

Film

An Industry versus Independents

Chinese cinema is moving toward a large industry model; but we must face our shortcomings and challenges. (Huang Jianxin, film director and executive producer)¹

“The huge contrast between large production numbers and few box-office revenues of middle and low budget films, is an important indication of the Chinese movie market’s abnormal configuration.” (Rao Shuguang, Bi Xiaoyu, film critic)²

Mainland China’s movie industry is growing rapidly but the independent filmmaking field is shrinking. In 2007 box-office revenues totaled 3.3 billion yuan (US\$475 million). Movies made in China accounted for 54 percent of the income, the fifth consecutive year domestic films beat imported foreign movies the majority of which were Hollywood big-budget blockbusters. For the 2007 New Year–Spring Festival season, China’s biggest holiday, box-office income was 500 million yuan (US\$70 million), much more than the 300 million yuan (US\$43 million) films earned in the same period in 2006.³ During this festival Chinese and English films are shown alongside each other as can be seen in Figure 12.1. China’s biggest film distribution company, China Film Group (CFG), was considering a public stock offering to become the first Chinese film company listed on a stock market.⁴ An increasing number of private but larger film production and distribution companies are playing a stronger role in the Chinese film market. These companies include Huayi Brothers Films, Poly-bona Film Distribution, and Paige Media Investing Inc. They have handled most of the recent high-budget Chinese commercial movies and have also invested in some



Figure 12.1 Film festival week at a Shanghai cinema. James Bond's 007 shares billing with a film made in China.

Source: Wynne Wang

middle- and low-budget films. Smaller production companies can only finance 1.5–3 million yuan (US\$200,000–400,000) low-budget films. It is difficult and costly to distribute these films to cinema audiences, so most go directly to national or local television movie channels or find their way on to the shelves of shops selling pirated DVDs.

Imbalanced Battle: Fifth Generation's New Niche vs. Cursed Still Life

Since 2001, all the domestically produced box-office hits have been made by private film companies. Feng Xiaogang's *Big Shot's Funeral* (Da Wan), a 2001 comedy co-produced by private film companies Huayi Brothers, Taihe Film and TV Investment Company, and Warner Brothers Asia had the top box office revenues for domestic movies that year, earning 30 million yuan (US\$4.3 million). In 2002, in first place was Zhang Yimou's *Hero* (Ying Xiong), made by the Beijing New Pictures Distribution Company. *Hero* took

in more than 250 million yuan (US\$36 million). In 2003, the top film was Feng Xiaogang's *Cell Phone* (Shou Ji), a production by Huayi Brothers, and Taihe. In 2004, Zhang Yimou's marshal art epic, *House of Flying Daggers* (Shi Mian Mai Fu), was the box-office winner. In 2005 Chen Kaige's *The Promise* (Wu Ji) was top in movie receipts for Chinese domestic films. This movie was actually produced by the American company, Moonstone Entertainment.

Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige were the two most important representatives of the internationally acclaimed Fifth Generation Chinese Filmmakers. They started their careers immediately after graduating from Beijing Film Academy in the early 1980s. Zhang Yimou was the cinematographer of Chen Kaige's first two films, *The Yellow Earth* (Huang Tu Di, 1984), and *The Big Parade* (Da Yue Bing, 1986). The two films earned Chen Kaige worldwide critical praise because of the refreshing and stylized visual approaches – noticeably different from earlier generations of Chinese film directors. In 1988, Zhang Yimou's directing debut, *Red Sorghum* (Hong Gao Liang, 1987), won the Golden Bear Award from the Berlin International Film Festival. In 1992, Zhang Yimou's *The Story of Qiu Ju* (Qiu Ju Da Guan Si, 1992) won a Golden Lion from the Venice International Film Festival. In 1993, Chen Kaige's *Farewell My Concubine* (Ba Wang Bie Ji, 1993) won top prize, Palme d'Or, at the Cannes Film Festival. The above works were regarded as the milestones of Chinese artistic films and established the two filmmakers as the most important figures of the Chinese Fifth Generation directors.

During the entire 1990s their films were shown in Chinese cinemas although sometimes with censorship troubles. Zhang Yimou's *To Live* (1994), has never been released in Chinese cinemas. Movie-goers embraced these films passionately, but they were often criticized by the Chinese reviewers for focusing on the negative side of traditional Chinese culture and for the stereotyped formulated portraits of Chinese people. Most of their films, during this stage, were set in historical times and in remote mountain or village areas in China. Sometimes, the period and region were both vague, just providing some general sense of pseudo-China for Western audiences to fit their imaginary China, showing its exotic culture and visual rituals.

During this early period, most of their films are tragedies with a sad ending that emphasizes the politically pessimistic tone of their works. Most protagonists in Zhang Yimou's films were peasants, characteristically represented by a string of village woman characters consistently and

excellently performed by the famous Chinese superstar actress, Gong Li. In Chen Kaige's films, though relatively diverse, most of his characters were lower-class figures. The exceptions were those in his epic historical drama, *The Emperor and the Assassin*, (Ci Qin 1999). The film is based on a well-known historical story about the assassination of the cruel King Qin, who unified ancient China and founded the Qin Dynasty over 2,000 years ago.

Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige's early works were strongly influenced by European Art-house filmmaking styles theory, by Freud's psychoanalysis, and by Friedrich Nietzsche and Jean-Paul Sartre's modern existentialism philosophy. Meanwhile, they also carried on the former Soviet Cinema and older generations Chinese filmmakers' realism traditions. Their early works' achievements in top European film festivals substantiated one of the basic principles of international communication. Many Chinese critics regarded Zhang Yimou's films as a very successful example of how a non-westerner can satisfy Western audiences by showing them an inferior "other" culture. Chinese critics consider this portrayal of China satisfies Western moviegoers because "a self-satisfied, on-top civilization needs a subordinated otherness figure," and "a stopped China is the denied otherness figure in the background of the progressive western cultural myth."⁵

On the visual style and storytelling tactic level, however, it is undeniable that the Fifth Generation filmmakers' early works represented by Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige are the peak and highlight of Chinese national artistic cinema. They represent the best films made in China since the Chinese film industry was first developed in the 1930s and since the golden years of Chinese filmmaking in the 1940s.

WTO Brings New Challenges

After China joined the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 more American blockbuster movies were imported and shown in Chinese cinemas nationwide, Chinese domestically produced films fell both in numbers and box office revenues. This was the turning point for Chinese cinema. While it faced huge marketing pressure from the Hollywood giants, it was also an opportunity to reestablish the once flourishing movie industry by borrowing Hollywood commercial movie-making approaches and devices. When the younger filmmakers retreated to underground film making, the Fifth Generation filmmakers, led by Zhang Yimou, took up the challenge. After making three small-budget films between 1997 and

2000, he raised US\$30 million, brought together an all-star cast, and made a stunning historical martial arts drama, *Hero* (Ying Xiong, 2002). The investment, about 250 million yuan based on the exchange rate at the time, was a record for a Chinese-produced film. Everybody waited to see how Zhang Yimou, whose success was based on relatively low-budget artistic films, would handle this huge-budget martial arts movie. The film's story was a version of the assassination of China's King Qin. Zhang Yimou's rival Chen Kaige just 3 years earlier made a film based on the same story, *The Emperor and the Assassin* (Ci Qin, 1999), and it was a box office failure.

Audiences were not disappointed with Zhang's version. His Kung Fu action scenes were beautifully shot and dazzling to the audiences while his all-star cast of actors gave shining performances. Nevertheless, along with the skyrocketing box-office revenues nationwide came critical attacks. The critics mainly concentrated on the film's storytelling strategy and its superficial exhibition of traditional Chinese cultural potpourris, such as, the calligraphy, the fencing, the game of go, and the guqin, a traditional Chinese musical instrument. Critics from Taiwan were focused on its sub-text of reunification and some Western reviewers "felt the film had advocated autocracy and reacted with discomfort."⁶ However, "Zhang Yimou himself maintained that he had absolutely no political points to make."⁷

Hero's cinema success set the box-office record in China at 250 million yuan (about US\$30,000,000). After nearly 2 years, it was released with English subtitles in the United States and the United Kingdom. In the United States "it debuted as the Number one film, achieving US\$18,004,319 (\$8,864 per screening) in its opening weekend. The total was the second-highest opening weekend ever for a foreign language film. Its US\$53,710,019 North American box office total makes it the fourth highest earning foreign language film and fifteenth highest earning martial arts film in North American box office history. The total worldwide box office revenue was US\$177,394,432."⁸ It was also nominated for Best Foreign Language Film at the 2003 Academy Awards. A notable phenomenon was that *Hero's* storytelling format, criticized by Chinese reviewers and even some Chinese audiences, was praised by both American critics and audiences. On Yahoo most moviegoers rated the film's story A or A+, nine critics' average rating for it was B+.⁹

Zhang Yimou's *Hero* is a brilliant "visual banquet" and a milestone not only for his personal aesthetic style but also for China's commercial movie production and its national movie industry. In 2002, the year of *Hero's* release,

total box-office revenue for Chinese-produced films for first time surpassed that of imported movies (mostly Hollywood blockbusters). A trend maintained for six consecutive years.¹⁰

The negative impact of *Hero* on Chinese filmmaking was that most of the later huge-budget commercial successes were of the historical martial arts genre, including Zhang Yimou's next two commercial hits. Among these big-money productions, Zhang Yimou's comrade and unspoken competitor Chen Kaige's reportedly 350 million Yuan movie, *The Promise* (Wu Ji, 2005), earned just 200 million yuan at the box office. The film received bad reviews and complaints from both critics and moviegoers for its terrible script and laughable performances from its Asian superstar cast. One amateur critic even became famous when he inserted some clips from *The Promise* with other television show sequences and made a satire piece titled, *A Bloody Homicide Caused by a Steamed Bun*, and put it online. It soon became the nation's hottest hit on the Internet. Director Chen Kaige threatened to sue but never did.

In 2008, Chen Kaige's updated work, *Forever Enthralled* (Mei Lan Fang), made with a 100 million yuan investment, gained Chen Kaige many positive reviews and decent box-office returns. A biographical film about the famous Beijing Opera legend, Master Mei Lanfang, it was selected and shown in the competition program at the fifty-ninth Berlin International Film Festival.

The Vanishing Independents

Meanwhile, films by independent Chinese film makers are almost vanishing from commercial mainstream cinemas. If they get into Chinese cinemas at all, most of them only can be seen at the morning or early afternoon showings. A typical and perhaps symbolic example of the imbalanced competition between big-budget commercial movies and low-budget "indie" films was Zhang Yimou's 2006 epic *Curse of the Golden Flower* (Man Cheng Jin Dai Huang Jin Jia) versus Jia Zhang Ke's 2006 *Still Life* (San Xia Hao Ren). *Still Life*, the story of two people searching for their spouses against the backdrop of the giant Three Gorges Dam, won a Golden Lion award at the Venice International Film Festival. Zhang decided to release his big budget *Curse of the Golden Flower* during the 2007 New Year–Spring Festival period; Jia told the press he would release his low-budget but prize winning *Still Life* the same week. He said he was

confident audiences would make their own choices and that *Still Life* would do well. Audiences did make their choices, but overwhelmingly chose his rival's film.

After the first week *Curse of the Golden Flower* earned over 100 million yuan (US\$15 million) nationwide, while *Still Life* only took in 50,000 yuan (US\$7,000).¹¹ In Shanghai, *Still Life* had only four screenings in the holiday period and, one critic said, "so far its box office revenue may almost be ignored." The rivalry continued as Jia complained to the press that cinemas only showed his film in the morning and afternoon while saving evening show times for Zhang's movie in order to maximize their profits. Zhang, famous for his early films about Chinese peasants, struck back by saying, "You can't blame other people for your own bad harvest."¹² Meanwhile, Jia continued to produce films that pleased the critics but did not have mass audience appeal. A film about Chinese factory workers, *24 City*, opened in the United States in 2009 with the usual praise from critics but clearly appealed only to cinema fans.

Surviving a Relaxed Censorship Proves Even Harder

Chinese independent filmmakers cannot take on the big-budget movies directly if they want to survive in China's unregulated film market. Therefore, their low-budget films are more often offered to the public via DVDs sold on street corners or in small shops, rather than being screened in cinemas. Also, as independent filmmakers do not have sufficient money for promotion and distribution, sometimes they would rather sell their films directly to CCTV-6, the movie channel of China Central TV, in order to recoup their expenses. At times they advertise their films via trailers in cinemas and then quickly distribute DVD copies. One success model they hope to emulate was that of the 2007 Brazilian film *Elite Squad*. That film first became popular on DVD and was then distributed to cinemas by Universal Studios. Independent films in China are not yet dead and Chinese independent filmmakers (including those previously underground) are making more movies since censorship rules were relaxed in 2003. However, even this has caused problems.

One result of the loosened ideological control of Chinese cinema in recent years has been the surfacing of the previously banned underground "Sixth Generation" film makers. The "Sixth Generation" is the title given to a group of Chinese directors who graduated from the Beijing Film

Academy and Central Drama Institute in the late 1980s and early 1990s. These directors focused on contemporary society. Their films were at first banned by Chinese censors even though they won prestigious prizes all over the world.

Jia Zhangke is the most important representative of this group. His four early films, *Xiaoshan Returns Home* (Xiao Shan Hui Jia, 1995), *Xiaowu* (Xiao Wu, 1997), *Platform* (Zhan Tai, 2000), and *Unknown Pleasure* (Ren Xiao Yao, 2002), are still denied exhibition approval by the government. However, in 2005 Jia's first domestic film released to cinemas, *The World* (Shi Jie), encountered no significant difficulties with censors. In an interview, Jia said his reason for attempting to resurface from the underground was the relaxed environment of censorship. "Originally . . . the censorship apparatus was to a large degree restricting our freedom of choice," he said. "But now it looks like we'll have the chance to express ourselves freely, and that's why I'm willing to give it a try."¹³ When he submitted his film *The World* for review by the censorship board, he said he was surprised that, with the exception of a few lines of vulgar language, the majority of the film was allowed to remain intact.¹⁴

Another former underground film maker, Xiaoshuai Wang, emerged in 2005. The ban on his 2001 film, *Beijing Bicycle*, which won the Silver Bear Prize at the Berlin Film Festival, was lifted. His two more recent films, *Shanghai Dream* (Qing Hong, 2005) and *In Love We Trust* (Zuo You, 2007), were approved by the Chinese film censors. Both films won prizes in foreign film festivals but had limited success in the Chinese market.

Unfortunately, most of the Sixth Generation directors' films win overseas prizes, but become box office disasters in China. Chinese audiences were curious about the Sixth Generation's underground films, especially since they were banned by the government and won prizes at heavyweight Western film festivals. So, audiences in China tried to view them through any possible route, usually as pirated DVDs or through online downloading. After the censorship bar was lifted in 2003, these films could not compete with other films and lost their audiences.

A Rating System with Chinese Characteristics

As censorship is being lifted, more sex and violence is appearing in Chinese films. Some suggest it is time to establish a rating-system for Chinese movies

similar to those used for decades in the United States and many other countries. The State Administration for Radio, Film and Television (SARFT), China's equivalent to the US Federal Communications Commission (FCC), has held hearings and conferences on this issue but has not made a decision.¹⁵ Even Chinese actress Gong Li, an international superstar, has called for a rating system.¹⁶ However, the veteran film producer, the Vice President of Shanghai Film Group (SFG), Mr. Xu Pengle expressed his concerns about conducting a rating system, "Nowadays, it is impossible to launch a rating system and it cannot work out in China, in my opinion. Why? Because China's film market is unregulated, the film-related legislations are incomplete. When piracy is so rampant that teenagers can easily access films that even haven't been shown in theatres at every street corner, how can we conduct a rating system? . . . Only after the Chinese film market becomes clean and regulated, let's talk about it then."¹⁷

A transformation from hard censorship, which decides what is permitted on screens, to the soft censorship of a rating system, which does not proscribe the content of films but rather classifies them as appropriate for certain segments of the public, seems likely to come eventually to Chinese cinema. In November, 2007, the film *Lust, Caution*, which won a Golden Lion award, stirred up the rating discussion again. Since there is no rating system in China, Director Ang Lee had to personally edit a "clean" version specifically for mainland cinemas by deleting most of the sexually graphic scenes in the film. Ang Lee stated that the shortened version would be as enjoyable as the uncut version but, people still crossed into Hong Kong to see the full version where it was shown with a "III" rating, similar an "R" rating in the United States. Again, a heated discussion about bringing a proper rating system into mainland China emanated from websites. There is still no sign, from SARFT, of introducing a mainland rating system. TV journalist Qiu Luwei of Hong Kong's Phoenix TV told her audience, "Today's (Chinese) government is unexpectedly demonstrating rationality and flexibility and even openness, so I'd like to keep my optimism (on this matter)."¹⁸

The first signs of this transformation to more openness can be found in a document on censorship regulation issued by SARFT in September 2003. SARFT now requires film makers only to submit a 1,000-word draft script to get approval for shooting. After that, the completed film is sent not to SARFT but directly to local film censorship boards unless it touches

on sensitive topics such as the Cultural Revolution, anti-Japanese sentiment, or the 1989 Tiananmen Square “incident.” This dissemination of censorship power from the central government to the provinces is important to film makers. It reduces the possibility of a national ban on a completed film, thus causing a total loss. It also provides more space for different approaches and opinions on film censorship. Out of 214 films that were submitted to the censors under this new system in 2004, only one film, *Jianghu*, a Hong Kong production with violent content, was denied approval for release in mainland China.

In 2005, there was a censorship case against film maker Lou Ye and his film, *The Summer Palace* (yuan Ming yuan), which included sex scenes related to the Tiananmen Square incident. Lou finished the film without submitting it for either central or local censorship review and then sent it to the Cannes Film Festival. Like *Purple Butterfly*, his earlier film, *The Summer Palace* won no prizes. SARFT asked Lou to revise his film for the domestic market but he refused to cut even one frame from his film. At that point SARFT finally banned *The Summer Palace* release.

Just 3 days after the 2008 New Year, a prime time for new films to hit the Chinese market, a 4 million yuan (US\$570,000) Chinese indie film, *Apple* (Ping Guo), was suddenly banned nationwide. In just 1 month in the cinemas *Apple* had accrued revenue of more than 17 million yuan (US\$2.4 million). The public was astonished by *Apple*’s sensational sex scenes that were widely distributed via Internet clips. SARFT later said that *Apple*’s producer had tricked officials by submitting a different version of the film for review. SARFT even tried to stop its DVD distribution.¹⁹ Nevertheless, *Apple*, *The Summer Palace*, and other banned films, can generally be found as pirated DVDs inside the country.

Until the movie market develops more balance, Chinese independent films will reach viewers mostly as pirated DVDs. This is the only positive side of the piracy problem in China. Pirated DVDs do serious damage to China’s movie market, as well as to the imported Hollywood blockbusters. Pirated DVD makers are well organized and try to match their faked DVDs release time to the original premiere in the United States or Europe as closely as possible. Dubbed Hollywood films are also widely available on DVD. Examples can be seen in Figure 12.2. This may be one reason that the imported Hollywood movies box office has decreased for 5 consecutive years in the mainland market. Chinese high budget commercial movies suffer the same damage from the piracy criminals as they battle for a place in China’s film market.



Figure 12.2 Dubbed Hollywood films are widely available in China on DVDs.
Source: Wynne Wang

Twin Peaks: High Budget and High Box-office

Hollywood's impact on Chinese filmmakers is not decreasing. On the contrary, Hollywood's influence is becoming more significant, most of the Chinese epic commercial movies that win large audiences are modeled after successful Hollywood films from production style to market promotion, although with smaller budgets. With more Hollywood money now involved at both production and distribution stages of Chinese-language movies, their budgets are rapidly increasing. John Woo's 2008 epic war film *Red Cliff*, which is based on a famous Chinese novel, reportedly costs 600 million

yuan (US\$85 million) to make. Its first half was released right before the 2008 Olympics, and earned 302 million yuan (US\$47 million) in a few weeks – a box office record for a domestic Chinese movie. The producers expect *Red Cliff* to earn much more, especially when the second half is released. This kind of shoot-once-make-money-twice marketing strategy is borrowed directly from Hollywood and is expected to work well in China. John Woo, a Hong Kong trained Hollywood film maker, making an epic Chinese film adapted from one of the most famous historical Chinese novels, and using Hollywood production and promotion tactics illustrates the Americanized beefing-up of the Chinese movie industry.

It is also worth noting that the distribution company for *Red Cliff* is China's biggest film organization, China Film Group (CFG) a state-run, independently- capitalized enterprise. In early 2008, CFG successfully distributed another historical epic movie, *The Warlords* (Tou Ming Zhuang, 2007), directed by another acclaimed Hong Kong film maker, Peter Chan. Han Sanping, the CEO of CFG, said he hoped to launch his company on the stock market to raise more capital for expansion.²⁰ With over 200 million yuan (US\$30 million) in domestic box-office receipts, *The Warlords* production pattern is as same as the one for *Red Cliff*. Film makers from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and mainland China, along with some American professionals, created the film and hit both the mainland and Hong Kong movie market. *The Warlords* also won eight Hong Kong Golden Film awards in April 2008. Han Sanping is willing to raise money in the stock market so he can bring more talents together from the three Chinese-speaking regions in order to make movies that succeed outside the Chinese-speaking market.²¹ Another distribution giant, the private film company Poly-bona Film Distributions, has the same idea and its chief executive, Yu Dong, indicated that Poly-bona has already attracted international venture capital. Yu hopes Poly-bona will become the first private Chinese film company listed on an overseas stock market.²²

Shanghai Film Studio (SFG), another veteran film production company that had been state run and had become independent, planned to be listed on the stock market as early as 1996. However, at that time China's film market was not very dynamic and promising, so the idea was finally discarded. Recently, SFG Vice President, Mr. Xu Pengle stated his willingness to do so in the near future as a long-term commitment: "Our solution is to operate with diversified investment, diversified creative and collaborative teams, and diversified marketing strategies. Overall, we believe

the saying that is to make the creative marketable and to make the marketing creative.”²³

Huge investments return huge profits. More and more Chinese film makers and producers realize this film industry principle. However, in a growing and still unregulated movie market in China, seeking money to make movies is more difficult than in the United States. In the United States it is not unusual for a bank to lend money to a film company, but this rarely happens in China. By 2008 only one Chinese film maker, Feng Xiaogang, had succeeded in getting a large bank loan (50 million yuan or US\$7 million) from a Chinese bank. He is sometimes referred to as China's Steven Spielberg. He had no problems with the China Merchants Bank loan repayments because of his string of box office successes with films that pleased both movie-goers and critics.

No Third-party Guarantee

After his early success in television, Feng Xiaogang directed his first film in 1994. *Lost My Love Forever* (Yong Shi Wo Ai), earned fair reviews from the critics and decent box-office returns. Since then, each of his films has made tremendous profits in mainland China's market. His later three low-budget comedies, *Party A*, *Party B* (Jia Fang Yi Fang, 1997), *Be There or Be Square* (Bu Jian Bu San, 1998), and *Sorry, Baby!* (Mei Wan Mei Liao, 1999), were the New Year season's domestic film box-office champions for three consecutive years. His next two films, *Big Shot's Funeral* (Da Wan, 2001), and *The Cell Phone* (Shou Ji, 2003), were also the respective year's box-office winners. Feng made these two films with a comparatively low budget of less than 10 million yuan (US\$1.4 million). With his continuing success, his long time financial supporter Huayi Brothers, agreed to invest 100 million yuan (US\$14 million) in his next film. Feng decided to join with other major Chinese film makers, Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige to bring out his first historical epic film, *The Night Banquet* (Ye Yan), in 2005. Though the film was not well scripted and received weak reviews, it still earned nearly 200 million yuan (US\$28 million) at the box-office. This looked good to its backers as another epic film that came out that year, *The Promise*, was a box office disaster – earning just 190 million yuan (\$27 million) on a reported 350 million yuan (\$50 million) investment and also received a lot of bad reviews.

Many film goers considered *The Night Banquet* a fairly well made, decently performed historical film. This didn't stop many critiques regarding it as Feng's biggest failure, with a weak story and little character development. At the same time as some critics and audiences were saying that Feng's skills were limited to making modern life comedies, he went on to make a surprising war movie, *The Assembly* (Ji Jie Hao). The film was released in December 2007, the beginning of the New Year-Spring Festival season. *The Assembly* ran against Peter Chan's big budget (280 million yuan/US\$40 million) historical war movie, *The Warlords*. Both films were smash hits, with *The Warlords* box office hitting 200 million yuan (US\$28 million) and *The Assembly* bringing in about 270 million yuan (almost US\$40 million). Both movies were very well received by reviewers and audiences. *The Assembly* tells a story about a Liberation Army veteran spending almost all the second half of his life searching for the evidence that could prove his 48 dead comrades were revolutionary martyrs instead of missing persons. The film's elaborately structured first half is full of cruel, bloody battle scenes; the second is the journey of the protagonist, Guzidi, as he searches to justify the 48 dead soldiers' sacrifice. In the end, Guzidi finds the proof that his dead buddies were martyrs, but the truth is more than he wanted to find: Guzidi found that along with the other 48 soldiers, who desperately hoped their platoon would retreat, they were actually sent to the battle field only as a sacrifice in the entire battle strategy. Feng's film is a very humane and symbolic portrayal of war and the individual tragedies war caused in Chinese modern history. Not only did critics praise his narrative structuring and story-telling skills, but also highly acclaimed his character development. Some critics concluded that *The Assembly* was Feng's best film so far, not only a landmark for a master film maker, but also the "Mark of the Maturity of Chinese High-Budget Commercial Films"²⁴

Critic Jia Leilei noted: "Since entering the industrial era, we have talked about the harmonious balance between the commercial appeals of mainstream filmmaking and national mainstream ideology in Chinese cinema. However, successful examples are scarce . . . *The Assembly* is not only a film that is a tremendous economic achievement, but also one that is ideologically positive and lifts up the spirit; meantime, it is a film that has universal cultural values."²⁵

Another critic, Zhang Yiwu, in his article "*Assembly: Visit and Ponder on the Past of Chinese History*," emphasizes the possibilities of the new imagination and narrative patterns that *The Assembly* brought to Chinese

cinema. Zhang also credits a series of high-budget historical movies, starting from Zhang Yimou's 2002 *Hero*, as allowing the Chinese people to revisit and ponder the pain and hardships of twentieth century Chinese history.²⁶

While critics praised the monumental contribution of *The Assembly* to Chinese history and culture, the press also noted the movie's innovative fundraising format. However, few critics realized that perhaps more significant was the willingness of a Chinese bank to be directly involved with an expensive film project. Though *The Assembly*'s 80 million yuan (\$US11 million) budget was not the highest in Chinese film history and Huayi Brothers was willing to put up about one-third of the cost, Feng still needed 50 million yuan to make the picture and persuaded China Merchants Bank to lend it to him without any backer guaranteeing repayment. In unfamiliar financial territory with a bunch of movie makers instead of the usual manufacturers, the bank sent a manager to the filming sites to see what was going on with its money. "I probably am the first person from a Chinese bank who has followed the whole filming period for a high-budget commercial movie," said Zao Ke, customer manager of the Shenzhen branch of the China Merchants Bank.²⁷

Film making was a risky area for CMB because of the unfamiliarity and uncontrollability during the production period. Who knows what might happen during the process of making the movie? What if the finished movie does not pass the censorship review so that it cannot be released and the investors get zero? Or suppose the movie is distributed successfully but nobody goes to see it so that the borrowers cannot repay the money? With these questions in mind, after agreeing to the loan, CMB monitored the film's progress closely: "During that period of time, we intensely monitored the crew's every move. If there was something odd, we were highly cautious," said Zao. He recalled that one time after he saw a TV report that Zhang Hanyu, the leading actor of the film, had fallen from a horse, he hurried to the shooting location to check personally on the actor's health.²⁸

All worked out well, of course, especially financially. And at the twenty-ninth Hundreds of Flowers Film Awards (equivalent to the People's Choice Awards in the USA), *The Assembly* won prizes for Best Film, Best Director, Best Leading Actor, and Best Supporting Actor.²⁹ Hopefully, *The Assembly*'s wins at both commercial and artistic levels will build enough confidence in China's developing film industry for the large banks to lend more money not only to the established film makers like Feng Xiaogang and Zhang Yimou, but also to the so far unknown independent filmmakers.

Stardom System

The Warlords director Peter Chan said that in China it is easier to get funding for the low-budget films and the expensive blockbusters than for films budgeted around 10–20 million yuan (US\$1.5–3 million). Mid-range movies are regarded as the most dangerous for investors because in China it is hard to attract a superstar within the budget. To do so a director might have to sacrifice some of the production budget or even some of the director's ideas for the film. One superstar cannot guarantee a film's success, but Chinese audiences really like to see their favorite stars on screen. This is a typical dilemma that middle-budget movies have to face. The low-budget films do not need stars to attract the small audiences needed for financial success, while high-budget films have enough funds to cast at least two superstars to secure their box-office success. Therefore, since 2001, all domestic box-office champions have featured multi-superstar rosters. Some of them were even all-star blockbusters. These included: *Hero* (2002), starring Jet Li, Tony Leung, Maggie Chang, and Zhang Ziyi; *Cell Phone* (2003), starring Zhang Guoli, Ge You, and Xu Fan; *Curse of the Golden Flower* (2006), which cast Gong Li, Chow Yun Fat, and Jay Chou; *The Warlords* (2007), with Jet Li, Andy Lau, Takeshi Kaneshiro, and Xu Jinglei; and John Woo's *Red Cliff* (2008), with Tony Leung, Takeshi Kaneshiro, Zhang Fengyi, Zhao Wei, and Chang Chen. Feng Xiaogang's *Big Shot's Funeral* (2001) even included Hollywood stars Donald Sutherland and Paul Mazursky, Rosamund Kwan from Hong Kong, and Ge You from China. Chen Kaige's *The Promise* (2005) had an Asian all-star cast including Jang Dong-gun from Korea, Hiroyuki Sanada from Japan, and Cecelia Cheung and Nicholas Tse from Hong Kong. The Chinese film *Beast Stalker* also drew large audiences because of its "homegrown stars" (see Figure 12.3).

As the list of stars grows, so do the box-office champions' budgets. *Big Shot's Funeral's* 26 million yuan (US\$3.7 million) budget in 2001 jumped to 350 million yuan (US\$50 million) for *The Promise* in 2005 and then to 600 million yuan (US\$85 million) in 2008 for John Woo's *Red Cliff*. Production costs for these big budget Chinese epics increase more than 20 fold in only 7 years with most of the budget increase being used on superstar payment. The extreme example is Jet Li's 100 million yuan (US\$12.5 million) salary in *The Warlords*, about one-third of the total budget for that epic film.



Figure 12.3 The Chinese film *Beast Stalker* drew large audiences because of its stars from Mainland China and Hong Kong.

Source: Wynne Wang

Jet Li, Gong Li and Zhang Ziyi are three internationally famous movie stars who originated from mainland China. Jet Li gained fame as a young martial arts athlete in the early 1980s by playing a Kong Fu monk in *Shaolin Temple* (Shao Lin Si, 1982). From the late 1980s through the 1990s, he developed his movie career as a Kong Fu star in Hong Kong. In the late 1990s, he launched on the road to Hollywood by playing a cruel gangster in *Lethal Weapon 4* (1998); then he starred in a series of Kong Fu movies in Hollywood and the most recent being *The Mummy: Tomb of the Dragon Emperor* (2008), in which he played an ancient Chinese Emperor Han. During

this period, he also returned to China and joined several Chinese huge-budget historical marshal art film productions, such as *Hero* (2002), *Fearless* (2006) and *The Warlords* (2007). He has become a box-office guarantee for markets both at home and abroad.

Gong Li starred in Zhang Yimou's film debut, *Red Sorghum* (Hong Gao Liang) in 1987 and began her 8-year cooperation with Zhang Yimou in seven films. The pair also co-starred in a Hong Kong made film, *A Terracotta Warrior* (Qin Yong, 1990). In the seven films on which they worked together, Gong Li mostly played village women from remote country areas. The best known, *Qiuju*, was a stubborn pregnant peasant who tried every way she could to make the village leader apologize to her husband, who had been attacked by the village leader as a result of a misunderstanding. This role won Gong Li the Best Actress Award at 1992 Venice International Film Festival, along with the Golden Lion Award for Best Film for Zhang Yimou. The couple became Chinese cinema's golden pair of the 1990s. After the last film they made together, *Shanghai Triad* (Yao A Yao, Yao Dao Wai Po Qiao, 1995), Gong Li tried to work with other directors (mostly Fifth Generation film makers), but none of them could inspire her to the level performance achieved with Zhang Yimou. In 2005, by co-starring with two other Chinese actresses, Zhang Ziyi, and Michele Yang in *Memoirs of a Geisha*, Gong Li established her career in Hollywood and then continued by appearing in the following Hollywood movies: *Miami Vice* (2006) and *Hannibal Rising* (2007). In 2006, Gong Li reunited with Zhang Yimou and took the role of an empress in his historical drama, *Curse of the Golden Flower* (Man Cheng Jin Dai Huang Jin Jia). The pair's reunion was certainly the biggest selling point for the movie – it became that year's Chinese box-office champion. More importantly for Gong Li, she won the following year's Hong Kong Film Award for Best Actress. It is worth noting that in recent years Jet Li; Gong Li; Zhang Ziyi and other famous Hong Kong superstars, such as Jacky Chan, Chow Yun Fat, and Michele Yang, have worked on both sides of the Pacific Ocean allowing them to maintain and develop their international celebrity status while contributing to China's movie industry development. A worry is that the superstar strategy forces Chinese film makers to focus on blockbuster epics that will be a commercial success at the expense of creativity and aesthetic value. Others say the star system is essential for China's movie industry if motion pictures are to be seen as an entertainment medium. On this issue, film director and executive producer, Huang Jianxin says the audience will decide, "If stars influence the box-office, then the stardom system is necessary. If

audiences won't buy it (the stardom system), then it's unnecessary."³⁰ The stardom strategy has been a successful strategy in Hollywood for decades and has worked with audiences all over the world as it has with Chinese film makers and audiences. Thus, the big directors are willing to pay superstars their skyrocketing salaries and the money men are also willing to provide the funds. John Woo's 2008 *Red Cliff* with 10 major characters played by superstars from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and mainland China and a budget of 600 million yuan (US\$85 million) is just the latest example. A smash hit at cinemas all over Asia, *Red Cliff* earned back that investment, in just a few months, before the second part was released.³¹

With this kind of success, the Chinese film industry is likely to focus on developing more stars to build up its "stardom system." This will require huge budgets for new films. Chinese cinema will thus focus largely on Hollywood-type "star movies" based on an industry system, replacing the long time European tradition of "auteur films" which emphasized a director's style and vision. Thus, Chinese cinema will embrace an era of industrialization.³²

This development depends on the availability of large financial investments in the Chinese film industry. The 2008 downturn in China's stock market could slow this development. Despite some great successes, film making remains a very risky investment. Production companies that seemed eager to raise funds are now hesitating. Nonetheless, the record-high amounts of domestic movies made for the 2009 New Year-Spring Festival season and the new box-office revenue records created during the season indicate that, during maybe the worst economic crisis worldwide since the Great Depression, China's movie industry might be one the beneficiaries of this recession. This mirrors the Hollywood dream works factory's golden years prosperity boosted by the Great Depression.

Summary

There are some in China's film industry that say it is time for some regulations. They want not just a rating system but rules relating to fundraising, the stardom system and some support for independent film makers. These film makers now struggle more with the profit-driven market than with government censorship. Censorship will not disappear in the foreseeable future but there has already been a loosening as the government is unable to ban films on the accessible global stage. Without

some changes to the above policies, it is predicted by some that China's independent film makers are likely to disappear.

The fast growing Chinese movie industry has faced challenges from a global economic recession, a shrinking domestic stock market, a lack of strong copyright laws for the protection of productions, comparatively limited fundraising sources, and a surge in superstar salaries. All these challenges will test Chinese movie policy makers' wisdom and courage as well as Chinese film makers' creativity and persistence.