and that there are higher requirements and standards of judgment for films. This enhancement requires film producers to change the current homogeneity of commercial films, no longer downward

compatibility but strict standards for their own team to seek longer-term survival. Additionally, producers cannot just go for a lavish cast and give up polishing the script. Such behavior may lead to momentary success, but in the end, it will surely be defeated.

With social media being used much more frequently, the promotion of the film is almost exclusively on this. The majority of audiences are informed by social media. *Successor* has a total reach of 15.234 billion on Weibo, TikTok, Little Red Book and WeChat Channels. Also, audiences are mostly positive about what publishers are marketing on social media, so publishers should craft and innovate video or graphic content to attract more viewers. Producers should also take advantage of the audience's reaction to the film on social media to improve subsequent productions accordingly.

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