

The Dilemma and New Development of Chinese Realistic Film Creation in Contemporary Era

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Abstract: In 2023, realism has emerged as an essential and influential theme within the Chinese film industry. Films that employ a realistic approach have not only achieved significant box office success but have also demonstrated that there is a widespread and substantial market for this genre in China. Despite the burgeoning popularity and commercial success of realistic films domestically, they have not yet achieved the same level of influence on the global stage, particularly when compared to cinematic works from overseas. This discrepancy poses a significant challenge for Chinese filmmakers, who must navigate a new and rapidly changing living environment and seek effective strategies to address and overcome these market dilemmas. This article delves into the trajectory of Chinese realist films, employing theoretical research and case analysis to address market challenges and suggest future development strategies. Through an in-depth examination of "Beyond the Furious Sea," it navigates the challenges and opportunities within Chinese realist filmmaking, shedding light on the genre's current landscape. This article identifies ongoing issues in China's realist film industry, notably concerning authenticity and diversity. The author provides recommendations for future advancements in Chinese realist filmmaking.

Keywords: Chinese films, Realism, Film industry development, global influence, *Across the Furious Sea*

1. Introduction

Following the conclusion of the Second World War, the international film scene witnessed the emergence of a new realism, marked distinctly by the iconic Italian film *Ladri di biciclette* (Bicycle Thieves)[1]. Serving as a beacon of the movement, this film poignantly portrayed the class conflicts and profound social disparities prevalent during that era. Realist cinema aimed to authentically capture the essence of everyday life and faithfully depict the intricacies of social reality and human nature. Such films provided a nuanced exploration of societal issues, fostering a deeper connection with audiences[2]. Beyond Europe, recent years have seen increasing attention towards the development of neorealist films in various regions. Notably, China's neorealist cinema has been experiencing rapid growth. Reports indicate that Chinese youth have a particular affinity for realistic films, drawn to their rich narrative depth and emotionally engaging experiences. Despite this domestic enthusiasm, Chinese realist films encounter challenges in gaining recognition and influence compared to international counterparts[3]. However, a pivotal moment arrived with the release of *Across the Furious Sea* in 2023. This film prompted a significant shift in Chinese societal attitudes towards

cinema by delving into themes such as family dynamics and social injustices, igniting widespread debate among viewers. The film's handling of realist imagery has spurred curiosity regarding the potential and future trajectory of Chinese realist cinema, hinting at its ability to offer fresh insights and innovative approaches to the genre.

This article aims to delve deeper into the evolution of Chinese realist films through theoretical analysis and case studies. It will begin by tracing the development of Chinese realist cinema, followed by an exploration of the challenges it faces. Finally, by examining the factors contributing to the success of *Across the Furious Sea*, the article will offer recommendations for the advancement of Chinese realist films.

2. The development of Chinese realistic film

Realism stands as an immortal emblem in the developmental journey of Chinese cinema, leaving an enduring imprint on its growth. Unlike many cinematic traditions, authenticity in Chinese realist films not only shaped their thematic and narrative landscapes but also steered their course forward. This commitment to realism dates back to the early days of Chinese cinema, emerging as a response to the socio-political realities of the time. From the silent era to the golden age of Shanghai cinema in the 1930s and 1940s, filmmakers sought to reflect the struggles and aspirations of the Chinese people with unflinching honesty[4].

Chinese cinema distinguishes itself on the global stage, cultivating a distinct identity through its unwavering commitment to realism. This dedication to authenticity permeates every facet of Chinese filmmaking, from storytelling to cinematography, character development, and social critique. By plumbing the depths of daily existence and grappling with the intricacies of human experience, Chinese filmmakers strive to mirror social realities with unwavering sincerity. The post-war period saw a resurgence of realism in Chinese cinema, with filmmakers like Xie Jin and Chen Kaige leading the charge[4]. The Fifth Generation filmmakers, emerging in the 1980s, further propelled realism to the forefront of Chinese cinema, producing groundbreaking works that challenged societal norms and explored the complexities of Chinese society.

This quest for truth not only enriches Chinese films with depth and resonance but also strikes a chord with audiences both domestically and internationally. From the rural landscapes of Zhang Yimou's early works to the urban dramas of Jia Zhangke, realism continues to captivate audiences and critics alike. Moreover, the enduring legacy of realism in Chinese cinema has nurtured a vibrant cinematic tradition that continues to evolve and innovate[4]. From the pioneering works of fifth-generation filmmakers to the contemporary endeavors of the sixth generation, realism remains a guiding principle, propelling the exploration of diverse themes and narratives. Whether capturing the struggles of ordinary individuals amidst historical tumult or dissecting the nuances of interpersonal dynamics in modern China, realism remains at the heart of Chinese filmmaking, serving as a testament to the enduring power of storytelling in capturing the human experience across time and space.

3. Case study----The reason for *Across the Furious Sea's* success

Across the Furious Sea stands out as a compelling example of realism in cinema for several reasons. Firstly, the film is rooted in true events, providing a solid foundation for its narrative authenticity. The story follows Lao Jin, whose daughter tragically dies while studying abroad. Blaming her boyfriend Li Miaomiao for her death, Lao Jin embarks on a quest for truth, only to discover his own potential involvement in the tragedy. This premise sets the stage for a gripping exploration of guilt, responsibility, and the complexities of human nature. One of the film's strengths lies in its multi-layered storytelling. While the central plot revolves around Lao Jin's pursuit of justice, the film

skillfully delves into various interconnected dilemmas faced by its characters. These subplots serve as a catalyst for unraveling deeper societal issues, including family dynamics, human frailties, and cultural norms.

The initial segment of the movie adopts the narrative style commonly found in mystery films, engaging the audience in a quest to uncover the murderer. However, the narrative trajectory shifts towards themes of revenge as the plot progresses. Revenge, a longstanding motif in film history, typically adheres to a predictable narrative structure. *Across the Furious Sea*, however, defies these conventions by deviating from the traditional narrative formula. In the latter part of the film, the focus shifts towards exploring the complex relationship dynamics between two generations within the protagonist's family. At its core, the film offers a poignant reflection on family dynamics, social injustice, and the class divide, rooted in East Asian cultural contexts. Through the character of Lao Jin, the film exposes the consequences of male chauvinism and neglect within the family unit, shedding light on the psychological toll it takes on individuals, particularly his daughter Nana.

The portrayal of Nana's struggles with mental health issues, exacerbated by her father's neglect and societal pressures, adds a layer of emotional depth to the narrative. Similarly, Li Miaomiao's character embodies the consequences of parental indulgence and emotional detachment, leading to his antisocial tendencies. At the same time, the film delves into themes of social injustice and class inequality. Li Miaomiao, born into a wealthy family, occupies a higher social class than Nana and Lao Jin, who hail from the working class. Jinglan, Li Miaomiao's mother, wields her wealth to shield her son, spotlighting the prevalence of privilege and corruption. Lao Jin, a humble fisherman, embodies the marginalized strata of society, accentuating the stark class divide. As Lao Jin clandestinely observes the opulent lifestyle of Li Miaomiao's family, he experiences a sense of empowerment, relishing in a fleeting reversal of the power dynamic. This portrayal underscores the palpable disparity between social classes and underscores the yearning for agency among those on the fringes of society. *Across the Furious Sea* serves as a remarkable example of realism in cinema. It weaves authentic narratives and complex character dynamics to explore themes of human experience. The film follows Lao Jin's quest for truth, delving into themes of guilt, responsibility, and social inequality. However, not all films with a realistic theme have attained the same degree of success as *Across the Furious Sea*. Chinese realist cinema still encounters certain challenges.

4. The Challenges Faced by Chinese Realist Cinema

Several challenges currently impede the development of realistic cinema in China, each affecting the authenticity and integrity of the genre.

Firstly, the utilization of realistic films as tools for political propaganda has been a notable concern. These films often center on themes of class struggle, portraying a conflict between an idealized hero and a villain, invariably culminating in the triumph of good over evil. Such extreme politicization not only breaches general artistic principles but also contradicts the foundational ethos of realism, which strives for a truthful depiction of life's complexities.

Secondly, a notable issue arises with certain films purporting to embrace realistic narratives, yet upon closer examination, they prove unable to withstand even superficial scrutiny. These movies lack the depth required to authentically portray reality and consequently fail to capture the genuine experiences of people's lives. Consequently, they often face criticism for being "escapist and disconnected from real life," ultimately diluting the essence of realism, which aims to present life with accuracy and significance. Such shortcomings highlight the importance of a genuine commitment to realism in filmmaking, emphasizing the need for films to earnestly engage with the complexities of human existence and offer meaningful reflections of society.

Thirdly, stringent film censorship significantly hampers the creative expression within realistic films. In China, the censorship system imposes strict guidelines to prevent films from excessively

highlighting societal flaws. Realistic films that explore sensitive topics are often subject to censorship or alterations to align with acceptable social values. For instance, the film "Return to Dust," which portrays real-life rural issues in Western China, including sensitive topics such as the challenges faced by the elderly unmarried, was removed from cinemas due to its content[5]. Similarly, international films that depict controversial themes, like "The Joker," which portrays the violent uprising of a marginalized individual against societal injustices, are also banned from screening in China. These restrictions reflect concerns over national security and social stability, but they also stifle the potential for realistic films to engage with and reflect on pressing social issues authentically.

5. Suggestions

To foster the further development and global resonance of Chinese realist films, several key strategies can be implemented. Above all, there should be a focus on innovating narrative technique. Realistic films should strive to innovate beyond the traditional narrative frameworks associated with different genres such as comedies, romantic films, action films, and horror films. As noted by French film scholar Christian Metz, films are essentially "machines that can tell stories," where the narrative technique is pivotal to the art of filmmaking[6]. André Bazin also highlighted that realism enhances technical expression and broadens the stylistic possibilities of film language[7]. By diversifying their narratives, Chinese filmmakers can infuse their creations with personal insights and unique expressions, making their films more engaging and reflective of a broader range of human experiences.

Moreover realist films are expected to push the boundaries of realism further. They prioritize depicting society's restoration and presenting social life and human nature within the framework of reality. Realistic films resonate with audiences and evoke empathy because they focus on addressing social issues and engaging with current societal discourse. Yizhen Shen argues that realism encompasses not only theoretical frameworks and creative methods but also core values and artistic sensibilities[8]. According to contemporary British scholar Pam Morris, a full understanding of realism can only be attained through the texts that embody it[9]. Thus, it is essential to watch realist films firsthand and discern the realism embedded within them. By analyzing the emergence of realism in the nineteenth century, Pam firmly believes that realistic novels have the potent ability to advocate for social democracy and equity.

Besides, diversification of expressive forms in realistic filmmaking is crucial. The current landscape of realistic films in China often lacks the appeal necessary to attract a broader audience, especially those accustomed to the dynamic and engaging formats typical of Hollywood productions. To address this, there is a need for a more creative and varied use of expressive forms within realistic filmmaking. This involves not only adhering to the serious themes typical of realism but also innovatively exploring these themes in ways that captivate and entertain audiences. By integrating artistic methods from various film genres and continuously enriching the expressive capabilities of their films, Chinese filmmakers can enhance the attractiveness and emotional impact of their works.

In summary, by embracing innovation in narrative techniques, deepening the commitment to realism, and diversifying expressive forms, Chinese realistic films can overcome current limitations and evolve into a more influential and admired component of global cinema. This approach will not only improve the marketability of these films but also their artistic integrity and cultural relevance.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the evolution of Chinese realist cinema reflects a profound commitment to portraying authentic narratives that resonate with audiences both domestically and internationally. Realism has been a foundational tradition in Chinese cinema, consistently influencing its development for more

than a century. Despite encountering numerous challenges and changes through its evolution, Chinese realistic films have steadfastly adhered to the principles of realism. This commitment reflects a deep-seated dedication to portraying the complexities and nuances of real life, even under significant constraints. Films like *Across the Furious Sea* stand as exemplars of this tradition, rooted in true events and exploring complex themes with depth and nuance. However, the genre faces challenges, including political manipulation, superficial storytelling, and stringent censorship, which can hinder its artistic integrity and societal impact. The metaphor of art as "dancing in shackles" aptly describes the situation faced by creators of realistic films in China. These filmmakers must navigate a landscape marked by various restrictions, whether they be political, social, or cultural. Yet, it is within these bounds that the true artistry of realism can be demonstrated. By directly engaging with and confronting these contradictions, realistic films can achieve a profound depth of expression and impact.

To address these challenges and further develop Chinese realist cinema, several strategies are proposed. First, there should be a focus on innovating narrative techniques, diversifying expressive forms, and deepening the commitment to realism. By embracing these strategies, Chinese filmmakers can enhance the marketability, artistic integrity, and cultural relevance of their films, ensuring that they continue to captivate audiences and provoke meaningful dialogue for years to come.

Limitations of this article include its focus primarily on Chinese realist cinema, which may not fully represent the complexities of global cinematic traditions. Future studies could explore the comparative analysis of realism in Chinese cinema with other national cinemas, examining how cultural, political, and historical contexts shape cinematic representations of reality.

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