

Becoming Indie: Making of Indie Cinema in Mainland China (2010-2019)



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To my father, Wu Weidong (1962-2017)

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Abstract

Using Actor-Network Theory (ANT) as its main theoretical inspiration and key methodology, this thesis explores the landscape of indie cinema as a unique industry and aesthetic practice in mainland China from 2010 to 2019. Inspired by Bruno Latour's use of the analogy of a messy construction site where social enterprises emerge through a hive of activity – actions, movements, trials, negotiations, orders, and failures – this study conceptualises the term “indie cinema” within a specific Chinese context by traveling through the sites of production, distribution, and exhibition via which the term “indie cinema” comes into being. It focuses in particular on the busy human and non-human actants who proactively engage in activating China's indie film scene as a growing network. These actants include both human actants, such as industry professionals, filmmakers, and online communities of film critics, and also non-human actants, such as state regulations, shooting equipment, and online platforms.

The conceptualisation of Chinese indie cinema does not only provide a valuable lens through which to understand the evolution of the scene as a unique film practice – constantly evolving as a result of the interactions, negotiations and influences of various actants – but it also contributes to the application of Actor-Network Theory in film studies by examining the role of non-human actants such as lighting, cameras, and objects in shaping the aesthetics of Chinese indie films. These latter actants help to construct negative affects, which allow the films under investigation to evade censorship and challenge state-propagated narratives. More broadly, throughout the thesis, I demonstrate how the Chinese indie cinema landscape provides a compromised and fragile, but nevertheless open network for film practitioners and audiences to navigate the increasingly restrictive ideological control of the state, and the uncertain political climate in China.

Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 One Night in Pingyao

It was the ancient city of Pingyao, October 2019. Social distancing was not yet a thing. So, it was still okay to stand outside and ask a stranger for a cigarette. It was one of the many end-of-the-day parties that were held during the festival. As an attribution to its sponsor, that very night was named “Momo’s Night” (Momo 陌陌, an up-and-coming social app that is China’s equivalent of Tinder). The event was exclusive. Stood at the door were four young volunteers, each wearing a name tag, who were there to make sure the guests showed up with their digital invitations. The stranger I talked to turned out to be an actor in a film that I had watched during the WPS (work-in-progress) session that day. He told me that aside from acting, he had just graduated from one of the few non-officially run film institutes. He had come here with his first full-length feature film. The more people he knew and talked to (especially the important curators), as some of his friends had suggested, the better the chance that his film might get some recognition, or even go somewhere. I told him that I was a student, writing a thesis on what it takes to make legal, arty, and low-budget films in today’s China, and that I also wanted to meet people in the field to get their views on the issue. To make myself sound less like a student, I told him that before this, I had worked for the independent film festival in Nanjing for many years. However, since leaving China some years ago, I noticed that a lot of things had changed. He agreed with this view, pointing out that there are now more opportunities, but at the same time there are more constraints, which have made independent filmmaking more difficult.

We stomped out the cigarettes and agreed to meet a couple of days later for a proper conversation. He left, and I went back to the party and opened the second beer of the evening, a 330ml Hoegaarden. The venue was roughly divided into three rooms. It was loud inside.

With DJ and techno music, an extra-large projector and neon blue lighting in the background, the first room resembled a proper clubbing scene, if one ignored the almost deserted dance floor. Aside from the very few guests who had been invited to the VIP lounge at the far end of the venue, most of the guests were gathering in the middle room. There, I saw producers, film festival curators, local film screening organisers, actors and actresses, film critics, film company owners, reporters, we-media writers, and other anxious PhD students. Most of the guests were well dressed. I had encountered many of them during the day. Important people, such as the CEO of an up-and-coming film company or the producer of a famous filmmaker, showed up, but did not stay long.

I did not stay for too long either. I was introduced to another “party” not too far away from Momo’s Night. It was in a classic barbecue restaurant where one could still not feel bad about smoking inside. Here, there were no fancy Belgian beers or lines of delicate finger food. Instead, large bottles of Qingdao, piles of lamb skewers and slices of heavily spiced, grilled potatoes were served by a middle-aged man with crew-cut hair. Being the only person, both cooking the food and bringing it to the table, the restaurant owner was attentive but also quite done with the day. People were lining up along the long table, exchanging information about which film might have been a sell-out, and which had been a huge disappointment that day. I was introduced: There were some familiar faces who were connected to past independent film festivals. There were more producers and self-media writers. The man sitting next to me had been making underground documentary films for years and had just made a film that was to be screened in the WPS session the following day. It was approaching midnight. The barbecue session went on. Some people left, and some arrived, whose faces I recognised from the cocktail party.

A slice of an evening during the Pingyao Film Festival. The festival, founded by the esteemed Chinese filmmaker Jia Zhangke 贾樟柯, was described by him as a tribute to the

new generation of filmmakers, new films, and a new era.¹ While Jia's mention of "a new era" may be seen as a strategic move to safeguard the festival amidst a shifting climate, especially considering its association with Xi Jinping's political slogan,² the festival still signifies a notable moment. The collaboration between a previous underground filmmaker and the local government suggests that filmmaking in contemporary China has become intricately intertwined with the state while also advancing on its own trajectory. In essence, this declaration of "new-ness" signifies a distinct point in time where the film industry in China embraces both collaboration with the state and the pursuit of its own artistic vision.

This dissertation unpacks this novelty by investigating and contextualising the concept of "indie feature film" in contemporary China. Despite the fuzziness of the concept itself, a thorough examination of "indie feature film", as I will elaborate in the later chapters, can lead to a thread of valuable clues that contribute to a novel understanding of the contemporary Chinese cinema scene as chaotic, complex, and vibrant; on the one hand heavily pruned by state authorities and, on the other hand, constantly ignited by the manoeuvrings of a variety of social actans, changing technologies, and city landscapes that are both virtually and physically mutating and folding into each other.

Turning to Latour's actor-network theory helps to capture this cluster of networks of relations. It follows the traces of everyone who participated in the evening, which links together both a fancy cocktail party and a late-night smoky barbecue restaurant together. The sites, no matter how far apart they were from each other, or how little they had in common

¹ Jia Zhangke, 贾樟柯, "Jiazhangke: Rang shijie kandao shanxi 贾樟柯: 让世界看到山西" [Jiazhangke: let the world see Shan Xi], Xinhua 新华网, last modified n.d., <http://sx.news.cn/2021ft/jzk10.htm> (accessed 15 January 2022).

² Xin Ming, 辛鸣, "Xi Jinping xinshidai Zhongguo tese shehui Zhuyi sixiang shi Makesi zhuyi Zhongguohua de zuixin chengguo 习近平新时代中国特色社会主义思想是马克思主义中国化的最新成果" [Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era is the Latest Achievement of localisation of Marxism in China], Xinhua 新华网, last modified n.d., <http://www.xinhuanet.com/talking/19dbgid/sjdbgid03.htm> (accessed 20 August 2023)

with each other, were juxtaposed. These sites, along with half-full Qingdao beer bottles, worn-out folding chairs, laser lights, champagne glasses, and cheap taxis, were hosting their visitors in the most meticulous way. They shaped how they dressed, talked, stood. They shaped how they related to each other and how an indie project might be pulled off.

While this is not a dissertation specifically about a particular film festival, the investigation of “Chinese indie” began with it, as I find that the very definition of “indie” is not fully theoretically constructed, and therefore can only be explained by observations of how it is used in practice. In other words, the concept of “indie cinema” in a Chinese context is germinated in these scenes. It largely depends on how industry insiders frame it, how the media writes about it, and what the audiences expect from it.

1.2 Tracing Indie: Indie Feature Film in a Chinese Context

1.2.1 Indie as An Evolving Concept

1.2.1.1 Main Discourse on Indie Cinema

Interpreting what constitutes indie cinema in current film studies discussions is seen as a complex task. This is implied by the whimsical ending “ie” in “indie”, which hints at its vague connection to the term “independent”. Different from the term “independent”, which is deeply ingrained primarily in the evolving American film industry over the last century (Levy 1999, Tzioumakis 2006, King 2004, Tzioumakis 2012, Pierson 2002, Backman Rogers 2015, Holm and Redmond 2007) and serves as a significant reference point for studying European (Elsaesser 2005, Fowler 2002) and contemporary Asian cinema (Devasundaram 2016, Domenig 2005, Paquet 2009, Baumgärtel 2012), the term “indie” is comparatively new. According to film historian Yannis Tzioumakis, “indie” is a result of recent manoeuvres by American film conglomerates to integrate and assimilate earlier independent cinema and related companies by early 2000s (Tzioumakis 2006, 247). As further elaborated by Tzioumakis, the blending of practices associated with major film corporations and elements linked to independent filmmaking has resulted in “indie cinema” a hybrid form of cinema (Tzioumakis 2006, 265-266).

In practical terms, “independent” and “indie” are often used interchangeably. Film scholars like Alisa Perren suggests that the term “independent” has been adopted as a marketing ploy for movies that are in essence “indie”. Movies advertised as “independent”, such as *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (dir. Joel Zwick, 2002), are often produced or distributed by a major company or a subsidiary of a conglomerate. Consequently, she points out that because the use of the term “independent” frequently causes more confusion than it resolves, there should be new criteria which can be applied to identify different types of films. This includes firstly a film’s source of financing; second, the industrial affiliation of the film’s

distributor; third, the site in which the film is exhibited; fourth, the status of the talent in relation to Hollywood; and fifth, the “spirit of the film” (note: this is usually interpreted to mean its aesthetic or generic ties to commercial or alternative media traditions) (Perren 2004).

While the first four criteria mainly address a film's positioning within the industrial network, the analysis of the “indie spirit”, particularly its aesthetic qualities, has posed an intriguing question for scholarship examining contemporary indie cinema. Janet Staiger’s analysis from the 1980s asserted that a film's independence is determined by its economic connections with major producer-distributors, thereby necessitating an evaluation within the industry’s structural context (Staiger 2013, 17). However, given the industry dynamics in the early 2000s, where a production company invariably forms relationships with conglomerates to shield from risks and secure distribution channels, how can one differentiate an independent film from a mainstream one? To resolve this conundrum, Tzioumakis suggests that after the early 2000s, industry ties become less critical in discussions about indie cinema, while the aesthetic aspect assumes increased significance (Tzioumakis 2006, 266).

Regarding this, a cluster of scholarship addresses the unique “indie spirit” in American cinema since the early 2000s. A substantial body of scholarship concentrates on individual filmmakers such as Wes Anderson (Buckland 2021, Browning 2011), Jim Jarmusch (Suárez 2007, Piazza 2015), David Lynch (Nieland 2012, Todd 2012), Sofia Coppola (Roger 2019, Ferriss 2021), and Richard Linklater (Stone 2013) and offers insights into how these filmmakers crafted unique narratives and aesthetics, thereby shaping the landscape of indie cinema in their own distinctive ways. Alternatively, other scholarly work integrates textual film analysis of American indies with social and political nuances, probing the spirit of American life in the post-capitalist era (Backman Rogers 2015, Perkins and Verevis 2015, King 2017).

Research on aesthetic and industry layout do not necessarily need to exclude each other. Rather they can intersect and complement each and contribute to a more profound comprehension of the context and cultural framework of indie films, highlighting how cinema, an art form that has been evolving for more than a century, continues to adapt, critique, shape, and be shaped by its contemporary society.

The above offers a concise encapsulation of how indie cinema is conceptualized within the scope of American cinema. This focus on revising American indie cinema stems from a historical perspective that sees indie cinema as heavily influenced by the context of the American film industry, especially the continuous reshuffling of film companies in their relationship with Hollywood. Clarifying this aspect facilitates more comprehensive understanding of “indie” within the context of other countries. For example, while there is extensive academic research on American indie cinema, the terms “indie” does not seem to feature prominently in European cinema studies. As highlighted by Thomas Elsaesser in his research into European cinema’s interaction with Hollywood, the two operate under unique paradigms. Simply put, while American films are generally studio-backed, it is acknowledged that 3A film festivals “govern” the production, distribution, and reception of so-called independent films in Europe (Elsaesser 2005, 87-88). Elsaesser’s analysis illuminates terms such as “arthouse cinema” (Elsaesser 2005, 16), providing insight into the foundational contexts which from which such terms are derived. It further shows how a term’s meaning can vary across different scenarios. Through this lens, “independent” in the context of British cinema could refer to a very different network with a notably lenient censorship law since the late 1960s (Hunter, Porter and Smith 2017, 9-10; Brett 2017, 236-237), unregulated home video distributors in the 1980s (Walker 2017, 329; Hunter, Porter and Smith 2017, 12), or BBC 4’s support for independent cinema (Cateridge 2017, 351-352) while in an Indian context, it could mean reliance on digital distribution and online platform

(Devasundaram 2022, 9).

1.2.1.2 Where to Locate Indie in a Chinese Context?

Defining Chinese indie cinema presents unique challenges when compared to its international peers, mainly because looking from an industry-structure perspective, the marketisation of the Chinese film industry under the PRC regime did not truly begin until the early 1990s, when a series of film laws and regulations were promulgated which gradually ended the total monopoly of CFC and allowed private film companies to participate (Zhu and Nakajima 2010, 25-30). The state has promulgated a series of regulations to make the film industry more inclusive. This includes allowing private film companies to acquire shooting permits without the sponsorship of any state-owned studio since 2001,³ and offering tax reductions for establishing new film companies in mainland China including a four-year tax exemption for cultural enterprises from 2004-2008.⁴ However, the implementation of the film law in 2018 and the shift of administrative power from the department of culture to the department of propaganda have raised ongoing concerns about the actual degree of freedom private companies possess, particularly in comparison to the role of large state-public conglomerates in the film sector.

To better understand indie cinema in the Chinese context, it is essential to

³ State Administration of Radio Film and Television and Ministry of Culture, 国家广播电视电影总局及文化部, “Guanyu gaige dianying fangying faxing jizhi de shishi xize (shixing)de tongzhi 关于改革电影放映发行机制的实施细则(试行)的通知” [(trial) Implementation of regulations on the Reformation of Film Distribution and Screening], the People’s Government of Beijing Municipality, last modified 18 Dec 2001, https://www.beijing.gov.cn/zhengce/zhengcefagui/qtwj/201912/t20191218_1270579.html (accessed 25 August 2023)

⁴ 财政部, 海关总署, 国家税务局 Mistry of Finance, Genera Administration of Customs, and State Administration of Taxation, “Guanyu wenhua tizhi gage zhong jingyingxing wenhua shiye danwei zhuanzhi hou qiye de ruogan shuishou zhengce wenti de tongzhi 关于文化体制改革中经营文化性事业单位转制后企业的若干税收政策问题的通知” [Notice on the tax Policy for the Culture-institution-Converted Enterprises During the Reform of Culture Institution], Ministry of Commerce of PRC China 中华人民共和国商务部, last modified 11 May 2005, <http://www.mofcom.gov.cn/aarticle/b/g/200505/20050500088303.html> (accessed 17 July 2023)

acknowledge the considerable research that has been conducted on the structure of the broader film industry, including the practices of private film companies in PRC China and the impact of state policies and censorship on these sectors. (Zhang 2012, Kokas 2017, Su 2016, Yang 2016). While a minority of English-language works delve into the perspective of individual private film production companies and film company owners and their response to the state policy (eg. Meyer-Clement 2016) in PRC China, the predominant approach in English literature emphasises film policy and critically examines the role that the PRC state plays in relation to the private sector (Su 2016, Zhu and Stanley 2010). This analysis explores how the state shapes and influences private entities, constructing the larger framework within which the industry operates. On the other hand, Chinese literature also addresses the policy level, though often in a more descriptive manner. For instance, works such as Liu Pan 刘藩's *Economic of Film Industry* have astutely introduced concepts like “government failure” (Zhengfu shiling 政府失灵) to analyse the inefficiency of state policy within the film industry (Liu 2010, 298). While such analysis highlights the limitations and shortcomings of government intervention, it typically concludes with a rhetorical balance that emphasises the perceived necessity for state interference. This balance often overlooks additional factors, such as ideological censorship, thereby limiting the scope of inquiry into the complex interplay between policy, ideology, and the practical realities of the industry.

While acknowledging the somewhat limited nature of existing Chinese academic writing on the subject, it nonetheless provides invaluable detailed accounts of specific film companies, contributing significantly to this thesis's understanding of the Chinese film market. For instance, Yu Li 余丽's *Introduction to Movie Industry* (2016) offers an in-depth exploration of the general film industry landscape, featuring companies such as Huayi Brothers (Huayi xiongdi), Bona Films (Bona yingye 博纳影业), and other private film enterprises that have played key roles in the Chinese film industry since the early 2000s (Yu

2016, 9-10). Compared to Yu's work, which primarily focuses on the role of larger corporations in film production (Yu 2016, 19-28), and Song Tingting 宋婷婷's somewhat oversimplified characterisation of independent cinema in China as "films produced out of the studio system" (Song 2010), Liu offers a nuanced account by arguing that the term "independent cinema" is not easily transferable to the Chinese context (Liu 2010, 165). Liu contends that, due to the small scale of the market and the constraints of censorship, independent films in the Chinese context often find themselves positioned as either "a downgraded version of a commercial film or a diluted version of art cinema" (Liu 2010, 165). He then provides three case studies including Beijing New Picture Film (Beijing xinhuanian 北京新画面), Pegasus Media (Paiqia taihe huanqiu chuanmei 派恰太合环球传媒), and Ningxia Film Group (Ningxia dianying zhipianchang 宁夏电影制片厂) and suggests that the operation modes of these three companies offer valuable insights that "film production companies lacking distribution channels could learn from" (Liu 2010, 165).

While "indie" as a concept has not been the focus of academic research on Chinese cinema, "independent" has arguably emerged as one of the most exciting and researched topics within contemporary Chinese cinema studies. Among the available literature, several pivotal works and themes have surfaced, enhancing our understanding of what "independent" means within the context of Chinese cinema (Pickowicz and Zhang 2006, Zhang and Zito 2015, Wang 2014, Wang 2018, Nakajima 2013, Berry and Robinson 2017, Zhang and Zito 2016). This body of research regards independent cinema as a medium for challenging and critiquing dominant political, social, and cultural norms. This includes questioning state policies, exploring marginalised groups or individuals, and addressing historical political events. Concurrently, the practical aspects of independent filmmaking, particularly the incorporation of new technologies like digital cameras, have been recognised as aspects enabling filmmakers to evade traditional routes often subject to increased state oversight.

Discourse on aesthetics, intricately tied to digital independent filmmaking, frequently engages with terms such as on-site (*xianchang* 现场), a term which according to Luke Robinson, enfolds as part of an ongoing dialogue between public and private in documentary practices in contemporary China (Robinson 2010, 193-194). Simultaneously, figures like Wu Wenguang 吴文光, often considered the godfather of Chinese independent cinema, hold not only pivotal roles in the academic realm (Wu 2010, 49) but also significantly extend their influence beyond scholarship. Their contributions notably enrich overseas collections of Chinese independent cinema, such as those found in Newcastle, UK and the United States.⁵

Despite the fact that independent cinema operates in a grey area and is not formally included in the industry, extensive scholarship has deeply explored the exhibition spaces of independent cinema. This body of research predominantly focuses on independent film festivals (Berry and Robinson 2017) and informal screening clubs (Fan 2019, Nakajima 2010, Zhang 2007, Zhang and Zito 2016) as pivotal platforms connecting Chinese independent cinema with its limited audience within mainland China.

Research on the nature of independent cinema in contemporary China has indeed deepened over time, reflecting a more nuanced understanding of “independent” as a “compound word”, a movement that consists of visual practitioners with different identities including but not limited to artists and filmmakers, all connected by the fact that their filmmaking practice is off the state radar.

Scholarship on Chinese independent cinema provides a good argument for the wide range of meanings “independent” can contain. For instance, in their studies of various independent film festivals in China, Yu and Wu have diverged from a general dissident

⁵ See Wu Wenguang and the Memory Project at Centre for Chinese Studies, UCLA (<https://www.international.ucla.edu/ccs/event/13967>) and Chinese Independent Film Archive (<https://www.chinaindiefilm.org/>)

narrative on Chinese independent festival and unravel the diverse connotations embedded within the term “independent cinema” in a Chinese context. As Yu and Wu point out, the term “independent film festival”, for example, can encompass three different festivals located in various parts of China, each exhibiting distinct characteristics (Yu and Wu 2017, 170-174). And compared to the more political engaged stance of BIFF, CIFF contains a more educational elements in their programs (Yu and Wu 2017, 182).

Yu and Wu’s reasoning on distinct characters of independent film festivals can help us understand the key differences between independent documentary and independent feature filmmaking. While a substantial portion of existing literature centres on independent documentary filmmaking (Pickowicz and Zhang 2017; Chris, Lu and Lofel 2010), independent feature filmmaking appears to adhere to a different, set logic. The term “independent” is applied less rigorously when it comes to feature filmmaking in mainland China, both within academic discourse and in practice. Primarily, “independent feature filmmaking” tends to highlight a select group of auteurs, particularly those identified as Sixth-Generation filmmakers (Stuckey 2018, Lin 2002). This includes individuals such as Wang Xiaoshuai 王小帅 (Wang 2017), Jia Zhangke (Mello 2019), and Lou Ye 娄烨 (Zuo 2019) who represent a new wave of Chinese filmmakers with distinctive storytelling and aesthetic styles, differentiating them from their Fifth-Generation counterparts (Clark 1987, Clark 2005, Ye 1999). While aesthetic convergence is observed among certain independent filmmakers - such as Zhang Yuan 张元’s use of extreme close-ups in *Mama* (Mama 妈妈, 1990), hand-held style in *East Palace, West Palace* (Donggong xigong 东宫西宫, dir. Zhang Yuan, 1996) and Jia Zhangke’s renowned long take and realistic style in *Pickpocket* (Xiaowu 小武, dir. Jia Zhangke, 1997), it is crucial to acknowledge a group of contemporaneous filmmakers who, despite having less association with established entities like the Beijing Film Institute, arguably embody a degree of, if not higher, “independence”. Largely

unheralded, filmmakers like Geng Jun 耿军, Gan Xiaoer 甘小二, and Diao Yinan 刁亦男, maintain stronger ties with independent film festivals, signifying their underappreciated yet substantial impact on China's independent cinema.

The complexity of the “auteur” paradigm within the context of Chinese cinema will be further explored in the methodology chapter. However, it is important to mention existing studies that move beyond this paradigm, analysing independent filmmakers based on their distinct thematic choices, demographic attributes, distribution channels, relationship with urbanisation in post-socialist China etc. (Wang 2018, Ma 2020, Liang 2007, Feng 2017). Furthermore, examinations of themes which are more related to affect including melancholy (Wang 2022) and boredom (Zuo 2019) expand our understanding of independent feature films, providing a more nuanced view of the breadth of Chinese independent cinema.

Moreover, locating Chinese indie cinema as a concept requires not only scholarly review but also an understanding of the broader shifts in political-ideological narratives. This is because these ideological imperatives imposed by the state are not merely reflected in propaganda films; they also influence the wider cinematic landscape, including indie productions. Since the “Harmonious Society” was introduced by the Hu Jintao regime in 2004,⁶ the doctrine has progressed, particularly after the 2008 “wall-building” initiatives on China’s internet landscape,⁷ from a slogan promoting social cohesion to a stringent standard

⁶ 国务院公报 Announcement of State Council, “Zhonggong zhongyang guanyu goujian shehui zhuyi hexie shehui zhongda wenti de jue ding 中共中央关于构建社会主义和谐社会若干重大问题的决定” [Decision of the CPC central committee on major issues pertaining to building a harmonious socialist society], last modified 11 Oct 2006, https://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2006/content_453176.htm (accessed 15 Aug 2023)

⁷ During 2008 and 2009, unrests occurred in Xinjiang and Tibet. Combined with China’s resolution to build up its international image for the 2008 Olympic, the Chinese government allegedly tightened its control over information, leading to the blocking of Facebook and the eventual pull-out of Google from China due to censorship disagreements. Meanwhile, China increased regulations on internet audio-visual content with the Administrative Provisions on Internet Audio-Visual Program Service (Hulianwang shiting jienu fuwu guanli guiding 互联网视听节目服务管理规定), emphasising the ‘healthy and orderly development’ of such media (Article 1). These governmental moves can be considered as visible effort to promote a harmonious society by monitoring and filtering online information and digital content to align with state-endorsed values.

that actively filters out the deemed “unharmonious” and shapes public discourse. The subsequent ideological directive under Xi Jinping, “Tell the Chinese Story Well”,⁸ seeks to project a renewed national image and enhance China’s soft power. This includes promoting films which openly celebrate Chinese values, culture and state ideology, influencing both mainstream and indie film sectors. While the funding, resources are heavily favouring the former, the latter retains as a critical voice and creative autonomy while navigating within the given political framework.

These ideological slogans provide a foundational context for the contextualisation of indie cinema in China. In this specific Chinese context, indie cinema emerges both as a distinct industry practice and a medium with unique aesthetic value. As I will further elaborate in the methodology chapter, understanding indie cinema as an industry practice via the lens of actor-network theory takes on a deeper resonance in how “small” yet impact films are made and distributed in mainland China despite of the strong ideological demand from the state and market risks; The exploration of negative affect through formal analysis in later chapters further elucidate how these films, through their unique aesthetic choices, embodying an indirect yet impactful challenge to prevailing ideologies.

⁸ Xi Jinping 习近平, “Jianghao zhongguo gushi chuanbo hao zhongguo shengyin 讲好中国故事 传播好中国声音” [Tell the Chinese story well, spread the Chinese voice well], last modified 21 August 2013, http://www.xinhuanet.com/zgjx/2013-08/21/c_132648439.htm (accessed 24 Aug 2023)

1.2.2 From Independent to Indie: A Methodological Shift

1.2.2.1 What Is the Relation Between Indie and Independent?

In terms of the relation between indie and independent, Tzioumakis, concurring with Perren, defines “indie” as the “hippy offspring” of the independent film scene in American cinema after the 1980s (Tzioumakis 2006, 8). Although the American scenario cannot be directly applied to the Chinese context, as contrary to the historical role played by the U.S. government in tearing apart monopolies and dismantling vertical integrations, as seen with actions such as the promulgation of 1940 decree, which had a profound impact on the onward industry structure (Tzioumakis 2006, 102), a key theme in academic discussions on film distribution in PRC China centres on the role of the state monopoly in the Chinese film industry. Tzioumakis’s conceptualisation of “indie” does suggest a potential path for exploration. In particular, the perception of “indie” as being less serious yet more commodified, while retaining an aesthetic distinct from mainstream blockbusters, could shed light on unexplored aspects of contemporary Chinese cinema studies.

The body of literature on Chinese films within the contemporary industry practice displays an intriguing uniformity. Apart from a considerable number of studies examining the relationship between Hollywood and the Chinese film market (Kokas 2017, Su 2016, Zhu 2022), a significant portion of the literature is dedicated to “main-melody” films (zhu xuanlü dianying 主旋律电影) and their contemporary blockbuster incarnations such as *Wolf Warrior* (Zhan lang 战狼, dir. Wu Jing 吴京, 2015) (Yan 2022, Zhu 2023, Xie 2021, Yu 2013).

Another distinct strand of research gravitates towards entertainment films. These works delve into films that may not carry a strong ideological underpinning but are steeped in commercial appeal, with filmmakers such as Feng Xiaogang 冯小刚 and his New Year’s Eve Films (Hesuipian 贺岁片) being typical examples (Zhang 2008). Whether emphasising ideological underpinnings or not, such literature tends to spotlight the strategies of major corporations

like Wanda Films 万达电影 or Huayi Brothers 华谊兄弟, prioritizing larger budget films helmed by more prominent filmmakers.

Within the scope of research addressing Chinese feature filmmaking since the 2000s, there is a curious gap regarding films that are neither labelled "independent" nor backed by hefty budgets. How does the rest of the filmmaking landscape, specifically those smaller and medium budget films, fit into this scenario? Elena Meyer-Clement sheds light on the trend of "one-picture companies" in China's private film sector since the 2000s. These small companies, reminiscent of China's 1930s film producers, typically made one low-budget film and then dissolved. Despite occasional successes like *Crazy Stone* (Fengkuang de shitou 疯狂的石头, dir. Ning Hao 宁浩, 2006), most faced financial challenges, leading them to produce only one film before bankruptcy (Meyer-Clement 2016, 169).

Meyer-Clement's observation about one-time private film companies illuminates an intriguing period in the early 2000s for the Chinese film industry. On one hand, the state was visibly embracing the opportunity to penetrate the global film market by joining the WTO (Zhu and Seio 2010, 28). This step, coupled with the newfound ability for private film companies to secure shooting permits independently of state-owned studios,⁹ signified a level of independence that was previously unseen in the PRC's history.¹⁰

However, contrastingly, this era also bore witness to the underperformance of so-called "Chinese blockbusters" such as *The Lost Bladesman* (Guanyunchang 关云长, dir.

⁹ "Dianying qiye jingying zige zanxing guidingdian 电影企业经营资格暂行规定" [Interim Provisions on Operation Qualification Access for Movie Enterprises] last modified 10 Nov 2004, https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2021-12/14/content_5711915.htm (accessed 6 Aug 2023)

¹⁰ By 2014, according to 21cn Economy, the five leading private distribution companies in China dominated the mainland's distribution market, accounting for 70% of the overall box office. See The five majors mentioned in the 2014 article are Bona Film Group (博纳影业), Wanda Films (万达影业), Beijing Enlight Media (光线传媒), Le.com (乐视视频), Huayi Brothers (华谊兄弟), see "Wuda gongsi dianying haoqu 45 yipiaofang 五大公司电影豪取 45 亿票房" [Five Majors raked 4.5 billions box office], last modified 25 Aug 2014, <http://m.21jingji.com/article/20140825/herald/1f5a826da1621570a9d014da3291cb86.html> (accessed 25 Aug 2023)

Felix Cong and Alan Mak 麦兆辉 庄文强 2011) and *The Golden Era* (Huangjin shidai 黄金时代, dir. Ann Hui 许鞍华 2014) which despite emulating Hollywood-style productions and featuring acclaimed directors and A-list actors, failed to resonate as expected.

Interestingly, this phenomenon remains largely unexplored in academic literature, with only media coverage serving as a record of these commercial disappointments. And while the industry tried to figure out how to cash in on the opportunity of an allegedly more vibrant film market, it has brought questions on the table. For example, for independent filmmakers, the question is, who will buy their films?

In an article titled “When Independent Film Meets the Industry: A False Proposition” (2014), Shen Xiaoping 沈小平, one of the organisers of CIFF, raised this critical question. He writes, “Over the past two decades, Chinese independent cinema has fostered talents who made their way to the mainstream film market and some works have even achieved international recognition. However, is it possible to establish a link between independent cinema and the domestic market, fostering a meaningful circulation?” Seeking to partially answer his own query, Shen identifies in the conclusion of his article a handful of cases and agencies that have managed to introduce some independent films to a larger audience. This includes in very seldom occasions; documentaries being sold to television channels. Additionally, he presents Heaven Pictures as a standout example, describing it as “the independent production company that embodies the most industrial characteristics.” (Shen 2014). Although some aspects of Shen’s analysis, especially those concerning the American independent scene in the article, are questionable. For example, his assertion that “self-funded and handmade” were the defining traits of American independent cinema before the 1990s did not touch upon how American independent has been heavily shaped by various industry practices. His analysis about the progression of Chinese independent cinema remains remarkably valuable as it touches upon a topic which rarely discussed: the relationship

between Chinese independent cinema scene market.

In summary, around 2010, if not already earlier, long-existing distinctions within the Chinese independent filmmaking community became much more pronounced. On one side, there were filmmakers completely devoted to independent filmmaking, operating entirely outside the mainstream system. They aligned themselves with initiatives such as the “Nanjing Manifesto” (Nanjing xuanyan 南京宣言),¹¹ and contributed to independent publications such as the monthly magazine “Film Auteur” (Dianying zuozhe 电影作者). On the other side, a separate group of filmmakers began to explore new possibilities. For instance, films produced by Heaven Pictures were screened through film screening weeks in downtown Nanjing, with Rear Window (Houchuang 后窗) as the organisers. These latter independent filmmakers and practitioners, who Shen Xiaoping referred to in his article, were cultivated through independent cinema and sought to reach a larger audience.

The relative lack of academic focus on this subject can be attributed to several factors. First, lack of substantial measurement in terms of quantity of films, box office performance, or social influence means that these independent films with market potential slipped easily off the academic radar. Moreover, the concentrated academic focus on Chinese independent cinema as a practice operating outside of state supervision has overshadowed those films that are willing or have the potential to find the market and reach a broader audience. Also, the absence of a proper term to describe what is happening has resulted in the continued and messy use of the word “independent”. When reviewing literature on Chinese independent cinema and its relationship with independent feature filmmaking in mainland China, it

¹¹ After an intense debate regarding the position of independent filmmakers and researchers, four A4 papers were displayed on the wall out of the conference room the second day, detailing independent filmmakers’ own positioning on filmmaking, and their views on independent film critiques. For more details, see “Saman dongwu 萨满 动物” [Shaman Nanjing Manifesto], last modified 1st Nov 2011, <https://site.douban.com/widget/notes/5494326/note/181581347/> (accessed 7 Sep 2023)

becomes clear that for over a decade and a half, both film scholars and industry practitioners have inconsistently utilised this term. For example, the term “independent” appears in the following three different segments, each using it in a completely distinct context:

“Since the early 1990s, independent film and video making has developed as new player in Chinese cultural production – a player who is enthusiastically welcomed at international film festivals overseas but who has been ignored and occasionally banned by Chinese State censorship...” (Pickowicz and Zhang 2006, 23)

“Zhang Yuan’s *Mama* has been marked as the first independent feature film in China, followed by *The Days* (Dongchun de rizi 冬春的日子 1993) by Wang Xiaoshuai. Both films are regarded as the foundation of the Chinese independent Cinema.” (The Economic Observer, 2012)

“21st century sees the emergence of a wave of ‘new independent cinema’, which is represented by a new generation of directors who were born after 1980s. Their works have become an overwhelming force contributing to the Chinese cinema as a form of art.” (Li 2018)

It is noteworthy that, despite the term “independent” never having been officially embraced or supported by the state, by the 2010s even state-sponsored institutions began to acknowledge the existence of this cluster of films which tell stories differently, referring to it as “arthouse cinema” or “anti-genre film.” For instance, the Research Report on the Chinese Film Industry (2015), published by the China Film Association, categorizes films like *Kaili Blues* (Lubian yecan 路边野餐, dir. Bi Gan 毕赣 2015) and *River Road* (Jia zai shuicao

fengmao de defang 家在水草丰茂的地方, dir. Li Ruijun 李睿珺 2015) as “arthouse cinema with a medium/low budget.” (China Film Association 2016, 103-104) These fall under the broader umbrella of anti-genre films (2015, 103-104). The report even posits that “as pioneers at the frontier of art-house cinema, these films carry significant meaning for the entire film market” (China Film Association 2016, 104).

The introduction of “anti-genre” as a category of film in this official research report is intriguing. Generally, the concept of genre film is developed through the film history of studio production firstly as a strategy for studios to better promote their films (Perren 2004) and therefore is closely linked to mainstream filmmaking and a mature film industry (Bordwell et al., Langford 2005, Neale 2000). Primarily, by the 2010s, Chinese commercial cinema has been attempting, but has not yet succeeded, in developing well-established genre categories with real impact. The flops of so-called “Chinese blockbuster films” mentioned earlier can serve as an example (Zhu 2010). This situation makes the term “anti-genre” ambiguous, as the significance of “anti-genre” is unclear when genre categorization within Chinese cinema itself remains undefined and elusive.

Still, the use of the term “anti-genre” highlights how films like *Kaili Blues* are uniquely recognised by institutions. Specifically, it can be argued that by 2015 state-sponsored institutions such as the Chinese Film Association acknowledged the potential of these films. This leads to the question: Why not simply adopt the term that the CFA has given these films? Why is there a need to go further than “small and medium budget arthouse cinema” or “anti-genre” film, and make an extra effort to define “indie” in a Chinese context? This exploration for a distinct term “indie” goes beyond mere semantics. It is an essential endeavour to find a label that maintains a connection with the heritage of Chinese independent cinema and accurately encapsulates an essential yet understudied facet of its transformation and divergence in China’s post-2010s film scene.

Although extensive academic research has not yet delved into this subject, the significance of this divergence within independent cinema has been illuminated by two key articles. Chris Berry's "Death of Chinese Independent Cinema?" (2017) and Li Yang 李洋's "It Is the Time for Chinese New Independent Cinema" (2018), both written by acknowledged scholars specialising in Chinese cinema, call attention to the need for a fresh perspective on the progression of independent scene in China.

In his article "Death of Chinese Independent Cinema?" (2017), Chris Berry highlights the fragmentation of the exhibition channels once associated with the independent scene in China. He points out that the increased political constraints imposed by the PRC regime means that the previously independent cinema scene are becoming more dispersed, and one must now "look elsewhere" to find interesting content. Berry's finding resonates with Li Yang's article "It Is the Time for Chinese New Independent Cinema". In this article, Li identifies a significant distinction between traditional independent film and what can be termed as "new independent film" (xinduli dianying 新独立电影). According to Li:

The new generation of filmmakers proactively seeks opportunities without state funding... The films, which are labelled as independent, have begun to gain significance as audiences choose to pay for these films. (Li 2018)

Interestingly, despite the expertise of the authors, neither of these insightful pieces were published in traditional academic journals. Instead, they found their place in online journals and we-media platforms. This highlights the ongoing evolution and complexity of this discourse. In terms of the content, while both articles highlight the decline of the independent cinema scene and the increasingly restrictive stance the state has taken to regulate and supervise filmmaking in mainland China, it's vital to consider how Li Yang

introduces the term “new independent cinema” in his article. This article, published in mainland Chinese media, insightfully highlights the emerging practices and their relationship with the independent film scene, focusing on the unique agency of the new generation of filmmakers. This emphasis is valuable in shedding light on further study of a critical aspect of contemporary Chinese cinema. However, Li's characterization may unintentionally lead to confusion, especially when attempting to distinguish between the so-called “old” and “new” filmmakers. For instance, the categorization of filmmakers such as Geng Jun or Diao Yinan becomes problematic, as they clearly do not align with Li's “born after 1980s” criteria, despite being influential figures who have significantly shaped the understanding of this divergence of independent cinema in post 2010s China. Another reason the term “new independent cinema” maybe problematic is because, as the state's increasingly hostile stance towards the independent cinema scene becomes more apparent, the term “independent” has understandably become less favoured among industry practitioners.

Up to this point, I have illustrated why terms such as “anti-genre film” and “new independent cinema” are not appropriate to describe the further divergence of Chinese independent cinema and the growing demand of the Chinese film market. With these considerations in mind, the question that arises is: what role does niche art film play in the broader picture?

It might be tempting to label the phenomenon of Chinese indie cinema as “auteur film” (*zuozhe dianying* 作者电影) or “arthouse cinema” (*wenyipian* 文艺片). These terms seem appealing, especially since they are sometimes used by Chinese indie film practitioners themselves to describe the works they distribute. Moreover, Chinese indie cinema exhibits characteristics commonly associated with art cinema/arthouse cinema. This includes the aim not simply to entertain, but to interrogate the self, explore culture, and examine society, as described by John White (White 2017, 20), and to create an intellectual filmgoing experience,

as noted by Barbara Wilinsky (Wilinsky 2011, 3).

While terms like “auteur film” or “art-house cinema” may appear useful for understanding emerging Chinese indie cinema as they are frequently used by industry practitioners and audience, they are ultimately not suitable for application in the Chinese context for several reasons. First, as Thomas Elsaesser points out, the concept of “art cinema” serves as a crucial criterion in evaluating European cinema. It does not solely refer to a “distinct formal-aesthetic style of narration”, but also functions “as an institutional-pragmatic category” (Elsaesser 2005, 16). In other words, “art cinema” refers to all films shown at “art-house” cinemas, whether they are government-subsidised or independently produced. (Elsaesser 2005, 16) Applying such terms as “art-house cinema” to Chinese indie cinema without considering these complex nuances can be problematic. For instance, while there may be a few art-house cinemas located specifically in Beijing, such venues, in the European or North American sense, are largely uncommon throughout mainland China. Moreover, it is very unlikely, if not completely impossible, for an independent production to get state funding.

Secondly, the conceptualisation of art cinema or arthouse cinema, deeply rooted in European cinema tradition, cannot fully encompass the unique political dynamics that influence Chinese indie cinema. As one of the few countries in the world which does not have a legal grading system for films, censorship process in China can be extremely opaque and decided by the Film Bureau on a case-to-case basis. Therefore, the application of “art-house cinema” to describe Chinese indie films overlooks the pervasive and sometimes intrusive role the Chinese state plays in regulating, censoring, or supporting films. This combination of state censorship and influence of market forces means that a more specific terminology is needed to accurately reflect the unique circumstance in mainland China.

Thirdly, the term “art-house cinema” indicates a highbrow image that is associated

both with the films produced and the audience that consumes them. As Barbara Wilinsky, channelling John Belton, points out, this image offers people a way to differentiate themselves from others in the middle-class film audience (Wilinsky 2011, 3). However, some Chinese indie filmmakers may not identify with the Western-centric connotations associated with “art-house.” The term might not fully capture the diverse motivations and cultural contexts that drive indie film production in China.

Lastly, and most significantly, we must recognise the institutional weight behind the term “art-house cinema.” While “art-cinema” has been examined in a productive lens for its impact on Chinese film, it is essential to revisit Elsaesser’s insight into “art” as an institutional concept. The term “art-house cinema” implies a set of institutions that define what qualifies as “art”, and what does not. In the specific context of the global film industry, it is often European film festivals that play this defining role, acting as gatekeepers or regulators (Elsaesser 2005, 27). Therefore, the usage of “art-house cinema”, while appealing in a broad sense, risks Eurocentric bias, which could potentially lead to misconceptions and inaccuracies in capturing the unique characteristics of the forming indie film landscape in mainland China.

1.2.2.2 Chinese Indie Cinema: From “Independent” to Networked

In the previous section, I systematically approached the complex landscape of Chinese indie cinema. I began by offering a concise account of independent cinema in broader literature and in a Chinese context, identifying a gap in the literature concerning Chinese independent filmmakers who target films with market potential. Next, I detailed the current state of the Chinese film industry, including its burgeoning openness in the early 2000s, and the failure of Chinese blockbusters which tried to mimic the Hollywood style, and the potential for medium to low-budget films. I argued that these factors collectively lay the

foundation for conceptualizing indie cinema within the unique context of China.

My examination then moved beyond the confines of traditional categories and classifications, refusing to be restricted by a simplified definition of independent film practices as a practice outside the state, and how their relationship with the industry, market, and state are slowly captured by scholarly articles, institutional annual reports and industry discourses. I critically evaluated existing terms often used to describe this convergence, such as “anti-genre film”, “new independent film”, and “art/art-house cinema”. I detailed the context from which these concepts are derived, their helpful aspects, and ultimately, their limitations in capturing the complexity and nuance of this emerging body of film practice.

In this section, I argue that an investigation of indie cinema in contemporary China presents a necessary approach to understand the changing landscape of current Chinese cinema scene, as well as the afterlife, the legacy of Chinese independent cinema as a movement. This investigation of Chinese indie cinema clarifies the connection between indie network with its independent past as well as its newly fostered relationship with the market.

To tackle the complexity of Chinese indie cinema, I propose a shift in defining “indie” towards a networked approach. This approach connotes the circulation of cinema, which encompasses the entire process from production to exhibition. Applying a network approach helps this thesis moving beyond focusing on individual filmmakers or simplistic dichotomies such as “old” vs. “new” generations or “mainstream” vs. “non-mainstream”. Instead, it emphasises the connections and networks that support film circulation, whether they are independent, or state sponsored. I argue that recognising these networks is essential, as it detests the notion that films without state approval are entirely cut off from circulation. Even under the acknowledged suppressive power of the PRC state, films find their paths, making this networked approach both insightful and necessary. This is also a point which emphasised by Gao Dan 高丹 in her work on the digital distribution of independent cinema in

China:

... this does not mean that the institution of Chinese independent cinema is settled and finalized; it isn't like a breed of crops circled by impermeable ideological or physical fences. Rather, the formation of what counts as "independent cinema" has been constantly subjected to various influences – the state apparatus, filmmakers, funding source, distributing agents, exhibitions, film critics, academics, and the audiences, both domestic and foreign" (Gao 2015)

Gao's emphasis on circulation, rather than individual filmmakers and their testimonies, represents a shift in perspective that negotiates the rigid division between films within and outside the state system, while still acknowledging the suppressive nature of the PRC regime. This perspective allows for a more nuanced understanding of independent cinema, where interpretations become more connected rather than isolated. This epistemological shift towards a circulation-oriented approach resonates with D. Whiteman's research on activist documentary filmmaking and its political significance, but within a distinct political, social, and cultural context. Whiteman's work challenges the commonly applied "individualistic mode", which focuses on the impact of "the finished product on individual citizens and within the dominant public discourse" (Whiteman 2009). He argues that this focus has often overshadowed the significant role of a film's production and distribution, an insight that further underscores the importance of considering the entire process of circulation in understanding the real political and social impact of independent filmmaking in the US.

Both Gao's research on Chinese independent cinema and Whiteman's study on

American independent documentary films highlight how a networked approach can offer a transformative framework for investigation. By centring on the networks that facilitate the creation of Chinese indie cinema, questions about specific actants, such as whether indie filmmakers were previously independent, can be redirected into more fruitful inquiries. Rather than isolating a filmmaker, this approach considers their relationship within a network, examining how they are situated and influenced by the connections and dynamics of this broader context.

Building on the transformative framework of networked approach discussed above, the next section of this thesis introduces actor-network theory (ANT) as the primary methodology. ANT is chosen for its capacity to follow the traces of the complex interplay between actants in cultural production, which is particularly relevant for examining the intricacies of Chinese indie cinema. As I will elaborate in the methodology chapter, the ANT perspective shifts the focus to the concrete trajectories of how films are produced, distributed, and exhibited, and how a distinct set of aesthetics evolves in correlation with industry practices. This methodological shift allows for a more nuanced exploration of Chinese indie cinema. Questions that may have previously seemed unresolvable – such as defining “Chinese independent cinema” or grappling with the controversy around whether independent cinema has died in contemporary China – are transformed into more tangible matters. By examining the specific traces and trajectories of films, from their creation to their consumption, this approach provides a pathway to an understanding that bridges previous discussions and offers fresh insights into the evolving landscape of Chinese cinema.

1.2.3. The In-between-ness of Chinese Indie Cinema: A Road Map

As stated in previous sections, film industry in today's China, though not fully monopolised by the state, is still heavily influenced by state-driven ideological campaigns and film laws. Given this context, the role of Chinese indie films becomes more vital. In this thesis, I propose "in-between-ness" to articulate the unique positioning of the Chinese indie network within the broader socio-political and cultural landscape of contemporary China. Balancing between state censorship and artistic freedom, market profit and artistic pursuit and between official and independent narratives. The term, "in-between-ness" captures the real-life complexities, operational strategies, and unique aesthetic contribution of the indie network, all within a tightly controlled environment.

Typically characterised by medium to low budgets, Chinese indie films steer clear of the usual blockbuster path. Their financial limitations in distribution mean they are less inclined to cater to mainstream audience or investors with predictable stories. The small size of indie production companies also means that they face the challenges of censorship and regulatory frameworks. These constraints provide an indispensable lens through which we can observe how these small fishes survive in a market dominated by large studio productions with stronger commercial or propagandistic leanings.

Accessibility stands out as a key feature of indie cinema. Despite the coercion of independent film movements in China, indie cinema maintains the spirit of the previous movement, and makes it accessible to a broader audience. Filmmakers such as Diao Yinan, Yang Pingdao, and Geng Jun, are making indie films that carve out their own space in the market. These films create a unique cinematic space that presents an alternative view of life in mainland China, which I will elaborate in my chapter on aesthetic and negative affect.

Another trait which links indie cinema closely with its previous independent predecessors is a pronounced sense of locality. The depiction of Muslim religion in *Knife in*

the Clear Water (Qingshui lide daozi 清水里的刀子, dir. Wang Xuebo 王学博) and the Tibetan daily life in Balloon (Qiqiu 气球, dir. Pema Tseden 万玛才旦, 2020) provides a distinct cinematic account of Chinese minority contrasting to the state propaganda.

In a context where “positive energy” is widely promoted, the subtle undertones in these films can be examined as a quiet form of protest. Despite having to comply with censorship, elements like colour palettes, framing, and mise-en-scène subtly convey feelings that cannot be easily censored. In this sense, indie films question the dominant narrative of “telling the Chinese story well” and instead pose a new question: “Whose Chinese story is being told?” Chinese indie film presents a more complex image of China, enriching the representation of the Chinese experience on screen.

“In-between-ness” works as a consistent thread throughout this thesis as it explores various sites of indie network. In Chapter 3, I examine three indie production companies - Heaven Pictures (Tianhuahuatian 天画画天), Black Fin (Heiqi 黑鳍), and Factory Gate (Gongchangdamen 工厂大门). Founded in mainland China after 2009, these three small film companies are the first instances of small private film companies which specialise in bringing low budget films with alternative aesthetics off the ground. The network of these indie film companies exemplifies “in-between-ness” by producing films with alternative aesthetics that navigate the tightrope of cultural control and surveillance. This term accurately reflects the reality of indie film production in contemporary China, a sector that operates within a confined portion of the industry yet continually seeks to introduce fresh perspectives and remains a close link with the independent film movement in China. Linking my conceptualisation of “hubs” to in-between-ness, this chapter closely follows the manoeuvrings of these small, private film companies. These tactics include striking different deals to absorb filmmakers from the previous independent cinema scene, establishing headquarters out of mainland China to mitigate the risk of censorship, consciously branding

themselves “indie” instead of “independent” to claim the market and connect to the larger audience, and articulating the sentiment of love for film which functions as a bond between philanthropic investors and indie filmmakers. This chapter argues that although Chinese indie film companies do manage to find ways to gather just enough resources to produce feature films with alternative aesthetics in China, it is a hard task to keep the fragile balance between making small indie films with intriguing aesthetics in China while dealing with the market’s cautious interest and the constant need to zigzag through increasingly harsh state regulation. The network of indie film companies, as exemplified by Heaven Pictures, Black Fin, and Factory Gate, exemplifies “in-between-ness” by producing films with alternative aesthetics that navigate the tightrope of cultural control and surveillance.

Chapter 4 shifts the focus to emerging distribution channels in mainland China. Following three newly emerged Chinese distribution companies: Redience (Chijiao 赤角), Midnight Blur (Wuyeshijiao 午夜失焦), and Blow Up (Fangda 放大), this chapter shows how, by utilising both better knowledge of the international film circuit and also intensifying cinephilia in China since the late 1990s, these distribution companies develop strategies to promote themselves as respectable and accountable actants and claim their space in the existing film industry in and beyond mainland China. In this chapter, “in-between-ness” helps the understanding of distribution in various contexts: between mainland China and the international film circuit, between commercial and artistic pursuit, and between international recognition and the domestic market. This intricate place allows distribution companies develop strategies such as seeking business collaboration with like-minded partners, providing international sale service to Chinese films in the international circuit, and affiliating to larger, more influential domestic distribution film companies. In this chapter, I argue that, compared to indie distribution companies who act and place themselves in a more international network, indie companies who focus on domestic market are very much

constrained and under threat in the long run because of their lack of capital and low impact on theatrical chains.

Chapter 5 demonstrates how ANT can provide new insights into the complex relationships and interactions that shape film aesthetics. Inspired by Sonnenberg-Schrank's theoretical proposal of cinematic elements as non-human actants, formal analysis is introduced to the analysis of three indie films. Here, "in-between-ness" as a term helps delineate the stylistic and aesthetic space occupied by indie films --- a middle ground between state-sponsored propaganda films and independent art-house or activist films. This positioning not only enhances the accessibility and potential influence of these indie films, as films must be seen and discussed to have an impact, it also denotes the importance of formal analysis of films, especially formal analysis of the negative affect in this film as only these analysis, can the social significance reveal itself as the film's plot might be change but identifying the non-diegetic elements of films means that to find message that cannot be censored and accessible to all . As a term, "in-between-ness" aptly describes this duality, highlighting how indie films create alternative accessible spaces for both filmmakers and audiences. This quality allows indie films to illuminate under-discussed clusters of feelings like confusion, fear, and longing, thereby bringing political significance back to the table. To achieve this, this chapter choose three case studies: the chromatic patterns and the affect of dysphoria in *Black Coal, Thin Ice*, camera movements and the affect of despair in *An Elephant Sitting Still*, and the deployment of objects as non-human actants in *Kaili Blue*, I argue that an ANT approach to the close reading of these three films highlights how non-human actants, including neon lighting, cameras, and daily objects, shape the aesthetics of the films. The negative affects these indie films can carry dodge state censorship on cinematic content and contest the propaganda mantra of a harmonious society which imposed by the state. Thus, they find a way of connecting with disaffected audiences.

Finally, Chapter 6 investigates the diverse exhibition spaces for Chinese indie film, a landscape shaped by the delicate balance of “in-between-ness”. This term denotes the complex interplay of forces at work in the indie cinema landscape, where the potential for creative expression is both enabled and endangered by the spaces that occupy this middle ground. For instance, the Nationwide Alliance of Arthouse Cinema (NAAC) represents a collaborative endeavour that could, paradoxically, become an instrument of state influence. While it currently serves as a conduit for indie voices, its state affiliation poses the risk of co-option, where the indie cinema’s narrative could be subtly steered to align with official ideologies. Online platforms like iQIYI offer an expansive reach for indie films, yet this digital “in-between-ness” means that the independence of such platforms is a balancing act. Finally, a case study on FIRST International Film Festival highlights “in-between-ness” for its community engagement and the collective experience of indie cinema. Such festivals operate in an in-between space, not only showcasing indie films but also fostering an ecosystem where filmmakers, critics, and viewers coalesce, transcending the physical and ideological divides that often separate them. The festival’s very existence in “in-between-ness”, however, is fraught with uncertainty. As a space striving for free artistic expression, it faces the constant threat of being subsumed by not only the state’s tightening grip on public discourse but also the fluctuation from other forces like organisers’ vision of the festival and interests from local governments and sponsors.

While “in-between-ness” provides a space for indie cinema to grow, it also exposes its fragility. The future of this “in-between-ness” is uncertain. It could lead to a wider reach and influence or to a dilution of indie cinema’s essence. As the control on films are tightening under Xi Jinping’s regime, the indie cinema’s space could shrink or grow. Therefore, “in-between-ness” is not only a space of existence but also a battleground for indie cinema. It is within this contested space that indie films will continue to chart their course through the

unpredictable currents of artistic expression, market demands, and state oversight.

Chapter 2 Methodology: Trace the Actants and Find the Themes

2.1 Research Objective: Exploring Chinese Indie Cinema Through Actor-network Theory

Reflecting on the concept of “in-between-ness” detailed in the prior section, this thesis extends the analysis through the application of Actor-Network Theory (ANT). Utilising ANT as a methodological lens, the objective of this thesis is to provide an in-depth understanding of the unique and transient convergence that characterised the indie cinema network in contemporary China from 2010 to 2019. ANT’s analytical strength lies in accommodating all actants — human and non-human alike — without resorting to a pre-assumed framework that might only highlight certain key players. This theoretical flexibility is adept at capturing the “in-between-ness” that defines the Chinese indie scene, a space that traditional methodologies might not fully encompass.

The goal of this thesis is not merely providing a chronological archival account of this exciting period in Chinese film history. More importantly, it seeks to understand this fleeting convergence of unique circumstances that made the circulation of indie films in China possible. Here, actants from various backgrounds converged: veteran independent filmmakers, new industry practitioners, an audience seeking an alternative to mainstream cinema, and a market weary of poor-quality pirated content— all of whom collectively invigorated the indie film sector.

ANT’s emphasis on a “flat network”, where every actant’s move is significant, is key to grasping the “in-between-ness” of the Chinese indie scene. This realm is where filmmakers operate under state scrutiny while deeply connected within a network of actants, each bearing their own influence. It is entangled in a nexus of challenges. These include state regulations, a shifting film market, and the risks associated with lengthy production cycles. The

introduction of 2018 film law and the delicate manoeuvring around state censors are illustrative of the constraints that filmmakers navigate, impacting both the creative process and investor confidence. Meanwhile, larger corporations' growing interest in indie films, while aiding project initiations, also potentially dilutes the distinctiveness of indie voices.

It is precisely the complexities mentioned above that make this an opportune moment to examine Chinese indie cinema. Through ANT, this thesis will dissect these developments, examining the web of interactions that both define and propel the indie film movement in China.

2.2 Time Scope of Study

Utilising actor-network theory (ANT) as the guiding framework, his thesis aims to examine the forming of Chinese indie network from 2010 to 2019, a critical period marked by innovation and challenges. It recognises that indie cinema as a complex system embedded within broader socio-political and cultural networks. Through ANT, the thesis unravels the intricate interactions among filmmakers, industry practitioners, audiences, technology, governmental regulations, and global influences. This includes an examination of production methods, distribution channels, exhibition practices, and aesthetics.

This study takes 2010 as a started point, marked by the founding of the indie production company Heaven Pictures in Beijing. This event marked a significant moment in Chinese independent cinema and the future indie scene, announcing a new phase in the development and support of alternative filmmaking within mainland China. With funding from a generous entrepreneur and under the leadership of Zhang Xianmin 张献民, the company began to assemble talents from the independent scene. This reflected a new direction for alternative filmmaking in China and signalled a concerted effort to nurture and develop the indie cinema landscape. The intricacies of these developments and their impact on the industry, particularly the role of Heaven Pictures and similar entities, will be explored in depth in the chapter on indie production.

Prior to 2010, films such as Ning Hao's *Crazy Stone* has already made waves at the box office and resonated with audiences. However, I suggest that Jia Zhangke achieved a significant milestone by successfully screening his film *Still Life* (Sanxia haoren 三峡好人, 2006) in domestic theatres throughout mainland China. It serves a more symbolic beginning for indie films as he intentionally used the press and social media to market his premiere as an anti-blockbuster event. By setting the premiere of *Still Life* on the same day as Zhang Yimou's *The Curse of the Golden Flower* (Mancheng jindai huangjinjia 满城尽带黄金甲,

dir. Zhang Yimou 张艺谋, 2006), Jia intentionally challenged conventional Chinese filmmaking.

When questioned about this decision, Jia candidly expressed his dissatisfaction with the lack of talent and creativity among some contemporary Chinese directors. His decision to screen on the same date as Zhang Yimou and his outspokenness represented a bold statement from a new generation of directors who sought greater diversity in the Chinese film market:

There have been way too many commercial productions over the Chinese New Year Period, way too many martial arts figures flying all around the screen, it's just too boring. Instead of the flying daggers, we need films which can reflect what is happening in this country, here and now. Chinese Cinema should have been more diverse than it is now, this is what makes everything more interesting. There should exist a healthier mechanism which can take both flying daggers and films depicting the time China has been through at the moment. I am confident about the market, the copyright of *Still Life* has already grossed 12 billion RMB in 40 countries.¹²

The choice of 2010 as the beginning of the study does not negate what occurred before; rather, it focuses on a decisive phase in Chinese indie cinema, in which indie production has become a more substantial practice alongside increasingly successful individual. These developments collectively signified a more substantial and symbolically charged entrance of indie films into the mainstream consciousness.

¹² “Jia Zhangke anfang Chen Kaige Feng Xiaogang: tamen pai shangyepian mei caihua 贾樟柯暗讽陈凯歌冯小刚：他们拍商业片没才华”[Jia Zhangke satirises Chen Kaige and Feng Xiaogang: they do not have the talent for commercial films], last modified 6 Dec 2006, <https://yule.sohu.com/20061206/n246832761.shtml> (accessed 4 May 2017).

The selection of 2019 as the end point for this thesis is guided by several key considerations. First, 2019 is significant as it was the second year following the promulgation of the new film law in China. While this thesis will investigate the change of film law in-depth, it is important to note that the 2018 film law marked a significant shift in China's film administration structure. For the first time since the founding of the People's Republic of China, film administration fell under the supervision of the department of propaganda instead of the administration of culture. While the exact consequences of this change are yet to be determined, it symbolises the end of a more ambiguous period in Chinese cinema history, where practices such as director editions at international film festivals were still lawfully permitted.

Second, the informal screening of *An Elephant Sitting Still* (Daxiang xidierzuo 大象席地而坐, dir. Hu Bo 胡波, 2018) in 2019 offers a poignant reflection on the successes and failures of Chinese indie cinema. While this thesis began with a hopeful curiosity and confidence in Chinese indie cinema as a burgeoning practice signifying change and hope, *An Elephant Sitting Still* serves as a reminder of the challenges faced, including collaboration disputes with indie production companies and difficulties in screening permits even when shooting permits can be more easily secured.

Third, on a practical level, 2019 marked the year when I finalised my fieldwork in China and commenced the writing process. Although this thesis covers some of the prehistory of indie cinema before 2010 and considers the potential developments in relation to the state film law of 2018, the impact of this law is outside the primary focus of this study and can only be speculated upon.

2.3 Methodological Framework: Introducing ANT As the Guiding Framework

I have chosen Actor-Network Theory (ANT) as the guiding methodological framework for this thesis on contemporary indie cinema in China, precisely because it recognises the subject of study as something still in formation and inherently fluid. ANT allows us to perceive indie cinema not as a fixed entity, but as a dynamic and ongoing process that involves a complex network of interdependent actants. These actants are diverse and multifaceted, ranging from state legislation and local cinemas to industry insiders, filmmakers, and even physical objects like lighting and borrowed equipment. Together, they form a constantly shifting landscape that actively shapes our understanding of what “indie” means in the context of contemporary China. By employing ANT, this thesis can engage with these elements without reducing them to mere links in a chain, capturing the nuanced relationships that activate the indie scene.

One analogy that Bruno Latour provides in *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (2005) nicely captures the ongoing nature of the Chinese indie cinema scene. There, he invites us to a busy, buzzy, messy construction site that has resonances not only for scientific research, but also for artistic practice:

The “making of” any enterprise – films, skyscrapers, facts, political meetings, initiation rituals, haute couture, cooking – offers a view that is sufficiently different from the official one. Not only does it lead you backstage and introduce you to the skills and knacks of practitioners, it also provides a rare glimpse of what it is for a thing to emerge out of inexistence by adding to any existing entity its time dimension. Even more important, when you are guided to any construction site you are experiencing the troubling and exhilarating feeling that things could be different, or at least that they could still fail – a feeling never so deep when faced with the final

product, no matter how beautiful or impressive it may be. (Latour 2005, 89)

The analogy of a construction site, which “offers an ideal vantage point to witness the connections between humans and nonhumans” (Latour 2005, 88), speaks truth about indie cinema in contemporary China and therefore inspires my research methodology in at least three aspects. First and foremost, just as a construction site is the very embodiment of something “in the making”, the concept of indie cinema in China is also something “in the process of being built”. And just as a construction site is a hive of activity with actions, movements, trials, negotiations, orders, and mistakes, involving everyone and everything “onsite”, the conceptualisation of Chinese indie cinema is also not, and should not be, the job of film scholars or institutions alone. Rather, it is a joint, networked effort among actants including film practitioners, the press, local governments, cinema managers, freelancers, film-booking apps, and rising inner-city living costs. Second, because of all these actants and their actions, the scene is very messy. Therefore, indie is not an inherited feature that can be tagged onto anybody or anything – it is what people or things do in this construction site that count. And this means that, as a researcher, I need to keep an open mind about which actants require attention.

The third, and probably the most difficult aspect, is to accept that things might not work. There might be a blueprint, or a contract existing for an ongoing construction project, but these might fall through. Examples of what can go wrong for a construction site might include: sudden withdrawal of promised investment; stock fluctuation because of the sudden resignation of a key company figure or a fraud scandal; accidental death; the illegal working status of construction workers; noise complaints from neighbours; or protests from animal protection organisations. Similarly, examples of what could go wrong for my research subject include: film companies flourish or go bankrupt; filmmakers carry on or quit; major film

corporates invest or withdraw; partnerships are established or go sour; state policy tightens or relaxes; technology gets more advanced but at the same time becomes more expensive or more prone to surveillance. In this sense, when Latour stated that ANT researchers should be prepared to “get their feet deep in the mud” (Latour 2005, 88), he was referring not simply to conducting fieldwork to see what happens with one’s own eyes, but also to being prepared to deal with the unstable, transient aspects of the research subject, and to making peace with “not capturing the larger picture” and perhaps finding insight in that failure.

2.3.1 Overview of Actor-network-theory

2.3.1.1 Actor-network-theory as a Way of Seeing

As one of the main contributors to the foundation of this social science theory, Bruno Latour lays out three key criteria to identify a piece of ANT analysis in *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-network-theory* (2005). These criteria are: first, to grant equal roles to non-human entities and see them as actors who contribute directly to the making of the social world; second, to keep the inquiry as open as possible, which means that there should not just be a “limited repertoire that has been used to explain (away) most of the elements”, and the social should not “remain stable and ... used to explain a state of affairs” (Latour 2005, 10); third, unlike the deconstructive approach, ANT is a constructive methodology designed to “check what are the new institutions, procedures, and concepts able to collect and to reconnect the social” (Latour 2005, 11).

As a school of theory that was founded and has developed since the 1960s, ANT was, in its original context, developed around the inquiry of scientific knowledge. It concerns how the production of scientific knowledge through laboratory work is not simply an objective “discovery” of the natural world, but a result of collaborations among different entities that work together towards a goal. Here, borrowing Mike Michael’s account of the early development of ANT,

the laboratory was seen as a central venue in which texts, materials, skills could be combined to produce primarily texts that were sufficiently potent that they could be used to interest and enrol other actors (scientists, funders, regulators, publics). In this way, these actors would play their part in the extension of the networks of the laboratory scientists. (Michael 2018, 10–11)

This brief account of the original context explains some of the key stances any ANT-inspired analysis should take. First, the term “non-human actor” is not a fancy word serving an ostensible purpose. It refers to the crucial elements that are surrounding humans and contribute significantly to an outcome that a network produces or ways in which these networks are arranged. As Edwin Sayes summarises in his article “Actor-Network Theory and methodology: Just what does it mean to say that nonhumans have agency?” (Sayes 2014), the term “non-human” can be understood as “an umbrella term that is used to encompass a wide but ultimately limited range of entities” that include objects, technologies, environments, mammals, commercial goods, laws and regulations” (136). Second, once an actor, either non-human or human, is enrolled in a certain network, it contributes actively to the existence of the network. The activities of each actor, big or small, leave traces that construct the outcome of a project.

An ANT-inspired approach encourages investigations that see social phenomena as an ongoing process, in which each actor contributes its part. In this sense, Bruno Latour’s strong criticism of what he calls “the sociology of the social” (Latour 2005, 8) is not necessarily due to a lack of insight into established social theories and formed social categories such as gender, class, or culture, but rather more as a result of ontological differences in what the term “society” registers. For ANT, “social explanations” do not suffice, as “the social” is not an entity with a set, stable structure, but a goal for inquiry that is activated by all the participating actors. Therefore,

The painful lesson we must learn is exactly the opposite of what is still being taught all over the world under the name of a “social explanation”, namely we must not substitute a surprising but precise expression that is the well-known repertoire of the social which is supposed to be hidden behind it. (Latour 2005, 60)

As a theory that places an emphasis on relations, ANT has been evolving since the 1980s by being in constant dialogue with other schools of social theory, and aspects of its core concept are regularly challenged by fellow scholars (Michael 2018, 52–72; Farias, Roberts, and Blok 2020). For example, how does ANT deal with the ambiguity of the multiple roles an actor can play for different networks? How does it understand an actor's ambivalent attitude towards a certain network? If all actors play their roles, how does ANT deal with power relations existing in the network? Furthermore, how does the theory deal with the intricacy of different cultures, or actors who are on the periphery of the network?

These are all legitimate concerns that need to be addressed. As a theory that was founded in the science community in Europe in 1980s, it does not address certain tensions relating to sexism, cultural diversity, and even ideological disagreements. I see this criticism of ANT, however, as a query that can be expanded upon, and as an opportunity to test the theory in other aspects of the real world.

2.3.1.2 Application of ANT in the World of the Sensible

Actor-Network Theory (ANT) offers a distinctive approach to understanding complex relationships by recognising the equal significance of human and non-human actants within a network. Originating in Science and Technology Studies (STS), ANT has expanded its reach to various disciplines, allowing scholars to examine phenomena from unique perspectives. Its inclusive nature, which emphasises a flat rather than hierarchical structure, invites attention to often-neglected aspects of scientific discovery and opens up new dimensions of inquiry. This cluster of scholarship focuses on how objects, animals, and technology work as stand-alone forces and form unique networks with other more conventionally recognisable entities, such as developers, scientists, and medical doctors.

ANT classic texts such as Michel Callon's "Some Elements of a Sociology of Translation: Domestication of the Scallops and The Fishermen of St Brieuc Bay" (1984) amplify the equal relationship between human and non-human actants. In this piece of intriguing work, the relationship between oceanographers and the baby scallops are more complicated than researchers and their objects:

the hypotheses and the interpretations of the researchers are nothing but a program of negotiations: Larvae, should we search for you at the bottom of the bay, or should we wait for you on your way down in order to trap you as you sink? (1984, 196-233)

By prioritising non-human actors and proposing scientific research as a networked process that includes a joint effort made by various actors, an ANT approach challenges the conventional way of seeing knowledge as unified, objective, and clear-cut products carried out by specialists and their respectable institutions. Shifting to understand scientific research via ANT means to include more actors are within a network, a network which is flat rather

than hierarchical, and therefore invites or forces observation of the neglected.

This inclusive nature of ANT as a theory serves as an invitation to give attention to actors who are conventionally not part of the scientific discovery, and thus it enriches the vocabularies that scientific discoveries can speak and enlarges the audiences who will listen. It is, therefore, not a surprise that ANT quickly raised interest from researchers of other disciplines, who applied ANT-inspired approaches in their own research, simultaneously opening up ANT to conversations with different traditions of social inquiry. Just as in the fable which describes how stone soup is cooked not by any magic stone, but by everyone who brings carrots, beef, cabbage, milk, salt, and pepper to the pot (Brown 2005), ANT should not be treated as a ready-made theory or method (Callon 1999, Latour 1999), but as a repertoire (Mol 2010, 261) that is diasporic (Law 1998), increases sensibility and is “shaped by the convoluted multiplicities of our case studies” (López-Gómez 2019, 4). Many constituencies can make use of it: queer theorists with their dedication to bodies and desires; anthropologists with their ethnographical approaches; architects with their special attention to space; social scientists with their dedication to organizations, institutions, law, and politics; feminist scholars with their eye on gender; post-colonialism scholars with their focus on power, inequality, and Western-dominated narratives.

It is in this respect that an application of ANT to the fields of art, media studies, culture studies, and film studies becomes imaginable. As Francis Halsall argued in his article on the relationship between ANT and contemporary art: “ANT resembles more an artistic practice rather than a specific theory”, as both can be considered as deriving from the condition of late capitalism, and therefore both share the “distributed, and dispersed subjectivity across systems and control” (Halsall 2019, 200). While it is important to consider the appropriateness of applying terms such as “late-capitalism” to a piece of ANT-inspired research, I am in agreement with Halsall that “the strategy of both ANT and contemporary art

is to use aesthetic practices to complicate the world and reconsider its structures, relations and subjects” (201), and would like to argue further that these reconsiderations of existing schemas in the realm of social world and aesthetics inquiries have striking similarities and could be a portal that links these two worlds together.

Rancière’s interpretation of aesthetics as “modes of being” (2013, 39) that engender distinct forms of portals to the world (especially the ones that challenge normative conventions such as, to borrow Rancière’s own words, taste, and pleasure) resonates with actor-network-theory’s emphasis on the special roles that actants play in activating specific networks and the uniqueness of these networks. Similarly, to Rancière’s discovery of an archival dialogue between French workers on their life and art in the 1830s, in which their idleness and sophistication contest his initial intention to provide evidence of “working conditions, and forms of class consciousness” (2009 ,18-19) In order to support his reading of Marxism, Bruno Latour demonstrates how the role of a specific actant plays can completely confound conventional belief and expectation. In the beginning of *The Pasteurization of France* (1993), a classic ANT piece on microbes, Latour tells the story of a Russian general who, according to the official history recorded by both parties, defeated Napoleon and was rewarded handsomely by Alexander I for this victory. Latour points out that a very different version of the war was provided by Leo Tolstoy in *War and Peace* (2020):

[A]fter Kutuzov had been forced to act against his better judgment, his signed order kept being diverted. The young officer who held it got lost and could not find the generals; eventually he arrived late at night at a mansion between the front lines where, to his surprise, the high staff were carousing. When in the morning Kutuzov got up to fight a battle he did not want to fight, he discovered to his fury that not a single soldier was prepared. No officer had received any marching orders. (Latour

1993, 4)

To summarise, following Rancière's French farmers and Latour's Russian general, the "tidiness" of official historical document and existing social theories are contested. Borrowing their insights, this thesis applies ANT as a methodology which helps to put the conventional, institutionalised opinions and explanations into brackets and attempts to see what actors do in their own specific contexts.

Strings of ANT-inspired research constantly challenge established understandings of the social world. For example, as noted by Michael (2018, 85–6), Greenhalgh and Stone's 2010 article on the NHS "Choose and Book" system has revealed how the UK government's application of a personal digital assistant (PDA) system in the healthcare system can be complex. As a government-promulgated software, the NHS "Choose and Book" system should theoretically improve the flexibility and efficiency of the healthcare system by enabling patients to choose the hospitals and clinics they would like to attend. As the researchers found, however, the application is much more complicated, given that patients, doctors, and nurses were reluctant to use the system and interacted with it in different ways (Greenhalgh and Stone 2010, 1292–3). Based on Greenhalgh and Stone's findings, Mike Michael takes a step further and suggests that in this new realm of health-registration system, a distinct division between GPs and the newly promulgated NHS booking system should not be seen as two separate entities; instead, GPs who were introduced to the new technology should be seen as a form of hybrid:

The GPs' active agency of resistance is partly born of their embroilment with the mundane technologies of GP practice: rather than see the GP as the externally and internally structured "seat" of this resisting action, the GP might be understood to be

necessarily hybrid, partially enacted through such artefacts as stethoscopes and thermometers. (Michael 2018, 86)

Just as GPs as human actants in this case study are no simple executors of a pre-designed software system, mundane technologies in this particular context are not a pure application of what policymakers and software engineers have intended. They are also a “hybrid”, a consequence of meddling by their human peers. This subtle mind image of how institutions and organizations work as a flat map forces researchers not only to question the existing institutional hierarchies (in which policy makers have the final say), but also to revise how human and non-human entities relate to each other and make a specific assemblage work.

The application of ANT across diverse fields has led to fresh insights into the nature of human and non-human interactions. By challenging conventional understandings of hierarchical relationships and recognising the complexity of networked interactions, ANT allows us to grasp the intricacies of social and technological phenomena. The case studies mentioned, ranging from healthcare to contemporary art, illustrate how ANT has functioned as a “hybrid”, shedding light on new forms of understanding. It becomes evident that ANT’s theoretical richness and adaptability make it a vital tool for examining a wide array of subjects, including those that remain fluid and continually evolving. This adaptability sets the stage for further exploration of ANT’s potential applications in other realms of inquiry.

2.3.1.3 Application of ANT in Film and Media Studies

In the field of film and media studies, ANT has been used to study the relationships between human and non-human actors in the production and reception of films. The translation of ANT from social science to film, media, and culture studies can be considered as a burgeoning approach which generates new insights on specific circulations such as (pre-) production and circulation of films (Spöhrer 2017, Vlack 2007). For example, Marijke de Vlack points out two benefits that ANT has brought to the table in her work on film festival circuits (2007, 34–5): its neutrality and its emphasis on non-human actors. The neutrality of the theory, namely the way it explores a “flat network”, contests the existing perception of organisational hierarchy. It simultaneously invites, or to use a more technical term, enrolls more actors into this flattened network. Meanwhile, the attention to how both human and non-human actors work together and, in a way, define each other opens doors for easier access to the materiality of filmmaking and the circulation of film.

ANT’s denotation of the collaboration between human and non-human actants can be used to analyse the roles played by different technologies (such as cameras, editing software, and distribution platforms) in the production of a film, and how these technologies shape the final product. Borrowing Oli Mould’s observation in his ANT-inspired analysis of a film project:

The power inherent in a camera or piece of the set can be just as forceful or power-inherent as the verbal or gestural directions from a director (which would themselves not be possible without inhuman actants, namely the camera, video-assist monitor, megaphone or even the director’s chair). (Mould 2009, 204)

Mould's article sketches what and who are contributing to the making of cinematic meaning. In Debashree Mukherjee's ambitious work on the emerging sound film scene in Bombay in the 1930s, Mukherjee proposes the concept of cine-ecology, wherein "bodies, institutions, technologies, and environments collectively shape the production and circulation of cinematic meaning" (Mukherjee 2019, 2). There, she articulates the relationship between camera and camera man as follows:

A technology like the motion picture camera can work most efficiently when it articulates with a camera operator within an energy grid that can power the machine, supported by controlled light, colour, and noise conditions. The cinematographer and the camera are defined by their relation to each other but are also dependent on a network of uncredited and often unobserved actors such as gaffers, light stands, light boys, camera assistants, reflectors, steady voltage, and film stock. This network of actors, once recognised, reveals that filmmaking is a complex and collaborative set of operations and that creative agency is dispersed across a film set, capable of surprises at multiple nodes of contact. (Mukherjee 2019, 14)

Mukherjee's approach to the historical cinematic scene of Bombay foregrounds two crucial insights that ANT-inspired research can bring. First, participants that co-build the cinematic scene and yet are neglected by the existing production analysis approach which favours either larger institutions, corporates, or specific crew members from producer to best boy, are given the place they deserve. Second, objects, props, technologies that are deployed in a film, along with climates, geography, and urban planning, are naturally all included, or invited to the investigation of film since here, too, the meaning of film has expanded. The result is an assemblage of cinematic truth that is imbued with the environments that incubate

it, and thus the investigation can pay attention to these specific relations and arbitrations without further need to segregate the different elements, be they social, political, or economic, that are normally applied to explain specific cinematic scenes.

If Mukherjee's work reconfigures our imagination of film history by articulating cinematic meaning that derives from the temporal-spatial habitants and habitats of Bombay, Björn Sonnenberg-Schrank's analysis on contemporary American teen film via the lens of ANT is fresh and bold in another theoretical dimension, as it expands the notion of non-human actor from physical world to cinematic world. As a concept that already registers animals and objects such as "microbes, scallops, rocks, and ships" (Latour 2005, 10), as well as "documents, writings, charts, files, paper clips, maps, organisational devices, in brief intellectual technologies" (76) in the material, natural world, ANT in Sonnenberg-Schrank's analysis expands to include "concepts, fictions, institutions, or other visible or invisible, tangible or intangible non-humans" (Sonnenberg-Schrank 2019, 12).

Based on Steven Shaviro's analysis on re-formed reality as a steppingstone, Sonnenberg-Schrank firstly reaffirms the priority of the "reality of image" (Shaviro 1993, 39), and proposes a non-representational, non-mimetic way to examine teenage film as an assemblage of networks that is constantly on the mission of sense-making. Through recycling references and, in the process, enrolling new actors such as locales, milieus, and objects within and beyond diegetic world, a canon of American teenage films is revived and mutates into a network of meaning-making. In this sense, teenage films, according to Sonnenberg-Schrank, do not merely represent reality but forcefully affect the actual reality. Sonnenberg-Schrank is right to argue that

they are installed stably both within the medium, the individual texts, the diegetic realities, but also in the actual reality: When we speak about nerds, jocks, or

cheerleaders, about the prom, being grounded, Ferris Bueller, detention, or the shopping mall, we use the same internalized references and referents as the fictionalized characters from teen films. The associated images, ideas, and connotations are already co-constructed through a dynamism of mutual feedback between teen films and teen realities that are in a constant process of generating and redefining each other. (Sonnenberg-Schrank 2003, 9)

Sonnenberg-Schrank's approach to ANT and film theory is a bold one, as he is essentially arguing that cinematic reality has an accountability which is so stable that it actively participates in the making of the real. ANT plays a huge role here since, given that there are no pre-assumed hierarchies and structures, it becomes possible to see the cinematic and the non-cinematic not as two separate worlds, but as two spaces that are generated via various networks consisting of human and non-human actors which interact with, influence, translate, register each other, and consequently build on each other. This approach encourages us to liberate film from the chain of representation and explore more freely different elements, especially the materiality which surges through the screen.

2.3.2 Application to Chinese Indie Cinema: Existing Paradigms and How ANT Contributes

For my specific research objectives, which focus intricate connections within production, distribution, exhibition, and aesthetics of indie cinema, ANT offers a comprehensive perspective in understanding the strategies various actants deploy to keep the indie network flow.

Connecting ANT to de Certeau's writing on "strategy" and "tactics" helps to foreground the importance of the network. In *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), de Certeau introduces two useful concepts: "strategy" and "tactics". "Strategies" refer to moves actants make on a daily basis after establishing themselves within a stably defined space or territory. These actants are powerful enough to determine their trajectories and engage with external forces, be they competitors, collaborators, or adversaries. On the other hand, "tactics" refer to manoeuvres employed by actants without a defined space. These discreet, often subversive moves allow these actants to navigate within spaces dictated by more powerful forces.

While both being acts that are discreet and untraceable from a top-down, institutionalised mapping, I emphasise the distinction between strategy and tactics rests heavily on the concept of "space". A strategy is viable only when an actant has carved out its niche in a more sustainable way. This secured space allows the actant to manage its relationships with the outside world, with all its complexities and challenges (de Certeau 1984, 35–6).

In the context of Chinese indie cinema, the application of "strategies" and "tactics" becomes even more interesting. If we consider that independent filmmakers have been employing tactics like operating film festivals in grey zones or leveraging equipment from state-owned TV channels for their creations, then "strategies" resonate deeply with the

“quasi-within system” status that many of my research subjects navigate. Their close links with the state, market, and broader audience means the strategies can be found in how production companies operate with different headquarters, how distributors extend their reach to the international film circuits, or how exhibition sites function with further engagement with the state authorities. These strategies, of course, are not without vulnerabilities. That is to say, it is very likely for the indie network to diminish in a regulatory environment that is too strict. And this is where the flexibility of actor-network theory becomes important – it not only traces the active indie actants but also accommodate the potential failure of the indie network.

Still, at least till the writing up time of this thesis, “space” still exists. Building this specific interest in “space”, my use of ANT resonates with four prominent paradigms that have emerged as key influences over the past few decades: generational division, auteur paradigm, state-vs-civil-society paradigm, and the national cinema narrative. In the following section I will further explore these paradigms, what they are good for, and how my ANT approach can enrich them.

2.3.2.1 Generational Division

Dividing Chinese cinema and respective filmmakers into six successive time periods,¹³ the generational narrative is powerful as it shapes the fundamental schema of Chinese film history. In this section, I give an example of how ANT's tenet of "following the actors" demands further epistemological clarification of how this method of categorisation became so dominant in the first place. I then argue that by refuting a sense of theoretically constructed smoothness that continues from one generation of filmmakers to the next, ANT adds complexity and opens our analysis of contemporary Chinese cinema to new possibilities. It does this by redirecting our attention back to the actants' unique manoeuvres, unveiling the hierarchy of knowledge and authority that has formed the generational narrative since its inception.

Following the actors, I find that the generation narrative was proposed by a cohort of Chinese scholars and filmmakers affiliated with Beijing Film Academy in the mid-1980s. Possessing cultural authority, these powerful actants, such as Huang Jianxin 黄建新, Zheng Dongtian 郑洞天, and Ni Zhen 倪震, established the concept of "generations" in various ways that were tied closely to the PRC's political agenda.¹⁴ The term was then brought into English-speaking literature by scholars such as George Semsel, in *Chinese Film: The State of the Art in the People's Republic of China* (1987), and later reinforced by Paul Clark's article

¹³ The earliest systematic, academic account of generational division I have located is from George Semsel. In *Chinese Cinema: The State of the Art in the People's Republic of China* (1987), he describes five generations of filmmakers as such: "Those who graduated from college after 1982 are the Fifth generation. Those who studied film prior to the cultural revolution but who didn't make films until after it ended, are the Fourth generation. The Third-generation directors did not study film but entered the industry near or shortly after Liberation. They form the old working generation. The Second generation refers to the filmmakers of the 1930s and 1940s who developed social realism. The First are the pioneers" (11). In this article, the term is defined as a given. There is no clarification of or reference to where these dividing periods derive from.

¹⁴ As noted by Pan Tianqiang 潘天强 in his article titled "The Generational Issue of Chinese Cinema" (Zhongguo dianying de daiji wenti 中国电影的代际问题) (2009), the generation narrative, while being obscure in terms of who raised it in the first place, works well for a Chinese reality as it "fits the development of Chinese society perfectly". He further specifies that the time periods are divided by political events including the "918" Invasion, the founding of the PRC regime, culture revolution, and economic reform.

“Reinventing China: The Fifth Generation Filmmakers” (1989).¹⁵ Over time, the term became more recognised academically after the so-called “Sixth Generation filmmakers” achieved broader recognition in the international film scene. Filmmakers such as Wang Xiaoshuai and Zhang Yuan are acknowledged especially as having formed “a reaction to the social conditions present in modern day China and an artistic rebellion against the style of film favoured by fifth generation” (Cornelius and Smith 2002, 103). While there has been other, more in-depth work on Chinese film history,¹⁶ this generational narrative, which obviously lacks a vigorous origin, remains widely accepted. This categorical division compromises the continuity or specificity of other decisive factors such as industry infrastructure, technology, or aesthetics, as researchers are guided to generalise characteristic traits within this constructive division. One example indicating the forced constructiveness of this generational narrative is the fact that filmmakers who play an important role within it do not feel that they belong to such a narrative. Zhang Yimou 张艺谋, who is indisputably the most representative figure of “the fifth-generation” in China, has no say in or recognition of this generational division, having been quoted as saying that he had “no idea who the past four generations of directors were” when he “was called a fifth-generation director” (Wang 2002).

Zhang’s unawareness of his “fifth-generation” label resonates with Zhang Yingjin 张英进’s critique in the early 2010s that the division “ignores the discontinuity and uniqueness of filmmakers’ approach to their work, let alone the fact that the booming film industry and

¹⁵ In an article titled “The End of the Generation Narrative of Chinese Filmmakers” (Zhongguo dianying daoyan daiji huafen de zhongjie 中国电影导演代际划分的终结), Yu Ji 虞吉 and Ge Jinsong 葛金松 summarise different plausible rationales behind the establishment of the narrative, which has been traced back to important figures’ personal feelings and judgements about whether there really existed a generational relationship among filmmakers.

¹⁶ These works include: Zhong Dafeng and Shu Xiaoming, who noted the transitional period from silent film to sound film between 1929 and 1936 (Zhong and Shu 2001, 52); and Li Shaobai’s narration of Chinese film history, which has a much more detailed division in terms of the period between 1905–1949 (Li 2006).

the rocketing number of films produced each year has made it nearly impossible to generalise uniformed traits” (Zhang 2012). In direct dialogue with Zhang’s critique, my thesis on Chinese indie cinema answers questions of “how” – how does a networked approach help us to understand this discontinuity? How can we move away from the assumption that filmmakers who belong to the same chronological cohort must have something (i.e., subject-matter, editing style, aesthetic preference) in common? An ANT-inspired approach allows an alternative, more grounded and confirmation bias-free perspective through which to investigate the infrastructure and aesthetics of Chinese cinema as an intertwined whole.

2.3.2.2 Auteur Paradigm

Within the dictionary entry for “auteur theory” or “authorship”, the auteur paradigm is defined as an approach that emphasises how a film director's personal influence, individual sensibility, and artistic vision might manifest in their work (Kuhn 2012). In studies of contemporary Chinese cinema, this method often leads to classifying filmmakers and directors into distinct generational groups, such as the fifth or sixth generations (Berra 2013, Lin 2002). Additionally, individual filmmakers like Feng Xiaogang (Zhang 2008), Lou Ye (Stuckey 2018, 61-77), Jia Zhangke (Mello 2019) have been analysed not only for their unique cinematic creations but also for their broader political and social relevance, including their engagement with and impact on the international film scene.

Focusing on filmmakers and directors provide a lot of insight of contemporary Chinese cinema as it gives space for researchers to dive into one filmmaker systematically. It is, however, essential to recognise that the term “auteur” carries strong connotations linked to European cinema and art or art-house cinema. In this context, filmmakers, particularly directors, are often portrayed as the primary creators of a film, akin to writers and artists. While there may be extreme cases that illustrate this concept, such as David Bordwell’s study of Ozu, where the renowned Japanese auteur exerted such control over the scene that his long-term collaborator, the cameraman Yûharu Atsuta, described having zero liberty to decide any shots (Bordwell 1988, 74-75), it is crucial to understand that filmmaking is inherently collaborative. Even in instances where a director's influence is pronounced, the creation of a film typically requires collaboration and input from various professionals in different roles. This extends beyond the onsite crew, including cinematographers, gaffers, best boys, and makeup artists, to encompass more managerial roles such as producers. The complexity of the filmmaking process further involves relationships with distribution and exhibition networks, as well as numerous other interconnected relationships and processes

that shape the creation, distribution, and reception of films. This is especially true for the study of Chinese indie films, which emerge through the manoeuvring of a network that makes them possible. Therefore, a singular focus on the director unavoidably simplifies and overlooks the diverse array of elements that contribute to the making of Chinese indie cinema.

The Actor-Network Theory (ANT), however, offers a complementary and comprehensive lens to investigate the emergence of indie network. By prioritising the trajectories of film production, distribution, and exhibition, ANT presents a more holistic approach that acknowledges the interconnectedness of various entities and actants involved in the making and circulation of indie film in China. This includes not just the filmmakers and directors but also the producers, distributors, audiences, technologies, policies, and socio-cultural factors, all of which collectively shape the cinematic landscape. Moreover, ANT recognises that films are not just products of individual genius but results of a networked process. This underscores that a film's aesthetics, themes, and cultural resonance emerge not solely from individual filmmakers, but from a constellation of relationships and interactions. Thus, a comprehensive understanding of Chinese indie cinema requires exploring the notion of shared creativity in terms of aesthetics and themes that different films might capture, resonating with the political and social truth of contemporary China. By broadening the scope between industry research and aesthetic analysis, ANT aligns with a circulation-oriented approach. It enables us to navigate beyond conventional questions such as “are indie filmmakers previous independent filmmakers?” by finding their unique position within a lively and emerging yet risky indie network of human and non-human actors, rather than a restrictive box which uses labels such as “auteur”, “independent” and/or “indie”.

By moving beyond the conventional auteur paradigm and adopting ANT, this project probes the complex processes at the core of Chinese indie cinema. While filmmakers and

directors are undeniably key players, they are only components within a larger, interconnected system. Engaging with this broader network is essential to fully understanding the subtleties and dynamics of Chinese indie cinema. By utilising ANT, the research provides an opportunity to reflect upon the collaborative nature of film creation, distribution, and reception, thereby capturing the multifaceted essence of the Chinese indie film landscape in a manner that goes beyond traditional analysis.

2.3.2.3 State-vs-civil-society Paradigm

Anchoring itself in analysis of how the state executes power over social realms, the state-vs-civil society paradigm probes the authoritarian nature of the PRC regime in the socialist and post-socialist eras. In the context of Chinese cinema, films, along with the infrastructures from which they are produced, are very often scrutinised as either a product or counter-product of state manipulation. Films in Mao's era were promulgated as state propaganda (Berry and Farquhar 2006) that was backed up by a monopolistic film industry under complete state control. And while state power went through a process of decentralisation, and the film industry has experienced rounds of further marketisation since the early 1990s, the shadow of censorship still hangs over the industry (Su 2016). Under this thread, films, be they sixth generation in their "underground period" or documentary filmmaking, have been taken as a medium with distinct political significance in relation to the authoritarian state narrative (Berry, Lü, & Rofel 2010; Pickowicz 2012; Pickowicz and Zhang 2006; Zhang and Zito 2015).

State-vs-civil-society is a valuable approach, as it is vocal about the smothering and detrimental aspects that state control has imposed. It also foregrounds how other forces, be they individual, non-official, or market-based, are brought to bear on film by authoritarian power that is opaque, non-transparent, and sometimes violent. It is no surprise that research of this kind is often produced by Anglophone authors, as these scholars are less affected by the ongoing censorship that is imposed on researchers in China.

In his critique of the "the sociology of the social", Latour points out that a general approach to explaining social phenomenon using a pre-established, theoretical framework, which produces refined, clear-cut explanations of the social world, risks sacrificing the intricacy of the whole image, in which various actants act differently. With this pre-given theoretical framework,

[O]nly a handful of actors will be designated as the causes of all the others, which will have no other function than to serve as a backdrop or relay for the flows of causal efficacy. They may go through the gestures to keep busy as characters, but they will be without a part in the plot, meaning they will not act. (Latour 2005, 141)

Latour's critique of the passive placeholder challenges the dominant state-vs-civil-society paradigm by granting equal amounts of space to both the state and social actants¹⁷. Applying ANT as a method means that the Chinese state, despite being the most powerful entity, remains only one of the many actants that contribute to/hinder the making of indie networks in China. In other words, the indie scene is only possible when all the actors are doing their work. Once political correctness, and the narrative of rivalry between authoritarian state and civil society is put aside, true investigation can start into how each actant moves and how these moves co-generate an emerging indie network which hosts unique circuits including production and circulation, and thereby allows alternative aesthetic features to emerge.

This epoché – suspension of judgement – is by no means equal to turning one's back on the manipulations of the regime, particularly at a time when state scrutiny of film has been tightening in an unprecedented and worrying way under Xi Jinping's regime. It was not simply self-defence when Latour stated that “morality is from the beginning inscribed in things” (Latour 2002, 258), as the act of “going back to the fact” itself has an inherited moral and ethical dimension. Following the actants and looking at the whole network, whether it is

¹⁷ Since my research is closely related to filmmaking industry, to avoid the plausible confusion between actor in the industry and the term “actor”, which, in the ANT context, refers to entities actively engaged in creating the observable social phenomenon, I use “social actant” or “actant” throughout my research to refer to the former.

striving or withering, shows respect to every actant who is involved, regardless of how much political power each carries.

This investigation of indie cinema in China does not merely reveals how current state policy and the market setting prompt or hinder the production and circulation of indie cinema; it focuses further on how actants, both human and non-human, make the whole alternative cinema scene in China work. For example, following Wu Wenguang, one of the proclaimed “godfathers” of Chinese independent filmmaking, we find that his milestone documentary film *Bumming in Beijing: The Last Dreamers* (Liulang Beijing 流浪北京, 1990) is in fact a “within-the-system” production given that Wu was hired by the national TV channel CCTV as a contract director – a detail that is interestingly left unmentioned in most of his profiles. This documentary film, which follows four young people who proactively decide to live a life outside of the state system, was shot by the cameras, mics, and crews that were used to make other TV shows at the time.

During the early nineties, Wu Wenguang was not the only filmmaker who utilised state resources and “with-in-system” status to do one’s own thing. In Wu’s article on the preface to “Walking on Earth: Following-up Interviews and Survey Report on Contemporary Chinese Documentaries” (2021), he also notes that there were other filmmakers at the time who were working on their own projects while maintaining their positions within the state system. These filmmakers were on the one hand safe within the state system, and on the other hand “two-faced”, as they, and the work they produced, were not obliged to follow propaganda and therefore “... have demonstrated a sense of diversity and complicity”.¹⁸

¹⁸ “Wuwenguang yingxiang biji 30: tanhua ji daolu wei “dadi xingzou dui dangdai Zhongguo jilupianren de genzong yu diaocha baogao” shuxie xu 吴文光影像笔记 39: 谈话即道路为——《大地行走对当代中国纪录片人的跟踪访谈与调查报告》书写序”[“Wu Wenguang’s Film Notes 39: The Talk is the Road – Preface to ‘Walking on Earth: Follow-up Interviews and Survey Report on Contemporary Chinese Documentaries’”], last modified 30 November 2021, <https://www.chinaindiefilm.org/wu-wenguangs-film-notes-39-the-talk-is-the-road-preface-to-walking-on-earth-follow-up-interviews-and-survey-report-on-contemporary-chinese->

This is a simple case of how contemporary Chinese filmmakers put on their “la perruque” – a concept that is utilised by Michel de Certeau to describe “the work one does for oneself under the guise of doing work for their employer”. Like “a secretary writing a love letter on ‘company time’”, or “a cabinetmaker ‘borrowing’ a lathe to make a piece of furniture for his living room” (Certeau 2011, 25). The dynamics that one can observe from a networked Chinese cinema scene are always more complicated than a “state vs society” paradigm can grasp. This is precisely because “the ordinary man” (Certeau 2011, xxiv), or to use a more ANT-oriented term, the actant, constantly develops the “art of practice” that enables them to manoeuvre around spaces and situations with constraint.

2.3.2.4 National Cinema Narrative

Compared to the last two dominant paradigms which have comparatively clear boundaries and are therefore easier to pinpoint, the national cinema narrative is much broader and more complicated. It is especially worthy of elaboration, as it has perhaps the most fundamental impact on how Chinese cinema has been understood.

Chinese film scholars who write about Chinese national cinema clearly acknowledge the problematic aspects of the national cinema narrative. In direct dialogue with Tom O'Regan's account of Australian national cinema, which argues that it "is messy in its local, national, and international involvements" (O'Regan 1996, 5), Zhang Yingjin points out that as "an ethnic, cultural, linguistic, political or territorial marker" (Zhang 2004, 4), the term "Chinese cinema" is complicated firstly because it is very closely linked with the "nation state" (Zhang 2004, 3), and therefore contains an extra layer of political denotation. Secondly, it covers too large a corpus of films, many of which do not necessarily share any similarities other than being "Chinese".

I find that ANT complements the established national cinema narrative in the following respects. First, in terms of political intricacy, ANT transforms fuzzy boundaries, ideological conflicts, and political disputes into specific networks that are activated by actants inclined to enrol one another. By conducting the epoché mentioned in the previous sections – namely putting established categories such as geographical boundaries and different forms of political institutions and beliefs into brackets – we are spared the angst of explaining what the "Chinese nation" refers to in the first place and are able to move on to investigate actual films more productively. This is especially urgent given that our current period witnesses a worrying wave of ideological backlash in mainland China that has already led to more pronounced institutional differences and escalating tensions between mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. This means that Zhang's definition of Chinese national cinema, which

covers all films produced in mainland China (including those prior to 1949), Hong Kong, and Taiwan (Zhang 2004, 5) is not applicable anymore.

In terms of film aesthetics, this more networked perspective on Chinese cinema contributes greatly to constructive dialogues on “Chinese cinema” by breaking the essentialist idea of the “Chinese-ness” of Chinese cinema apart into traceable, contestable pieces. With this perspective, it is easier to contest assertions that advocate analysis of Chinese films mainly for their political and social relevance. Statements such as “... movies can be examined for their portrayal of Chinese life and values, for the political and social message that the makers (or censors) wish to convey, and for influences on their audiences” (Croizier 1973) had their currency in the past, but are also dangerous, since they conflate the aesthetic with the social and political. Consequently, Chinese films are implicitly excluded from the corpus of films that are deemed worthy of aesthetic examination. In this regard, Rey Chow’s article “Chinese-ness as a Theoretical Problem” (1998) works well as an exposé of what is wrong with Crozier’s statement – firstly, the false sense that Chinese reality can be simplistically accessed and analysed by films that Chinese filmmakers make, and more deeply, the unsaid double standard whereby scholars of Western films can write about more general themes such as love, feminism, and emotions, whereas the analysis of Chinese films must work more carefully on framing the boundaries, because the “message” is specific to an imagined Chinese reality.

This double standard has significantly shrunk over the past decades, because of wider access to and deeper understanding of Chinese film within international academia. The Chinese national cinema approach, as illustrated by Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar in early 2000, is not a set, inert concept; instead, it “needs to be understood within an analytic approach that focuses on cinema and the national as a framework within which to consider a range of questions and issues about the national” (Chris and Farquhar 2006, 17).

In dialogue with Berry and Farquhar's call for a more flexible theoretical framework and responding to Rey Chow's critique of the pitfalls of defining subjects solely as “Chinese”, my research inspired by Actor-Network Theory (ANT) adds a nuanced perspective to the question of “what does it mean to be a Chinese film”. By reframing “national” or “trans-national” filmmaking as a dynamic network of elements that exist temporarily or permanently through successful interactions and collaborations, I argue that the uniqueness of a particular film’s identity transcends existing labels. Instead, it originates from the singular network that enables its creation—a network comprising both practical aspects like cost-effective equipment, paid or volunteer labour, international travel, and financial interests, as well as the more artistic side that includes non-human actants such as ideas, chromatic patterns, and tempos.

This ANT approach compliments a transnational understanding of indie cinema by meticulously examining the connections within a flattened network. For example, via the lens of ANT, whether *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (Wohu canglong 卧虎藏龙, dir. Ang Lee 李安) is a Chinese film or not is not the main concern. More crucial is the fact that it

is assembled a multinational production line-up from the US, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and China. Location shooting was done, among other picturesque places, in the Gobi Desert and the Taklamakan Plateau in western China. Studio work was done in Beijing, music recording in Shanghai, vocals added in Los Angeles and post-production completed in Hong Kong” (Zhang 2004, 280–281).

2.4 Site-to-Site Exploration: Fieldwork

2.4.1 Positioning the Researcher

Before discussing the field trip in detail, this section offers an honest account of my background and the experiences that influenced my decision to write this thesis, and how they shaped my perspective as a researcher.

I began this research with first-hand experience in the independent cinema scene in mainland China. Before leaving to study abroad, I worked for the Chinese Independent Film Festival (CIFF) from 2009 to 2011. In the first year, I started as a liaison for CIFF's screenings at Nanjing University, where I was pursuing my master's degree. During this time, I also organised the 0206 Film Club at Nanjing University, the only student-led film organisation on campus for six years. During those six years, we (undergraduate and graduate students who studied very different subjects but were united by our obsession for "weird" films) screened films with eccentric tastes, ranging from Derek Jarman's *Blue* (1993) to Hu Jie's *Though I Am Gone* (Wo sui siqu 我虽死去, dir. Hu Jie 胡杰 2006). In 2010-2011, I continued my involvement with the festival, working as the chief English editor for the festival magazine. My responsibilities extended beyond quality control of the yearly pamphlet to include writing and editing articles and film reviews for the daily festival briefings. Additionally, I conducted interviews with filmmakers at the time, crafting timely articles for further circulation.

Rather differently from what I read about independent film festivals in scholarly articles and research later in my life, my personal feeling of working for CIFF was very close to a farmer's feeling of going through a harvest season: full of hope and excitement, but with an element of a routine. The planning normally started in late summer: before the term began, the same group of people would meet at a café in Gulou District, Nanjing, to discuss who would be in charge of what for the next couple of months. After a year or two, it almost felt

like an inner clock ticking, as we would then bike to the CIFF headquarter located on one of the compounds off West Beijing Road.

There, we worked as volunteers. Working hours were sometimes long so we survived on lunch boxes. I would translate the screening timetable from Chinese to English and revise this information if it had already been translated. Sometimes Zhang Xianmin would review my writing, pointing out my editorial mistakes. For example, a site for screening is referred to as a “venue”, not a “place”. I once accidentally locked him on the balcony while he was talking to a girl. I remember it well because it was awkward. My colleagues would tease me about that afterwards, even though I had not locked the door to the balcony on purpose.

There would be blank sections in the pamphlet. These blanks were left strategically, corresponding to documentary films such as *Karamay* (Kelamayi 克拉玛依, dir. Xu Xin 徐辛) or *Disturbing the Peace* (Laoma tihua 老妈蹄花, dir. Ai Weiwei 艾未未, 2009) that were politically sensitive. We would place the name of these films on the pamphlet but leave the synopses empty. That way, only those present at the screening would know what the films were about.

As volunteers, we often worked late to ensure that the daily briefings could be produced and printed overnight, ready for distribution in the morning. meant that I often ended up missing out on most of the films during the festival. After the film festival, Cao Kai 曹恺, one of the organisers, would invite those of us who did not get the chance to watch most of the screened films over to his studio. There, he would make coffee and serve spam from the tin, and we would watch some of the films together. I watched Ai Xiaoming 艾晓明's, a documentary film *Why the Flowers Are So Red* (Huaer weishenme zheyang hong 花儿为什么这样红 2010) which critically investigates the government's handling of the Sichuan Earthquake in 2008. The haunting sight of unclaimed school bags and stationery

reminded me of my time volunteering at a tent school near Wenchuan. While these images occasionally appear in the domestic news then, few question why. This documentary did, and its probing has stayed with me.

CIFF was an opportunity to meet filmmakers. Since nobody was going to come and buy films, the atmosphere was very relaxed. In hindsight, this did not mean that business-minded networking and intoxicated mansplaining to supposedly naive young female college students about art and film as art did not exist. Nevertheless, it felt more like a yearly gathering. Most of the filmmakers would hang out at Sculpting Time, a famous café (now gone and converted into an office for a curriculum education provider) at the crossroad of Hankou Road and Qingdao Road, and just relax.

It was clearly during this time that my positioning as a researcher began to take shape, long before this thesis started. By talking to and observing people, I came to understand that this festival only provided a space, and people went there for various reasons. One artist arrived with his film, a work of fiction that defied conventional storytelling; a feature filmmaker confided in me during an interview that he despised Jia Zhangke and those who capitalised on social issues as an entry ticket to the international film circuit; a documentary filmmaker visited and during a Q&A session spent a great deal of time sharing his view with audience on the typography of subtitles and the importance of quality English translations so that curators from international film festivals could understand the film better.

I recall a forum discussing the potential future of the independent films that were screened during the festival. An uneasy silence filled the room when the conversation turned to discussing the possibility of finding a platform that could potentially purchase some of the films. I also remember the tension in the conference room the day that the “Nanjing Manifesto” was born. There was a heated debate over what stance an independent filmmaker should take, and I could feel the discontent directed towards Lü Xinyu 吕新雨. At a certain

point, Cao Kai needed to speak up for her, pointing out that she was not only a scholar but also had practical experience, meaning she had the right to call herself an independent documentary filmmaker.

These moments shaped my fundamental understanding of Chinese independent cinema. It is about diversity and a sanctioned space for different voices to be projected. Sitting in that conference room (one of those 1980s' rooms with a large round red-wood table in the middle), I had the embodied feeling that I was in a place where various voices could gather and were allowed to coexist. Some of voices were so distinct that they clashed with each other. These moments shaped my fundamental understanding of Chinese independent cinema. My research on indie cinema started from an attempt to capture one particular strand of these divisions.

2.4.2 Overview of Fieldwork

Before beginning my fieldwork in 2019, I reached out to old colleagues with whom I had closely collaborated during my time with CIFF, as well as friends with whom I used to run the film club in Nanjing. Many of them had by this point established careers in the industry. Leveraging these existing connections, I conducted two rounds of fieldwork between the summer and late autumn of 2019 in the mainland Chinese cities of Shanghai, Beijing, Nanjing, and Pingyao in Shanxi Province, where my interviewees were based. The scope of my travel was tailored not only to cities which my interviewees were based but also to the funding I successfully secured for the fieldwork.

As a researcher, my methodological approach expanded to include systematic observation and semi-structured interviews. This phase was characterised by deliberate and reflective distance, as I aimed to analyse and interpret the lived experiences and narratives within the indie cinema landscape through both observation and interviews. The shift in my role from a participant of the independent film scene to a researcher are outlined with reference to methodological frameworks are drawn upon relevant literature which includes works on qualitative interview design, ethnographic practices in media and culture studies, and participant observation strategies in arts-based research. First, Boellstorff et al. (2012) establishes my confidence in ethnography as a sound method by clarifying its scientific validity (Boellstorff et al. 2012, 32-33). Steinar Kvale and Svend Brinkmann's metaphor of interviewers as miners and travellers (2009, 48) has shaped my engagement strategy with interviewees. Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw's *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes* (2011), which notes two modes of participant observations as versatile tools for capturing the intricacies of social interactions within cultural spaces. One mode involves researchers "living" the events rather than observing them in a detached manner. (Emerson et al. 201, 92) The other mode involves participating in events with the intention of immediate inscription, positioning

oneself to observe and record significant events in detail. (Emerson et al. 2011, 93) These two general approaches guided my fieldwork, where my dual role as a former participant and observer provides a unique vantage point. Additionally, Spradley (2016) offers detailed strategies for locating, interacting with informants, and designing the interview questions. These methodological frameworks, when applied to the 17 interviews conducted, enrich the analysis, allowing for a nuanced portrayal of the dynamics of the indie scene.

The first stint of fieldwork was undertaken in July and August 2019. Through my contacts, I secured meetings with industry practitioners who were navigating their own business in the film industry. The occupations of the first 5 informants who agreed to participate in formal semi-structured interviews with me, were as follows: a freelance cinematographer in Beijing; a freelance screenplay writer for web films and low-budget indie films, also in Beijing; an owner of a film production company in Shanghai that produces medium to low-budget feature films; and a manager of a state-owned film studio in southern China; and one who had just joined an upcoming indie production company based in Beijing.

During the fieldwork trip, the interviewees were invited to elaborate on their experiences in the film industry. They were asked about their understandings of the impact of various policy changes, including but not limited to the newly-promulgated film law. They also shared their strategies for keeping their businesses viable and their thoughts on the emergence of digital platforms within the industry. While not all of them were directly involved in indie film filmmaking and circulation, their varied backgrounds yielded important insights into the current landscape of the Chinese film industry.

During the first phase of my fieldwork, one of the contacts I spoke with suggested that I return to China in October of that year to attend the festival. This informant emphasised the importance of attending that year, as it would be a gathering point for many industry professionals, especially those working on projects aligned with my research interests, such

as filmmakers focusing on unconventional, experimental, or low-budget feature films. The gathering was likely to provide an opportunity for proper introductions and could potentially facilitate deeper connections for my research.

As a result, the remaining of the 12 interviews took place during my stay in Pingyao and subsequently in Beijing in October 2019. The interviewees were composed of a diverse cross-section of industry professionals between 20-40 years old. They were an up-and-coming filmmaker; a filmmaker/actor; a former producer at an independent film company; an independent exhibitor who now runs a small distribution company in his forties, and his business partner; an owner of an indie film company; an indie film exhibitor who used to run a pirating DVD business; an executive/producer from an established, larger film company in Beijing; one male indie film producer; a male employee at a state-owned culture centre; a former curator at an acknowledged art museum; and a commercial advertisement filmmaker with a keen interest in alternative film and music culture.

As illustrated by the opening anecdote of this thesis, the second phase of fieldwork unfolded just as a previous informant had predicated. Pingyao Film Festival provided me with access to a broad array of informants, each with their own unique perspectives and experiences within the industry. Their collective insights offered a refreshing and multifaceted view of the emerging scene for alternative filmmaking and circulation in contemporary China.

While consent was procured from all interviewees and the interviews were prearranged, due to the busy atmosphere of the festival, the reality of the process was not uniform. The length of the interviews varied widely, ranging from fifteen minutes to three hours, and the settings fluctuated from formal locations such as cafés or offices to more eclectic and informal places like restaurant waiting areas. I also encountered a wide spectrum of attitudes from the interviewees, ranging from curiosity about my research project to

palpable guardedness.

During the second phase of the fieldwork, my positionality as a researcher was shaped by a distinctive dual perspective. Having previously been involved in the independent film scene in China myself, I approached the second fieldwork trip not simply as an external observer, but with an intrinsic curiosity about the unfolding progression and “follow-up” of development pathways for emerging filmmakers and the channels that could be created for practitioners who are keen to make innovative and interesting films in today’s China. This blend of personal experience and academic inquiry has allowed me an insider’s insight and my previous involvement with the independent cinema scene helped me critically as a researcher to gain access and to observe without much interference the networks and activities relevant to my research project.

The interviews conducted during my fieldwork both confirmed and challenged certain preconceptions I had formed from reading the literature on my research subject. For instance, some interviewees expressed concerns about the threat posed by digital platforms to traditional film exhibition, while others viewed this shift as an opportunity. Several shared their thoughts on indie films, pointing to challenges such as uncertain market demand and a perceived lack of diversity in the genre. Others went deeper into their personal connections to the world of film, discussing their love for the medium and the factors that inspired them to build careers in the field. Furthermore, the relationship between Chinese indie cinema and international film circuits has undergone significant changes. The situation is no longer as simple as Pickowicz’s characterization, in which independent filmmakers leverage international awards (Pickowicz and Zhang 2006, 6-7) into domestic recognition. Rather, film practitioners today exhibit more nuanced, realistic, and pragmatic understandings of the international film circuit. They actively navigate both international and domestic markets to ensure their films are financially successful, reflecting a complex approach that extends

beyond previous models. Conversely, my conversations with industry practitioners confirmed my observations regarding the limitations of certain terms used in the field, such as “new independent film”. The feedback from those engaged in the industry emphasised the risks of labelling a film as “independent” as it would raise potential concerns from the authorities.

2.4.3 Ethical Considerations

Through extensive desk research, a selection of filmmakers and practitioners was pre-identified and shortlisted for semi-structured interviews.

For the recruitment process, shortlisted interviewees were approached via email or through an introduction from a primary contact. Additionally, a snowball sampling technique was employed. After each interview, participants could suggest further potential interviewees, broadening the research participant base. A limitation of this method is that it may have introduced bias into the way the interviews were sampled.

Regarding the consent procedure, participants received an information sheet (ANNEX C), a consent form (ANNEX D), and a guide to the interview topics (ANNEX E).

Participants could either express their consent in writing or speaking. If they choose the latter, consent was audio-recorded or, if they declined recording, it was noted by the researcher. For the ethnographic aspect of the research, consent was continuously monitored and revised if the research context changed. Observations of behaviour in public settings may not always necessitate explicit consent due to the lack of an expectation of privacy. Should unexpected individuals become part of the research or if their information was inadvertently included, it was only used in anonymised form or if subsequent consent was achieved.

Regarding data handling, all interviews were audio-recorded. While primary data such as the interviewee's name and role were obtained, other sensitive data, such as age or religion, were left out. Anonymisation took place immediately during transcription. Given the location of the research in China, immediate data transfers to the researcher's university computer was not always possible. As a precaution, the researcher's personal laptop had a disk encryption and was set up for automatic backups to the university's HFS backup and archive service. All electronic data remained solely on encrypted devices until it was safely moved to the university system. No data duplication or wireless transfers occurred. Data on

the university computer was saved on a hard drive and not on the cloud. Physical data, meanwhile, was securely housed in the researcher's locked cabinet in Oxford. All sensitive or personally identifiable information within the data was promptly redacted. After the research concluded, non-sensitive data has been stored, and any personal or confidential data has been securely retained for a minimum of three years post-publication.

Through these rigorous ethical considerations and procedures, the research aspires to guarantee the highest level of respect for participant rights, their privacy, and the protection of their data.

2.5 Selection of Case Studies

2.5.1 Production Companies

Among the numerous private film companies established post-2009, this thesis focuses on three indie firms: Heaven Pictures (Tianhuahuatian 天画画天), Black Fin (Heiqi 黑鳍), and Factory Gate (Gongchangdamen 工厂大门). The selection of these production companies is rooted in their distinctive positions within the Chinese film industry and their roles in the emerging indie network. Unlike the larger, high-grossing film companies that have dominated academic attention, these three actants stand out for their smaller size, limited assets and emphasis on producing low-budget indie films with unique aesthetics. The rationale for the three case studies are as follows.

First, Heaven Pictures stands out as a key case study for observing the transition from independent to indie cinema in contemporary China. Built by key actants from the earlier independent scene and fuelled by philanthropic support, Heaven Pictures serves as a real-world test case for how indie film companies can thrive in mainland China when freed from financial constraints and untouched by market considerations. Heaven Pictures represents an early phase where past independent filmmakers transitioned to a market-oriented environment, becoming acquainted with both the industry and its audience. Through first-hand interviews and online archives, an examination of Heaven Pictures also highlights its strategic approaches to maintain creative freedom while navigating state interventions, such as setting up different headquarters to navigate state censorship.

Second, Black Fin stands out among mainland indie film companies for its distinctive self-branding as a company that dares to be different. It was selected as a primary case study not only because this is the production company behind phenomenal success of *Kaili Blues*. More crucially, as discussed in the earlier section on defining “indie” in a Chinese context, grasping how industry practitioners actively define themselves and practice is key to

understanding Chinese indie. Black Fin is unapologetically loud in this regard. Its outspoken self-branding as an indie film company, aiming at the niche market, makes it a compelling subject for researchers. Different from Heaven Pictures, which is deeply tied to China's previous independent film scene, Black Fin blends this legacy with a team of industry practitioners and filmmakers who are keenly aware of their industry niche. Their preference for the term "auteur film" over "independent" signals a strategic understanding of market nuances. Moreover, the company's strategy of collaborating with filmmakers on a project-by-project basis tests out the producer-centric model in China's alternative filmmaking scene.

Finally, Factory Gate is the third case study, illustrating a production company that produces alternative films and collaborates with indie filmmakers, all while maintaining its corporate connection to its larger parent company. While large film companies have never been absent from the alternative filmmaking scene in China, Factory Gate provides a concrete case of a film company which specifically focuses on indie filmmaking while maintaining its corporate tie. This model echoes the American film industry's trajectory, where niche content producers like United Artists and Fox Searchlight Pictures were integrated into corporate behemoths such as MGM and Disney (Tzioumakis 2018, 224). Drawing parallels with the American landscape, Factory Gate highlights a pattern according to which significant capital integrates promising talent and innovation, especially relevant in China where indie projects seldom secure public funds. Furthermore, one can observe Factory Gate's further distance from the independent scene by crafting a company image rooted in positive and appealing aesthetics.

In the production chapter, this thesis chooses three indie companies, offering a rich understanding of their operations within the emerging Chinese cinema scene. However, the vibrant and rapidly evolving Chinese film sector continues to grow, introducing a rich ongoing development which deserves academic pursuit. Emerging indie companies are a

testament to this growth. Exploring and cross comparing the strategies and visions of more will offer valuable opportunities for future research. For example, Yang Cheng 杨城, the previous manager of Heaven Pictures founded Nezha Brothers Pictures (Nezha xiongdi 哪吒兄弟) in 2016; Bi Gan, after the viral success of *Kaili Blues*, teamed up with Shan Zuolong, another former manager of Heaven Pictures, registered Maidang Films (Maidang yingye 麦荡影业) in 2016; Lantern Film, a sub-sector of Sky Films (Tiankong yingye 天空影业) which focuses on “arthouse cinema” was launched in 2016. Exploring and cross comparing the strategies and visions of these companies will offer valuable opportunities for future research.

Another promising avenue for future studies is the role of technology plays. As streaming platforms increasingly aim to move beyond mere exhibition and take a more hands-on approach in the production sector, this shift warrants closer examination. With indie cinema increasingly becoming an accepted market practice, the state’s reaction—be it through inclusion, regulation, or censorship—is intriguing to observe. Additionally, an exploration into the reception by the Chinese audience can provide insights into their perceptions and interpretations of indie films, potentially highlighting further nuances in China’s film culture.

On a broader note, data from the Qianzhan Industry Research Institute, as of 2021, cites 96469 private enterprises entrenched in the film, TV, and music sectors, with 7238 dedicated to film production.¹⁹ The abundant number of private film companies provides a

¹⁹ Qianzhan Industry Research Institute 前瞻产业研究院, “2022nian Zhongguo chanye fazhan xianzhuang fenxi yiqinghou dianying chanliang, yingyuan shuliang, ji pingmushu junyou zengjia 2022 年中国产业现状分析 疫情后电影产量、影院数量及屏幕数均有增加” [Report of Chinese film industry 2022: Numbers of film produced, cinemas and screens all increased after the pandemic], last modified 12 July 2022, <https://bg.qianzhan.com/trends/detail/506/220712->

rich foundation for future quantitative research on indie production companies. Potential areas of investigation include the average lifespan of these companies and the mean number of films produced by each.

By continuously revisiting and refining our understanding of Chinese indie cinema, the aspects will enable a more nuanced tracking of the actants that shape the definition of “indie” within the Chinese film industry.

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2.5.2 Distribution

Distribution plays a crucial role in the film circulation network. While the barrier to entry for producers might be relatively low, distribution, especially in a market setting, is typically dominated by gatekeepers endowed with significant financial resources. As Angus Finney notes in *The International Film Business*, these gatekeepers tend to be “the most cash-rich centres for investment” (Finney 2015, 148). Translating this to the Chinese context, the situation is even more pronounced. Historically, film distribution was tightly controlled by state monopolies, which later transitioned to powerful corporate chains like Wanda Films. Consequently, it is imperative for the chapter on indie film distribution to highlight actants not backed by enormous financial muscle. Focusing on the “small fishes” in the industry, the distribution chapter sheds light on the complex dynamics of film distribution in mainland China by choosing three case studies: Redience (Chijiao 赤角), Midnight Blur (Wuye shijiao 午夜失焦), and Blow Up (Fangda 放大). In an industry often overshadowed by dominant actants, focusing on these three smaller distribution companies highlights the chances and challenges faced by such smaller players.

Redience is selected as the first case study because of its strategic alliance with the indie production company, Black Fin, and its unique stance bridging both the domestic film market and the international film circuit. In a hierarchical film industry, Redience’s growth provides an indispensable lens to observe the deepening interplay between Chinese indie film professionals and the global cinema circuit. The collaboration between Black Fin and Redience, representing indie production and distribution respectively, can be observed as an innovative strategy to maximise the profit margin and meanwhile also diversify the range of Chinese films on the international stage.

Midnight Blur offers a unique second case study. Different from Redience, which collaborates with indie production companies for a creative edge, Midnight Blur roots itself

in China's rising cinephile culture, spurred by the growth of we-media (Zi meiti 自媒体), and taps into the growing demand for international sales and promotion of Chinese films. Born directly out of China's booming cinephile culture, Midnight Blur highlights a fresh wave of indie actants, who do not belong to institution but committed to bring Chinese indie films into the global arena. This distinct operational model and growth trajectory of Midnight Blur makes it a compelling case study, providing insights into how cinephile culture creates alternative pathways in the indie film distribution sector.

Being the only case study in this research which focuses entirely on the domestic market, Blow-up is an intriguing case due to its transformative journey from Rear Window, an informal film screening organisation, to a fully-fledged enterprise. Very similar to Midnight Blur's transformation from we-media, Blow-up also leverages past connections and resources as the company seeks its footing within the Chinese film market. As a small distribution company which advertises itself as specifically contributing to indie film distribution, Blow-up provides an indispensable angle to observe how, or whether it is possible for a small-size distribution company to counter domestic market uncertainties and ensure better project access. Blow-up's journey highlights the challenges indie distributors face in China, navigating both state regulations and market forces.

The distribution chapter does not choose larger distribution companies with considerable resources and influence in the industry as case studies. By doing that, it offers a fresh perspective and strategically focuses on case studies which are smaller, less known actants, who are dedicated to indie film distribution. The reason of excluding larger corporates such as Wanda Films for this thesis is because although major companies like Wanda or Ali Films shape the industry landscape, their overwhelming presence can often overshadow the subtle contributions and challenges faced by smaller actants. For instance, large corporations are more likely to have leverage with state bureaus, thus encountering

fewer obstacles. Additionally, their complex operational structures and already established distribution network might make it hard to observe flexibility and innovation.

Nevertheless, future research would benefit from a more detailed elaboration on major distributors' interests and engagement with the developing indie scene. By the conclusion of this thesis, it is evident that the larger corporates have already noticed the potential profit of indie films can bring. For example, *Journey to the West* (Yuzhou tansuo gongzuoshi 宇宙探索工作室, dir. Kong Dashan 孔大山, 2022), a mockumentary film on an editor from a science fiction magazine going off his journey to find extra-terrestrial life, is distributed by Chinese Film Corporate. Analysing the impact of larger corporates' involvement, and potential short-term collaborations or long-term merge between major and indie distributors, would further enrich the understanding on the evolving Chinese indie film distribution.

2.5.3 Exhibition Channels

In terms of exhibition sites for indie cinema, three pivotal actants, each holding a unique position within the vast exhibition landscape, come under scrutiny in this thesis.

The Nationwide Alliance of Arthouse Cinema (NAAC), initiated by the state with participation from private companies, embodies an official intervention in the indie realm. As a third trial of the attempt to launch a nationwide arthouse cinema chain, its existence hints at the state's recognition of indie cinema's significance and possibly, its strategic value in broadening the cinematic discourse. Yet the true value of NAAC remains to be assessed, given its strong ties to state ideological control. By collaborating with the industry, NAAC provides a somewhat controlled environment where indie voices can be heard, albeit within defined boundaries. This state-backed initiative was chosen for study to understand the nuanced interplay between governmental directives and indie cinema's inherently creative spirit.

iQIYI, a Chinese online streaming platform, serves as the second case study to explore the evolving landscape of indie exhibition venues in China. As proposed by Chris Anderson in *The Long Tail*, online streaming platforms act as a natural sanctuary for films that struggle in the hit-driven economy which follows a 20/80 rule, where the top 20% of franchises gets 80% of the profit (Anderson 2008, 12). Via its digital premiere of Yang Lina 杨荔钠's *Spring Tide* (Chunchao 春潮 2019), and its host of other indie production for the platform, iQIYI demonstrated the potential for online streaming to provide alternative exhibition opportunities for indie films that may not have been widely available through traditional theatrical distribution. Moreover, iQIYI's gradual transformation into a provider of legal content and producer of original content provides an interesting lens to observe the dynamic tension between online platforms and traditional film and state TV industries in today's China.

The First International Film Festival (FIFF), launched in Beijing in 2006 and later relocated to Xining in 2011, emerges as a significant platform for showcasing indie films in China, making it an ideal case study for the chapter on indie exhibition. This case study directly aligns with scholarly discussions surrounding various Chinese film festivals and their nuanced adaptations of international models. Specifically, it delves into FIFF's unique “in-between” operational mode, which sees it functioning as an indie film festival while partnering with the local government. Central to this examination are two essential actants: the festival organisers and the local Xining government. Through a deep dive into their complex relationship, characterised by mutual interests yet tensions arising from the festival's dedication to indie talents and its potential threat to the local administration to screen politically sensitive content, this case study offers an insightful primary analysis into the dynamics and challenges underpinning indie film exhibitions in today's China.

A defining characteristic that distinguishes indie from the independent scene is that all exhibition sites for indie are subject to scrutiny by both the state and the market, and the selection of case studies in the exhibition sites chapter follows this logic and chose three sites based on their respective significant impact on the indie exhibition scene.

One area which is worth further investigation is the informal screening communities throughout the country. For instance, Rear Window consistently organises regular screenings of the latest indie films on a small scale in Nanjing. Similarly, Danqing Watches Film (Danqing kan dianying 蛋清看电影), an informal screening community based in Wuhan, frequently organises screening weeks and related activities. In an environment that increasingly constrains alternative films, these informal screening communities may still offer a haven for less regulated film content and community building.

As illustrated in the case study on First International Film Festival (FIFF), regional film festivals offer for a valuable lens to explore the intricate interaction between social

actants and local government. For instance, the Pingyao Film Festival (PIFF), founded by Jia Zhangke in 2017, serves as an outstanding example to observe specific strategies developed by actants that form a localised network, often blurring the lines between the consensus of the image of social and state. The choice to focus on FIFF rather than PIFF was influenced by the former's branding as an experimental space for emerging talents, and further investigation on PIFF's role as a more prestigious film festival, not only showcasing works-in-progress by new filmmakers but also featuring international films and screenings of established works that can bring a more well-grounded image of the prevailing indie film scene.

2.5.4 Aesthetics: Selection of Films

2.5.4.1 The Relevance of Aesthetics to Industry Research

While it is uncommon to merge industry practice and aesthetic traits into one piece of research, it is crucial to incorporate an aesthetic chapter into this thesis on Chinese indie cinema for the following reasons.

First, only by intertwining industry infrastructure with the aesthetics of indie cinema in China can we truly uncover the deep-seated nuances that define Chinese indie cinema. Film aesthetics and industry practices are inseparable. The visual and auditory choices in cinema, such as cinematography, editing, and mise-en-scène, are shaped by both the filmmakers' vision and industry conventions (Perren 2012; Elsaesser 2005; Tryon 2009; Bordwell, Staiger, Thompson 1988, Zhu and Stanley 2010). Just like how it is the productions' budget constrain on lighting plan created selective lighting, which enhanced the glamour of Hollywood stars' faces and emerged as a romantic hallmark of early Hollywood films (Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 1988, 324), or how the intense spectacle and immersive audio-visual appeal in blockbuster films today are meticulously implemented by the big studios so that "the aesthetics of watching on a big screen, the desire to be overwhelmed by the cinematic image, something that watching films on home system or especially, personal computers could not match" (Tryon 2009, 59) – focusing on filmmaking and aesthetics is never an abrupt or isolated choice but a necessity, deeply intertwined with the practicalities of the craft. All three case studies in this thesis – the neon lighting in *Black Coal, Thin Ice*, the focus on everyday life in *Kaili Blues*, and the deliberate camera movements in *An Elephant Sitting Still* are prime examples of how aesthetic decisions must first be understood through the lens of filmmaking practicality, emphasizing that aesthetics and functionality in cinema are inseparable.

Actor-network theory, with its emphasis on non-human actants, offers a handy

theoretical tool to examine the aesthetics of Chinese indie cinema. By adapting the theory's focus on materiality and each and every actant—be it human or non-human—to emphasise non-diegetic cinematic elements—such as colour palette, camera movements, and props—we see how form holds power in the specific context of contemporary Chinese cinema. This perspective is significant; while an indie film's narrative inevitably adapts to state censorship or market dynamics, its formal aesthetics typically remain intact. For instance, while dialogues can be deleted, colours or background objects cannot be censored, allowing them to convey subtle messages that might bypass direct narrative expression. In this regard, whilst passing the censorship, circulating in the market, and accessible to all ordinary audience, indie cinema can be in dialogue with other contemporary scholarship on Chinese cinema, especially feature films by mainland Chinese filmmakers, whose works are analysed for the political relevance of these works: the unique aesthetics of Jia Zhangke's films, which often employ techniques like the long take and a slow cinematic pace (Mallo 2019, 175), can be understood as a form of resistance. Drawing from Mallo's interpretation of Chris Berry's insights, this style disrupts the grand narrative of progress in social realist Chinese film typical of Communist portrayals, which functions, "on one level, as an aesthetic response to the violence of speediness" (Mallo 2019, p.5-6). Similarly, films like *Lanyu* (蓝宇, dir. Stanley Kwan 关锦鹏 2001) (Eng 2010, 193) and *Summer Palace* (颐和园, dir. Lou Ye, 2006) (Zuo 2019), which depict protagonists grappling with the aftermath of political traumas, are frequently interpreted in scholarly circles with a subtext of political dissidence.

Third, focus on indie aesthetics provides a full account of the significance of the "in-between" status this cluster of indie films are bringing to the investigation of the ongoing tension between political narratives and aesthetic innovation in the contemporary Chinese cinema scene. On one hand, mainstream Chinese cinema, with its focus on state narratives,

has seen a blending of propaganda films with commercial aesthetics. In this respect, substantial body of literature, bridging academic studies and industry analyses, focuses on main-melody films (zhuxuanlü dianying 主旋律电影) and entertainment films (yule pian 娱乐片). The former, including its commercially attuned variants, is often perceived as an instrument for ideological messaging (Berry 2018; Yu 2013; Chen, Ge and Fan 2021). On the other hand, the latter, as seen in the works of Feng Xiaogang and evolving endeavours to craft blockbusters “with Chinese characteristics” (Zhang 2008, Lu 2022), is credited for its role in revitalising the Chinese film market since the 2000s. Recent trends indicate a blending of the two categories, as propaganda films, such as *My People, My Country* (Wohe wode zuguo 我和我的祖国, dir. Ning Hao, Xu Zheng 徐峥, Wen Muye 文牧野, Xue Xiaolu 薛晓路, Guan Hu 管虎, Zhang Yibai 张一白, and Chen Kaige 陈凯歌), adopt more commercial film aesthetics, including intricate plots and emotionally resonant characters. This fusion is underscored in the *Report on Chinese Film Art* (2017), where *Operation Mekong* (Meigonghe xingdong 湄公河行动, dir. Dante Lam 林超贤) is praised not just as a typical main melody film but as a refined genre film that “emphasises the individuality of the protagonists” (China Film Association 2017, 3).

In this respect, close text analysis on Chinese indie cinema offers a unique counter-narratives challenging state-approved stories, using aesthetic choices as a form of resistance. Different from the more direct political significance a substantial body of Chinese independent films carry, the form of resistance, as I touched upon in the political significance of Chinese indie cinema earlier, is subtler and is much easier for many Chinese film audience to find, either in a cinema or through online streaming. By exploring the aesthetics of these films and connecting them with how the film industry operates, we can better understand the unique “in-between” position these films hold, and understand that their vulnerability to state

regulation, the market, and audience make them an indispensable lens to observe a more wholesome picture of contemporary Chinese cinema.

To underscore the significance of negative affect in Chinese indie films, the coming sections clarifies its background, providing a unique perspective on the state's increasing influence over emotional landscapes. While official narratives keep implementing plastic, propagandistic “happy feelings” from promoting a “harmonious society” to “telling a story well”, the presence of negative affect in this thesis tell a different version of story about today's China.

2.5.4.2 Selection of Films

Drawing on Actor-Network Theory (ANT), this thesis aims to dissect the aesthetic dimensions of indie films, revealing the complex relational web that informs cinematic portrayals. My decision to analyse *Black Coal, Thin Ice*, *An Elephant Sitting Still*, and *Kaili Blue* is guided by their unique aesthetic characteristics, and their crucial ties within the indie cinema scene.

In the first case study on *Black Coal, Thin Ice*, a 2015 thriller film by Diao Yinan, the complexities and nuances of the emerging Chinese indie network are brought to light. Unlike the other two case studies, which are both produced and distributed by actants who are active within the indie network, *Black Coal, Thin Ice* was produced by Omnijoi (xingfu lanhai 幸福蓝海), a large film corporate which affiliated with Jiangsu TV, a state-owned TV channel. This chance collaboration between indie filmmakers and major production companies in China not only demonstrates the interest of larger corporations in the indie film scene, but also provides an opportunity to observe how, even within a corporately produced film, the nuances, sensibilities, and storytelling methods of a well-acknowledged independent feature filmmaker are preserved and brought to the fore, thereby further substantialise our understanding of indie cinema in a Chinese context, particularly its intricate relationship with the previous independent scene.

More specifically, by examining the film's prevalent use of the neon lighting colour palette, I illustrate how the choice of colour introduces an affect of dysphoria — an unsettling, uneasy feeling, which is palpable in both the icy winter backdrop of Harbin City and the protagonists' desperate search, driven by desire for love and meaning. The rationale for choosing the film is threefold. First, being produced by as a filmmaker whose work has marked the height of contemporary Chinese independent feature filmmaking, Diao's commercial success announced indie cinema's potential in the Chinese film industry. Second,

an interview with Diao Yinan on the transition between independent and indie film provides a unique account of the actants who went through this transition and therefore offers insight into what indie and independent mean in a Chinese context. Third, the film's aesthetic choice, which is also the production choice of accenting neon light as a non-human actant, accentuates the pervasive themes of alienation and dysphoria, and acts as a bridge between the cinematic and the real without leaning on plot or narrative – elements that can be easily compromised because of state censorship.

In the second case study, I focus on *An Elephant Sitting Still*, Hu Bo's 233-minute film. Delving into the film's distinct, monotonous cinematography — especially in terms of camera movement and framing — this case study aims to illustrate how as a non-human actant, the camera presses human characters onto a flattened background and reveals the traces of despair. Initially titled *The Golden Yarn* (Jin Yangmao 金羊毛) and showcased at the FIRST International Film Festival in 2016, it caught the attention of Dongchun Films, owned by Wang Xiaoshuai. Its distribution was managed by Redience, an indie distribution company examined in the distribution chapter. Importantly, *An Elephant Sitting Still* offers unique insight into the vulnerabilities of China's emerging indie network. The film unveils the often underrepresented and challenging dynamics between the production company and filmmakers, particularly when the latter are controlled by an esteemed industry figure. These relationships, often shrouded in silence due to the industry's reticence to discuss failures or conflicts, come to the fore in the case of this film. As a central actant in this narrative, the power disparity between the production company and the filmmakers led to fervent disputes over the film's ultimate version.

The third case study focuses on the affect of melancholy and everyday objects as non-human actants in *Kaili Blues*, a film directed by Bi Gan. Produced by the indie company Black Fin with an initial budget of ¥ 20k (approximately £3000), the film not only got

recognition from global film festivals but also marked a pivotal point in Bi Gan's journey as an acclaimed filmmaker. This choice of case study is justified by the film's link to Black Fin, a significant player in the indie film industry, and its role in carving out spaces for alternative aesthetics within Chinese cinema. The film captures the transformative nature of melancholy, turning a traditionally negative emotion into an interpretative open space for contemplation and reimagination. In the context of contemporary China, the film offers a nuanced intersection of historical events with personal memories, showcasing a compelling cinematic portrayal of remembrance and underscores the significance of indie cinema in reshaping conventional interpretations of historical events such as cultural revolution.

The main rationale for selecting the case studies in the aesthetics chapter is to spotlight non-human actants, specifically cinematic elements that influence, yet remain independent from the narrative of a film. Even when indie films from mainland China inevitably makes alterations to satisfy censorship norms, non-diegetic elements such as colour palettes, camera movements, and props largely remain untouched. Alongside these elements, subtle affects such as dysphoria, despair, and melancholy persist. These understated negative affects neither align with the "positive energy" promoted by the state nor with the traditionally uplifting and cathartic emotions that mainstream films often use to engage their audiences. Their uniqueness not only provides a fresh insight into the undocumented collective emotions of everyday life in contemporary China but also positions Chinese cinema within broader academic discourses on affect.

In light of this, the three case studies can be taken as a start of a series of on-going investigation to read Chinese films in their forms. One direction of future research could be a more quantitative approach to selected films. For example, future research could break a film into quantifiable metrics like the Average Shot Length (ASL), the frequency of long, medium, or close shots, among others. This data-driven lens could be accompanied by noting

other elements such as non-diegetic sounds and identifying recurrent motifs in choices of colour settings. By revealing both intentional and unintentional aesthetic strategies, reading Chinese indie film in form offers a more open way to get access to Chinese cinema.

2.6 Contributions and Limitations

2.6.1 Contributions

First, this thesis provides a valuable account of a brief, but nevertheless crucial moment in the history of Chinese film where alternative film practice burgeons and even strives to become a consistent part of a more diverse film industry. Unlike previous research on indie cinema in China (Song 2009), which borrows the concept of “indie” directly from its original context as a means of alternative production out of the studio system and applies it to a Chinese context, my conceptualisation of Chinese indie is conducted by identifying an activated network that is maintained by a variety of actants who work relentlessly to maximise their own interests and stay enacted through political impediment in PRC China and the market constraints. Therefore, my thesis largely enriches the ongoing academic discourse on the role private film companies and private sectors play in shaping the industry landscape and alternative film culture in contemporary China.

Second, methodologically, aside from one piece of research by Seio Nakajima, who examined the network of Chinese independent film consumption in Beijing (2013), my thesis is the first theoretical attempt to trace the emerging and developing indie scene in China via the lens of actor-network theory. Application of actor-network theory to my examination of indie cinema in China allows me to follow the key actants who proactively making the scene and observe the specific strategies and tactics they develop.

Third, during my fieldwork in China during 2019, I visited different cities in China and conducted interviews with the industry insiders who are involved in the making of the indie scene. The interview transcripts which I include in this thesis (see Appendix 1 and 2) serve as the primary sources to the evolving Chinese industry.

Fourth, this thesis contributes to the larger literature of the application of actor-network theory in film studies, in dialogue with Sonnenberg-Schrank’s theatrical contribution

of introducing genre conventions as one of the non-human actants, I provide in-depth close analysis of how to apply ANT to explore the ways in which non-human actants such as lighting, cameras, and objects shape the final aesthetics of Chinese indie films and contribute to the construction of negative affects that allow these films to dodge censorship and contest the state's propaganda of harmony.

2.6.2 Limitations

First, because of the sudden start of the Covid-19 pandemic in China since early 2020, I did not manage to go back to China for the follow-up fieldwork as planned. This change of plans has affected my writings on the production and distribution companies as I did not manage to conduct research on the roles that non-human actants, including offices, shooting equipment, meeting rooms, and human actants like editors, camera men, and actors, play in forming the production and distribution network. Still, I was able to pick up cues, for example, how some of my interviewees who own small indie companies have a very small office which they only go to when meeting with clients; or how camera men borrow from and lend their equipment to friends. In Chapter 4, I did include interviews of cinematographers and their contributions to the filmmaking process, as well ANT analysis on the relationship between indie aesthetics and the moves that non-human actants make. Nevertheless, there exists a gap between my aim to conduct research on indie as an emerging network which is co-activated by both human and actants and my final presentation of the case. This gap opens up a space for further inquiry in the future.

Second, although I prepared myself for the potential difficulties of conducting fieldwork in China, I still felt frustrated because by the reluctance of human actants' reluctance to speak freely with me. As I have noted elsewhere in this thesis, in a space which is regulated by the state and increasingly driven by the market, it is becoming much more

difficult to mobilise interviewees to speak frankly about issues that might risk their business interests. This limitation I encountered during my fieldwork provides a good demonstration of the issues a researcher might encounter when she chooses actor-network as a methodology. My case demonstrates how taking the social sphere as a construction site in which things are coming into being can be both an exciting and a daunting prospect, as it raises the core question: what if the research fails?

On the third day of my fieldwork, I decided to change my strategy for following the actants and modified my interview scripts to a less structured format. In this way, I ensured that the interviewees could take detours from prepared interview questions until they felt comfortable enough to talk about what they deemed to be most relevant to my research on indie cinema. This way, I made sure that the interviewees were not addressed in ways merely intended to confirm or conform to pre-existing theories or my own presumptions of what indie cinema means in a Chinese context.

I have retained these scenarios of evasion and deflection exactly as they occurred. They were painful moments. However, according to Latour, in order to get a full account of the network, we have to “take all the uncertainties, hesitations, dislocations, and puzzlements as our foundation” (2005, 47). In retrospect, what tortured me during my interviews – namely, the silence, and sometimes even suspicion or mild hostility of the actants – ultimately contributes to the larger literature of the application of ANT in a non-Western context, as my research does not simply follow the actants to see what they do. It also presents a valuable case study of following what they do not say and do not do. To supplement my fieldwork, I have also accessed and reference a large amount of internet archives, public interviews, and industry reports, all of which have provided even more nuance to the analysis of indie cinema in contemporary China.

Chapter 3 Indie Production Companies as Hubs

Situated within the broader literature on the contemporary Chinese film industry (Zhu and Stanley 2010, Su 2016, Meyer-clement 2016, Nakajima 2013, Wing-Fai and Sangjoon 2019, Kokas 2017), this chapter examines three indie production companies - Heaven Pictures, Black Fin and Factory Gate. Found in mainland China after 2009, these three small film companies are the first waves of small private film companies specialising in bringing low budget films with alternative aesthetics off the ground. In this chapter, I ask two main research questions: First, who are the actants that are making indie films? Second, secondly, in a market setting, where business is business, how is it sustainable to maintain the circulation of indie films as a lucrative business?

Although indie films as a not-so-neatly defined concept²⁰ have seen an increased amount of academic interest in recent years,²¹ my attention is drawn to fact that the productions of these films have been somehow off the scholarship radar. I found there are two explanations for the absence of research on indie film production and circulation. Firstly, due to their low budget and the small market share that they acquire, indie films are

²⁰ I define the term “indie” in the first chapter of my dissertation. Here, I use the term “indie film” in reference to a cluster of feature film circulating in the domestic market in mainland China.

²¹ Two articles, Chris Berry’s “The Death of Independent Chinese Film?” (2017) and Li Yang 李阳’s article “Xin duli dianying de shidai daole 新独立电影的时代到了” [It’s the Era for New Chinese Independent Film] (2018) lay out the general scope of the inquiry by both spotting the change from independent filmmaking to a way of filmmaking that is within the system but is still distinguishable from conventional mainstream filmmaking (the difference between the two articles is that Yang’s is less direct as it is circulated on mainstream media in mainland China, and Berry’s focuses more on dissidence and the changing distribution channel in general). Furthermore, films such as *Kaili Blues* or *Tharlo* (Taluo 塔洛, dir. Pema Tsenden 万玛才旦, 2015) have been individually picked up and analysed for their aesthetic traits (Berry 2016). However, the definition of “indie”, particularly from an industry perspective, remains fuzzy. Borrowing G. Andrew Stuckey’s observation in *Metacinema in Contemporary Chinese Film* (2018), different terms have been applied to describe the cinematic scene in contemporary China since the 1990s, however, “None of these terms is entirely satisfying because none of them fully encompasses the variety of filmmakers or the films they have produced over the past two dozen years.” (79). I use the term “indie film” here to distinguish my research subject, which is a cluster of feature films made with a low budget and have aesthetic and social significance but are still legally made and circulate within the system of the PRC regime. The term “independent film” in this chapter refers to a filmmaking movement which lasted for nearly two decades in China from 1990s to early 2010 (see chapter 1).

statistically insignificant when considered within the entire purview of major industry-oriented research. Although a few indie films have proven through their commercial success to be exceptions researchers are driven towards films that are considered to have more commercial impact and potential political influence.²² Secondly, first-hand accounts from within these indie film production companies have been relatively difficult to gain access to. This is partly because most of the film practitioners engaged in operating companies dedicated to indie filmmaking have preferred to remain more low-key and discreet – that is, instead of talking about indie filmmaking, they have preferred to work quietly on their craft. These industry insiders acknowledge that what they do has been difficult not only because the films they make are walking the line of the grey area of state consent, but also how small in numbers these films are. “I am very aware that the so-called blooming is merely an illusion”, as Wang Zijian 王子剑, CEO of a Chinese indie film company frankly described in one of the interviews. Citing Wang in an interview conducted with Deep Focus in 2017, the journey for indie filmmaking in China has just started,

“We can only say that there have been a larger art film audience who would go to the cinema than before, but it’s far from being a game changer. When we swipe around the friend circle on WeChat²³ and see that everyone seems to be talking about the same film or event, we tend to get the feeling that it’s everything. The [discussion of the] film remains in the friend circle (*pengyouquan* 朋友圈), yet we think the

²² According to the annual industry report (2015) published by the Chinese Film association (Zhongguo dianyingjia xiehui 中国电影家协会), films such as *Kaili Blues*, which are categorized as “art films” (*yishudianying* 艺术电影), occupied merely 2% of the overall box office that year. It is, therefore, not easy for industry-oriented research to give “art films” enough attention as the commercial success is never statistically significant.

²³ Friend Circle (*pengyouquan* 朋友圈) is a social feature developed by the widely popular Chinese social app WeChat (*weixin* 微信), which is similar to a hybrid of Facebook and Twitter.

whole world is talking about it. All you have to do is go out of your room, talk to the cashier at the supermarket downstairs for a bit, and then you realise how insignificant you are, as that is the real world, that is the reality”.²⁴

Wang’s account not only resonates with the industry-focused observation that indie filmmaking is something observable yet very small in scale in contemporary China, but it also highlighted that there exists a massive gap between the “cinema world” (*dianying shijie* 电影世界), which exists primarily on the internet as a digital community of people with shared interests in film, and the “real world” (*zhenshi shijie* 真实世界), the Chinese population more broadly, where the majority do not necessarily care for indie films, nor engage in any substantial discussion of films in general.

Why is looking at these indie film companies important? I found there are four reasons why it is necessary to tackle indie filmmaking in mainland China. First, I argue that indie film production is a further development of private film companies in contemporary China since the early 2000s. In other words, indie film production companies resulted from a nearly two decade-long period whereby the opening up of the film market to private investment significantly lowered the barriers to entry into the world of filmmaking and distribution in mainland China. In this regard, if Yomi Braester’s comment on the Hundred Flowers Campaign of 1956–7 is correct – that the movement has provided a failed thinking experiment of how intellectuals could engage in academic cinematic discourses without holding back within the then existing communist regime (Braester 2015) – then my chapter on indie film production company can be similarly taken as a thought experiment of the

²⁴ “Shenjiao and Wang Zijian: Zhongguo dianying hui shengzhang chu xinde yiyi lai 深焦×王子剑：中国电影会生长出新的意义来” [Deepfocus with Wang Zijian: New Meaning Will Grow Out of Chinese Cinema]. Last modified October 5, 2017. https://www.sohu.com/a/196320033_758090. (accessed November 25, 2019)

potential to make films that aesthetically resist complete conformity to mainstream norms and avoid succumbing entirely to censorship or self-censorship in the context of an authoritarian regime. In sense, it serves as an exploration on the feasibility of producing films that challenge the status quo and uphold artistic freedom even under restrictive circumstances. To do that, I answer the question, “what happens to filmmaking in contemporary China if the law and censorship do not completely prevent filmmakers from finding ways to make the films they want?” Second, I found there is a very close link between independent filmmaking and indie filmmaking with regard to the filmmakers and practitioners involved. In brief, while Chinese independent film has generally been understood as an alternative filmmaking movement imbued with political connotations, indie filmmaking entails a cluster of filmmakers, also labelled as “independent filmmakers”, who do not engage politically in their films. More importantly, at a strange time when most of the independent filmmaking practice and exhibitions have been either completely halted or hugely compromised,²⁵ the indie film circuit remains steady and therefore is much more accessible for general audiences.

An examination of the relationship between indie filmmaking and practitioners who used to be involved in independent filmmaking enriches the understanding of independent filmmaking in contemporary China as a residual or still-ongoing movement. Third, the industry perspective I deploy adds a practical dimension to the larger discourse of “what does it mean to be indie in contemporary China?”, a crucial question raised by, but not fully answered in Chris Berry’s influential article, “The Death of Chinese Independent Cinema?”

²⁵ Independent film festivals in Beijing and Nanjing, which have been playing an important role in exhibiting alternative filmmaking in China since the early 2000s, have been shut down by the government since 2013 (Cui 2014, Zhang 2013). That said, screenings of independently made films have not completely disappeared in China, as influential individuals such as Wu Wenguang 吴文光 and Zhang Xianmin 张献民 are still arranging screenings in mainland China.

(2017). My choice of prioritising an industry approach in this chapter is based on my understanding that the very definition of “indie” is not fully theoretically constructed. That is, “indie” is not merely an indication of whether a film has any particular distinct aesthetic trait. How the term is defined and understood is also largely dependent upon how it is used in practice. In other words, how the concept “indie cinema” is used in a Chinese context largely depends on how industry insiders frame it, how the media writes about it and what the audiences been expecting from it. With respect to this, I disagree with an approach taken by previous research to define Chinese indie film by bluntly implementing a Hollywood approach, which divides independent and non-dependent filmmaking solely based on whether films are produced by major studios (Song 2009). I find not only that the concept of “independent” in a Chinese context is too different (in terms of the industry structure) and too nuanced (in terms of the social and political implication) to be simplified as merely being financially independent from the industry giants, but also that the very definition of indie film based on a division between majors and non-majors is no longer even applicable in its initial Hollywood context anymore. Fourth, I found that looking at these indie film companies as well as the distribution channels provides an alternative understanding of how a certain production mode of filmmaking and a certain form of aesthetics affect and complement each other. Therefore, looking at how indie films are produced helps to further understand the intricacy between film production, distribution and aesthetics, which will be discussed in the following chapters.

What is the best way to look at these indie film production companies in contemporary China without simplifying them as normal film production companies that are merely smaller in scale? Ideally, the way to study indie film production companies should preserve all the intricacies of the industry, ranging from how these companies survive by keeping the budget low, how they attract filmmakers to collaborate with them, how they

promote themselves with a limited budget, and, ultimately, how they dance between the lines drawn by not only state censorship, but also how they meet the expectations of the market and the audience. These crucial aspects concerning the survival of a Chinese indie film company can hardly be found in any industry handbook or archival policy: policies and rules only sketch out the boundaries, whereas manoeuvring within the boundary always happens and this is particularly relevant when it comes to the research subject of this dissertation. It is true that these indie film companies are operating within the system and thus must make compromises within all the rules. However, it is important to keep in mind that these film companies are aiming to make films which are, in short, “alternative”; and they are “alternative” in the sense that they are films the system tolerates but does not endorse, and that are liked by some of the audience but not favoured by the majority.

I propose the concept of “hub”²⁶ to understand indie film companies in a Chinese context with the purpose of emphasising the agency of indie film companies and their various manoeuvrings within the system in the process of film production. That is, if “indie film company” refers to the specific type of film companies as static, legal entities, “hubs”, by its literal definition, implies dynamism and, more importantly, the capacity to utilise and organise resources proactively and strategically. Therefore, applying the conceptualisation of hub means that the emphasis shifts away from the narrowly defined “company” to the manoeuvrings of companies within the system, and to the interactions between and within the companies in the production of independent films. It provides a different “mental-map” of seeing the Chinese cinematic scene as a meaning-making process and a broader space in which a collection of different entities manoeuvre themselves and connect to each other

²⁶ Hubs, according to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary (Merriam-Webster, n.d), refers to (1) the central and most active part or place; (2) the airport or the city through which an airline sends most of its flight; (3) the centre of a wheel, propeller, fan, etc. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hub> (accessed 1 January 2018).

locally, nationally, and internationally.

My conceptualisation of hub is inspired by the idea of the site, which is proposed in the edited volume, *Chinese Film Festivals – Sites of Translation* (Berry and Robinson 2017). Film festivals as sites, as various contributors of the edited volume have highlighted, function as more than a vessel that plainly gathers, presents and exchanges resources. As sites, they serve as a locale that not only “create[s] the conditions of possibility for the exchange of knowledge and experience” (Iordanova 2017, 233), but more importantly, as Ming-yeh T. Rawnsley articulates in her paper on the Golden Harvest Award in Taiwan, film festivals serve as negotiation sites where different actors engage with each other and “contest, translate and integrate a variety of cultural values and film practices through power interplay under different circumstances” (Rawnsley 2017, 73).

However, “hub” is different still from the idea of “site” because of its self-positioning as a production hotspot. While a site is a platform that hosts exchange, a hub provides the content to be hosted and exchanged. Because it is creating rather than hosting, “hub” implies an entity or cluster of entities that are therefore needing to be simultaneously more proactive and reactive in their functions. Positioning themselves at the very frontier of the production line, hubs take higher risks. That is, they deal with much more uncertainty and face less predictable scenarios, and they die if they fail either the task of production or exhibition. Thus, a hub, as its dictionary definition indicates, is where the central activities take place. In the specific context of the film industry, there is nothing more central than the activity of getting a film made. Thus, I argue that seeing indie film companies as hubs contributes to a different mental landscape for the contemporary film industry. Hub as a concept in this chapter is not only applied to explain how film companies’ function, but more importantly, it foregrounds the network in which they animate themselves. Elaborating on the concept of hub provides an alternative way to look at how indie filmmaking anchors itself within the

Chinese film industry, not as a form of passive side-product which merely complies with the state regulation and market rule, but as an organic part of the industry that is actively involved in the processes of their own growth, and in the dissemination and circulation of their own products via various channels that they can deploy. In light of this, the chapter will be focusing on three case studies of indie film companies -Heaven Pictures, Black Fin, and Factory Gate based in mainland China from 2009 and 2019. Travelling through these three film companies in a chronological order, I argue that despite the grim reality where state control, market demands, and audience expectations have laid siege to the space for creativity and freedom in film production, existing factors such as the acceleration of commercialisation and the decentralisation of state control over the film industry since the early 1990s, as well as the subsequent expansion of the talent pool, have nonetheless laid the foundation for indie film production to be circulated in a market setting, therefore making it accessible to a larger audience.

3.1 Heaven Pictures

“I entered the room for about five minutes, and he told me that he would invest [in] my film.” The entrepreneur told Hao Jie, “Go and set up a film company. Find other filmmakers like you. You guys do it together.” - Hao Jie, in-house indie filmmaker of Heaven Picture in an interview in 2014 (N.A. 2014)

The film Hao Jie 郝杰 talked about here was his feature debut, *Single Man* (Guanggun 光棍, dir. Hao Jie 郝杰, 2010), a film about a group of older men in a village in north-east China who had figured out a way to “purchase” a shared “wife” to satisfy their long, unresolved sexual frustration. The film company, Heaven Pictures, was founded in 2009. Until 2019, the film company collaborated with various filmmakers and produced 18 films. The founding of the company, as noted by Hao Jie, did not comply with the rules of how a film company should usually be understood, as the operation of Heaven Pictures has been heavily reliant upon the existence of philanthropy in the film industry. Therefore, the initial (and natural) research question of how indie companies stay lucrative enough is challenged, as what can be observed in the case of Heaven Pictures is that, although it operates as a company, the way it is funded does not completely comply with market rules. This deviation from market rules affirmed what I proposed in the Introduction: that to introduce the concept of “hub” into the study of indie film companies in China is to implement a mental map where unique factors that form and facilitate a particular form of circulation can be addressed. In the case of Heaven Pictures, a further question can be posed: what has driven the philanthropic contributions to this particular mode of indie filmmaking?

Before answering this question, it is necessary to briefly lay out the situation of private film companies in mainland China with the larger picture of the Chinese film industry

in the background. According to the updated version of the CCP's official film regulations, 2001 became the year when private film companies in mainland China were able to make films by themselves without needing to collaborate with state-owned studios, whether that collaboration was real or merely enacted on paper (The State Council PRC 2001). However, a booming film industry did not leave much space for smaller film companies to compete and thrive. In fact, scholarship mainly uses the term "private film company" to refer to film conglomerates owned by private capital, such as Huayi Brothers or Wanda Films (Song 2009, Zhang 2008). As one of the few scholars who studies small private film companies in mainland China, Elena Meyer-Clement has noted in *Party Hegemony and Entrepreneurial Power in China* (2016) that smaller film companies actually struggled through the further privatisation of the film market, because both commercial and state funding favoured either bigger film companies that produced higher-budget films, or companies that produced films more in line with state propaganda (107). As a result, Meyer-Clement observed the following:

deep splits have emerged between those who are willing to adapt their production choices to censorship rules and the prevailing cinematic taste of the audience for the sake of producing within the system and realizing profits in the domestic market, and those who are unwilling to subordinate their production choices to political boundaries and, whether volitionally or with a sense of coercion, produce films mainly for foreign film festivals." (Meyer-Clemente 2016, 203).

In a sense, Chris Berry's article (2017) on the aftermath of the withering independent film scene in mainland China is a further elaboration on the split Meyer-Clement described, where different distribution and exhibition channels were created for filmmakers who, using Meyer-Clemente's description, were either "willing to adapt" or "unwilling to subordinate".

While I am mostly aligned with Meyer-Clement on the general survival strategies the small film companies have been taking – for example, allying with state-owned entities – my research posits that what really happens to these smaller film companies in mainland China is much more complex than the binary of yield to state control or go against it. To be precise, to be “quasi-within the system” does not necessarily mean complete subordination, nor is the alternative to rebel completely against the system. All three indie film companies studied in this chapter have been operating in such a way that they conform to the system to the degree that everything is legal, but that they also persistently and stubbornly remain in an “in-between” space – a space where everything is subjugated to the law, yet neither completely yields to state-promulgated ideology nor simply aims to satisfy market demand. I found this “in-between” space meaningful as it opens up a much more nuanced way of understanding what it means to make and distribute films within the PRC regime. However, an investigation into this “in-between” space is only possible when a dualistic “within the system” (*tizhinei* 体制内) vs “outside the system” (*tizhiwai* 体制外) paradigm is cast aside, and the conceptualisation of “hubs” can be applied. Based on my findings, by utilising philanthropic support, Heaven Pictures, as an exceptional case within the overall picture of the film industry, activates itself by maximising resources and making strategies to leverage different connections both within and outside the state system. By doing so, Heaven Pictures as an indie hub preserves a part of the legacy of the independent film period. It dips into the mainland film market, transforming the “independent spirit” (*dulijingshen* 独立精神) into a more subordinated environment after the independent movement itself was coerced.

Heaven Pictures played a significant role in the Chinese independent film scene by positioning itself as a hub that closely connected with the formerly “underground” talents and practitioners. Since 2009, the company has been a major sponsor of independent film

festivals in China and has provided seed funding for independent filmmakers starting from 2010. Not only has it been one of the main sponsors of independent film festivals in China since 2009, but it has also been providing seed funding for independent filmmakers from 2010. The Heaven Pictures Film Foundation, which was a yearly grant dedicated to aiding young filmmakers produce their films, was set up to “encourage and assist the free and explorative cinematic expression by young Chinese filmmakers. Besides this, it is dedicated to the promotion, critique of, and research into Chinese independent cinema”²⁷. The Foundation moved to a semi-underground state at the beginning of 2013. “The environment in which the Foundation could exist has changed now and we will end the operations of the Foundation soon,” posted Zhang Xianmin, a professor at the Chinese Film Institute who was also one of the main figures for independent Chinese cinema as a movement. Zhang wrote, “To the fellow filmmakers who wish to apply for the grant this year, please don’t misunderstand or lose faith. Although the [Heaven Pictures] Foundation (*Tianhuahuatian jijin* 天画画天基金) will be gone, we will keep the work going as it is now”.²⁸ Looking back, two short descriptions of the Heaven Pictures Foundation stand out for their archival value, and for how it recorded a time when there was no need to be cautious around wording such as “Chinese independent cinema”. As I illustrate later, compared to other indie hubs, Heaven Pictures was the first, and allegedly the only, indie film company that addressed Chinese independent cinema directly.

²⁷ Zhang, Xianmin 张献民. “Huatian jijin disan nian 画天基金第三年” [the third year of Heaven Pictures Foundation]. last modified July 24 2012, http://blog.sina.cn/dpool/blog/s/blog_474b3e2a01017e19.html. (accessed April 7, 2018)

²⁸ Zhang Xianmin 张献民. “Duli dianying jijin jijiang gengming 独立电影基金即将更名” [Independent Film Foundation Will be Renamed]. last modified 4 January 2013. http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_474b3e2a0101eq3t.html. (accessed 15 June, 2018)

3.1.1 Philanthropy and Sentiment: Donors and Filmmakers

The operation of Heaven Pictures cannot be entirely explained by market rules. This is not only due to its intricate connection to the previous independent cinema scene but also because it heavily relies on philanthropic support as a film company. These factors together make its functioning distinct from conventional market-oriented approaches.

It is not new for philanthropy to play a powerful role in the film industry. In a recent piece of writing on the backstage story of *American Factory* (dir. Julia Reichert and Steven Bognar, 2020), a documentary film on the story between a Chinese billionaire and local workers in Ohio, Vincent Stehle addressed what the alliance between philanthropy and film production could bring to society (Stehle 2020). In the Chinese film industry, however, philanthropy has never been discussed at length. It has not been given enough credit, and the role it plays in the development of the Chinese film market has been seriously underestimated. Without philanthropy, it would be difficult to imagine how many film projects would have ended before the actual production phase began.

I found during my fieldwork that one reason why philanthropy has not been widely discussed in any academic work is because social actants themselves decide to stay quiet, low-key and mysterious about it. In the film industry, philanthropists sponsor film magazines. They buy the ownership of film festivals. They grant the last couple of millions needed to produce a film that few even see as profitable. The influence of their deeds is significant enough that they establish direct relationships with high-ranking film bureau officers. As put by one of the interviewees, who used to work for just such a billionaire, that in the entire Chinese film industry, every person feels as though they owe his boss a huge favour because of how much money he has invested in the industry infrastructure: “The head of the Chinese film at the time told my boss, ‘whatever you want to do, we will support you unconditionally.’” The names of the philanthropists as such would be buzzing around dinner

tables and tales about them exchanged among tipsy industry insiders. However, they remain faceless. As one of my interviewees described:

Everyone is different. I cannot tell you more than that. I cannot give you their names. However, they have two things in common: first, they are all super rich. Second, they have some sense of sentiment (*qinghuai* 情怀). These are the only two traits they share. All the other aspects vary. Some of them are in the real estate business; some of them work in finance; some of them are *nouveaux riches*. They can be of all different ages, men or women, but what really links them is them being rich. You cannot afford to play this game without being mega rich anyway. (#anonymous informant)

Heaven Pictures might be one of the very rare cases in which the story of their philanthropic backing received media coverage. In 2014, an interview article²⁹ sketched out a mysterious philanthropist who was only known as a former film projectionist who, in his youth during the time of the “Down to the Countryside Movement” (*shangshan xiaxiang* 上山下乡), travelled from village to village to screen films to the locals. After great success in finance and the real estate business, he supported Hao Jie and came up with the idea of setting up Heaven Pictures, which he envisioned to be a film company specialised in making low budget films known for their distinct personal touch. Aside from being the key person behind Heaven Pictures, “the Entrepreneur”, as the philanthropist prefers to be known, has

²⁹ “Jiemi tianhuahuatian: ba dianying dangcishanzuo sannian chupin 10 bu dianying 揭秘天画画天：把电影当慈善做 三年出品 10 部电影” [Backstage with Heaven Pictures: Filmmaking as Philanthropy, 10 Films in 3 Years], last modified October 31 2014, <https://app.dianyingjie.com/?app=article&controller=article&action=show&contentid=1996>. (accessed February 12, 2017)

also often involved himself in charity events, such as supporting the national Film Critics Association and other film-related projects. Similar accounts have repetitively reappeared in my fieldwork when it comes to people who share a life trajectory like “the Entrepreneur”. Different accounts all pointed to a keyword: namely, sentiment.

According to other accounts as well as the description in the interview above, sentiment is the main motivator that drives philanthropists to invest a sizeable amount of money into something that is very unlikely to be profitable. One of the interviewees summarised the motivation behind this kind of behaviour, which escapes the rule of the market jungle, as their “love for film”. In their words:

[The] film industry feeds itself on love. It is never short of investment. Most of the money that comes ends up being washed away. Gone. However, why are there always people striving to make films? Why are there always people doing that? That is because people have the sentiment for it. People want to get the stories they like made. There will of course be other aims. Beautiful actresses, right? If you have the assets to enter that circle, if your income is more than millions per day, you will not care either. Because that amount of money does not concern you. Hollywood is like this. And it will always be like this. Countless rich people are willing to throw their money at films. Because it will have their name on it. It will be something which passes on. Think about it! If the film happens to be a success, it will have your name on it! (#anonymous informant)

Here, I am by no means romanticising what philanthropy entails in the larger picture of the Chinese film industry. There must be other much less idealistic or altruistic reasons for

why the philanthropic deeds are done. Nonetheless, a sense of sentiment is unquestionably shared by numerous faceless figures who are in their mid-fifties and above. The question then is, where does this sense of sentiment for film come from? Interestingly, one answer is provided by Yang Cheng, one of the former executive managers of Heaven Pictures, who directs us to a much earlier period of time before the market mechanism took over. “[T]he older generation have been much more prioritising the cultural value of a film” stated Yang Cheng in one of the interviews, and “this is very different from the newer generation of investors who only prioritise the commercial value.”³⁰ Although the argument could be made that Yang’s comment served to flatter generous company donors with deep pockets, I argue that what he describes as the sentiment of the “older generation” in the context of philanthropy highlights a sense of idealism and a form of continuity that links today’s film market to a pre-privatisation and pre-marketisation era when the film industry was not profit-driven and was completely run on the basis of a state monopoly – a time when film and literature were able to inherit certain meanings and values that other activities do not have. One of the interviewees, who worked for one of the philanthropists for years, described sentiment as a sense of nostalgic feeling or a dream one had not achieved when one was young:

Before becoming extremely successful in the business world, my boss used to serve in the army. One time, he was awarded a third-class medal for winning a shooting competition. He was very proud of himself until one day he found out that his roommate was awarded a higher-class medal for writing a poem. A poem counts

³⁰ “Jiemi tianhuahuatian: ba dianying dangcishanzuo sannian chupin 10 bu dianying 揭秘天画画天：把电影当慈善做 三年出品 10 部电影” [Backstage with Heaven Pictures: Filmmaking as Philanthropy, 10 Films in 3 Years], last modified October 31 2014, <https://app.dianyingjie.com/?app=article&controller=article&action=show&contentid=1996>. (accessed February 12, 2017)

much more than shooting bullets! It shocked him to the very core. Since then, he has always been having this idea that culture is better. He has been a bit fan of the *Shaolin* film series and watched those films for a thousand times in the 80s. The first thing he did after he got successful was to hire the exactly same director to make a tv show out of the same subject” (Anonymous informant#).

Considering Bourdieu’s theoretical perspective on the functioning of intangible assets such as taste, education, and intellectual pursuits as means to exert power in the social sphere (1986), one could interpret the aforementioned anecdote as an expression of an individual’s desire to attain a form of cultural capital. However, it is worth noting that even Bourdieu’s theory may not fully capture or explain the extent of his dedication. In fact, he “lost so much money that films broke his heart” (#anonymous informant). Nevertheless, the sentiment of the entrepreneur persists and finds expression through his financial support of Heaven Pictures as a film company.

In today’s China, the observation of sentiment in indie film production contributes significantly to our understanding of the logic of contemporary Chinese film industry. While the role of individual devotion and idealism in filmmaking remains universal, this particular observation showcases the remarkable strength of filmmakers who resist the challenges arising from a nascent and less regulated market, a lack of state seed funding, and diverse audience expectations. Through the lens of actor-network theory, which emphasises focusing on the real moves of the key actants, we gain deeper insights into the distinct characteristics and dynamics of the emerging Chinese indie scene that may not be readily apparent in overarching industry reports.

The encounter between the entrepreneur and the filmmaker encapsulates a convergence of sentiment among various actants involved, fuelled by the entrepreneur’s love

for film and the filmmaker's unwavering determination to bring their visionary ideas to life.

If this nearly irrational sentiment, as earlier stated by Yang Cheng, the manager of Heaven Picture, finds its origins in a deep-rooted sense of idealism that emerged during a bygone era in socialist China. Back then, the film industry adhered to a structure centred around state control, where profit was not a driving force in decision-making processes, then the filmmakers' drive to get their first film made, as noted by one of the interviewees, is motivated by factors that extend beyond practical reasons or economic considerations:

It does not make any economic sense. But why would these people want to make films like that? Because they have not been thinking questions such as "oh, who will watch my film?" They just really want to make their films. And then there you go. They are stubborn enough to go for this all-or-none game. (#anonymous informant)

In short, neither where the money comes from nor the motivation for indie filmmakers to make their films, especially the debut ones, can be fully explained by market rules or as noted by Meyer-Clement, "the prevailing cinematic taste of the audience" (2016, 203) since there have always been filmmakers who have their own stories that they are so desperate to tell. Besides, cases of different filmmakers, from Yang Jin 杨瑾 to Li Ruijun to Bi Gan, have shown that it is almost normal for the initial monetary investment of their films, which could be as low as a few thousand yuan, to come from themselves. And if those are the ones who have already made it to the lighter side of the tunnel, there are interviewees I talked to during my fieldwork who are still struggling with the breakthrough of their first film. One of them, who has already made his full-length debut film, told me that he has got used to the state of a precarious life that seems endless, but it is nonetheless a risk he is prepared to take:

I've already sold my house in my hometown. I sold it and spent all of the money to make my debut film. I have not been earning anything since the beginning of this year [note: the interview took place in October]. Sometimes I would act a role in a friend's film and get a little bit of income, but that's all. All my friends and acquaintances in my hometown would think of me as someone who is living a good and stylish life in Beijing. But it is really not the case. It is not like that at all. On the other hand, I have almost accepted it. Those debts, to be honest, do not affect me that much now. I would like to make my second film. I would do it for whatever it takes. (#anonymous informant).

Such a degree of devotion, although seemingly inexplicable, came up frequently in other interviews with the filmmakers and the industry practitioners. However, coming from a very personal and individual place, the drive and devotion defy explanation by overarching industry theories and have no place in documents, laws, and archives alike. However, it is the unpragmatic, personal drive which pushes filmmakers' forward and establishes potential links with other social actants who share a similar sentiment or appreciate the idealistic elements in their drive to filmmaking.

3.1.2 Strategically Creating Space for Indie Talents

As a hub, Heaven Pictures first and foremost plays the role of linking: it uses strategies to host different filmmakers who used to have an underground status and potentially transfers them into a different, more public domain. Firstly, unlike most film companies, which normally operate on a case-by-case contract basis, Heaven Pictures interestingly maintained a semi-work unit (*danwei* 单位) system. Contracts were loosely signed between the company and several filmmakers who became in-house filmmakers. According to my interview with a former producer at Heaven Pictures, decisions about who the company would work with could be subjective and spontaneous:

The main key criterion [for signing a filmmaker] was their work from the past. All the filmmakers had already made full-length feature films before signing the contract with the company. We'd seen their work and liked it. So, everyone just sat down and had a chat. The contract would be signed if the chat went well. It was quite straightforward. Nothing complicated. (#anonymous informant)

According to the informant, all such contracts were signed in a semi-formal way. The durations of the contracts were loosely agreed upon. The start and end of a “long-term collaboration” were not agreed upon in a calculated way. To both parties' knowledge, the contract could be renewed if necessary. Aside from a monthly salary of approximately ¥ 3,000, such contracts also entailed basic social insurance for the filmmakers. In exchange, the “in-house” status of the filmmakers meant that Heaven Pictures would be given priority for the production rights of any films in progress. Furthermore, filmmakers would also need to be in attendance as “artistic consultants” for company business meetings. Although a filmmaker typically requires much more than a monthly salary of ¥ 3,000 to survive in

Beijing, and as loose and semi-professional as such contracts might appear, this gesture by Heaven Pictures secured for the company a cluster of filmmakers who later went on to achieve international and domestic acknowledgement from the beginning of the 2010s.

By 2013, four years after its establishment, the company had made its name on both the international film scene and in the domestic film circuit. Six out of twenty mainland Chinese films selected for competition at the Hong Kong International Film Festival that year were produced by Heaven Pictures.³¹ Although small in number, these six films could be seen as the result of the first round of the thought experiment of a different film production mode in which “small” films were produced neither by big companies, nor by film studios owned by directors who had already made their names, but by industry insiders who had a background in underground filmmaking and were backed by minimal, yet guaranteed support. During a very short period of four years, the support created an almost utopian space for the filmmakers to be creative without worrying too much about money. The sense of ease and confidence can be observed from how Yang Cheng, the then executive manager of Heaven Pictures, proudly declared that Heaven Pictures was one of the few film companies that gave real support to indie filmmakers:

As long as the film is good. That is all that matters. They [the filmmakers] can focus on the film itself. That is a very rare and precious thing. Nowadays, many film companies claim that they are going to support young filmmakers. It is all just lip service or bullshit. (n.a. 2013)

³¹ The six films which were produced in 2012 are: *Don't Expect Praise* (Youren zanmei conghui youren zebu 有人赞美聪慧有人则不, dir. Yang Jin 杨瑾 2012), *Fly with the Crane* (Gaosu tamen wo cheng baihe qule 告诉他们我乘白鹤去了, dir. Li Ruijun 李睿君 2012), *Emperor Visits Hell* (Tanghuang you difu 唐皇游地府, dir. Li Luo 李珞 2012), *Cremator* (Fenshiren 焚尸人, dir. Peng Tao 彭韬 2012), *The Love Songs of Tiedan* (Meijie 美姐, dir. Hao Jie 郝杰 2012), *PHILOMIRRORPHOBIA II* (Feiluonuoruofubiya II 翡罗弥诺浮彼亚 II, dir. Yu Ke 钰柯 2012).

Taken in its most literal sense, Heaven Pictures as a hub functioned as the centre of a propeller. When it works, the centripetal power means the company actively sucks in the talent while the centrifugal power strategically pushes the filmmakers and their films as far as possible to a sphere more public than their former underground status.

In *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), Michel de Certeau developed a pair of concepts, “strategy” and “tactics”, to describe the moves entities make on a daily basis that are, on the one hand, crucial to satisfy the needs of the entities and, on the other hand, so sneaky and discreet that they are untraceable from a top-down, institutionalised mapping, within which the entities are always merely subjugations. What’s the difference between a strategy and a tactic? My understanding is that the difference between “strategy” and “tactics” is how much “space” an entity could claim for itself. This is to say, “strategy” can only be implemented when an entity is substantial enough to secure a place to establish itself in an environment, and by acquiring a secured space, the entity gets to manage the “relations with an exteriority composed of targets or competitors, enemies, etc” (De Certeau 2011, 35–6). To put everything back into the context of Chinese indie film companies, as a strategy, although a registered film company is subjugated to state law and regulation, this does not mean the companies do not deploy strategies. In other words, state regulation and censorship do not deter indie hubs from taking risks to get their way, as long as a grey area exists.

A good example for the strategic moves film production companies can apply is how film companies set up their offices in both Hong Kong and mainland China to create leverage to include as many filmmakers as possible into the company.³² By acquiring Hong Kong-

³² Heaven Pictures is not the only film company which chose Hong Kong as a buffer zone from the early 2000s onwards. Before transferring his main film business to mainland China and making his first theatrically distributed film *Still Life* domestically, Jia Zhangke also registered his film company Xstreams Picture (Xihe xinghiu 西河星汇) in Hong Kong, which co-produced *World* (Shijie 世界, dir. Jia Zhangke 贾樟柯 2004) with the Shanghai Film Group Corporation (上影集团 Shangying jituan).

based companies, Heaven Pictures avoided some of the red lines set by the mainland film bureau. As emphasised by Yang Cheng regarding setting different headquarters in Beijing and Hong Kong, it does not mean that films produced in Hong Kong are “politically more provocative”, it was simply that because of

the difference between the film system in Hong Kong and that of mainland China, we would let our Hong Kong branch deal with films with a “funkier” vibe. If we felt that this [film] might conflict with the current film system [in mainland China], we would leave it to Hong Kong. However, this does not mean those [films] are extremely illegal, or dark. It is, in fact, not that problematic at all. They were just a little unsuited to the system.³³

Indeed, at least in the early 2010s, film content that failed to pass the first round of project establishment within the mainland censorship system could pass in the alternative censorship system in Hong Kong. In the case of Heaven Pictures, *Emperor Visits Hell* did not pass the initial script submission process in mainland China. However, this was not due to the content of the film, but to the nationality of its director. Li Luo’s Canadian citizenship was an obstacle for the film to pass the initial registration phase in mainland China, but not in Hong Kong. Moreover, it is also less problematic for a film company registered in Hong Kong to produce films like *PHILOMIRRORPHOBIA II* with explicit content of homosexuality and nudity as well as its highly abstract and formalistic visual language.

³³ “6 pian ruwei dianyingjie jiedu tianhuahuatian dianying fazhe 6 片入围电影节 解读天画画天法则” [6 films selected for film festivals: deciphering the rule of filmmaking with Heaven Pictures]. last modified March 21 2015, <http://ent.sina.com.cn/m/c/2013-03-21/00033881838.shtml>. (accessed February 17, 2018)

It is not a coincidence that early 2010 was the time for Heaven Pictures to establish itself as an indie hub and situate itself within multiple networks for both independent and commercial filmmaking practices in and beyond mainland China.

Beijing Independent Film Festival was completely banned in 2014 as a result of a rising hostility towards independent filmmaking in China from the state. Meanwhile, Heaven Pictures absorbs a particular cluster of films from the large box labelled “independent film”. It repackages them and then introduces them to the market to be accessible to not only an elite group – consisting of film scholars, festival curators, or film critics, but for a much larger audience. One can observe a distinct character of “in-betweenness” in Heaven Pictures, as strictly speaking, it was never a completely “overground” film company – while films such as *Love Song for Tiedan* and *Don't Expect Praise* have been acquired online and even for theatrical distribution, other films produced by Heaven Pictures, such as *Madame* (Gunainai 姑奶奶, dir. Qiu Jiongjiong 邱炯炯, 2012), remain niche and are only available for festival exhibitions and informal screenings.

3.1.3 Conclusion

Heaven Pictures stood out as the first indie film company that directly addressed Chinese independent cinema, setting itself apart from other indie hubs. Firstly, by positioning itself in the middle, Heaven Pictures as a hub first provides a solid position from which to observe the legacy of independent cinema as it remains in extremely close relations to the formerly “underground” talents and practitioners.

Second, unlike the previous director-studio mode,³⁴ Heaven Pictures as a hub actively facilitated the production of low-budget, aesthetically adventurous films while training both filmmakers and management talents throughout the process. As a result, former producers and managers of Heaven Pictures have gone on to establish their own film companies, showcasing the company’s role as an incubator for industry practitioners transitioning into more commercially involved environments. By 2019, former producers and managers of Heaven Pictures such as Yang Cheng or Shan Zuolong 单佐龙 had already founded their own film companies. As Zhang Xianmin commented in his article, “Dulidianying de ganga yu guangrong 独立电影的尴尬与光荣” [The embarrassed and the glory of independent cinema] (2016), with experience, producers such as Yang Cheng “no doubt would be able to produce films with a much larger budget”. In this regard, Heaven Pictures has played the role of an incubator which facilitates the transition of industry practitioners who have moved from the centre of an independent context to a more commercially involved environment. Putting aside the debate on whether or not it is a good thing to make films in a market setting, I argue that functioning as a hub, Heaven Pictures has been providing a substantial base for

³⁴ Here, director-studio mode refers to film companies owned by directors. It has a particular prevailing existence for filmmakers such as Jia Zhangke 贾樟柯, Wang Xiaoshuai 王小帅, and Lu Chuan 陆川, who have been well acknowledged for their previous work. Director-studio mode does not necessarily suggest that the film company only produces in-house works. However, it definitely means that the director has the power beyond all and has the final say about the operation of that company.

alternative filmmaking in China and has for first time brought what used to be dispersed, individual creative talents together and put them onto the radar of commercial consideration.

Over the years, the landscape of indie film companies in mainland China has undergone drastic changes, with more companies like Heaven Pictures entering the film market. Despite frequent personnel changes, Heaven Pictures has maintained its nature as an indie hub. In June 2019, Heaven Pictures announced a new project where the company would provide funding for six filmmakers worldwide to produce films with the filmmakers' own interpretation on the keyword of "love" (n.a. 2019). The filmmakers include Tsai Mingliang (Taiwan), Chen Cuimei 陈翠梅 (Malaysia), Ishii Yuya (Japan), Yang Jin (mainland China), Zhang Lü 张律 (mainland China) and Weng Ziguang 翁子光 (Hong Kong). In an age when the state has imposed stricter controls and inserted new red tape in the newly promulgated laws around film production and exhibition (see next chapter), I argue that Heaven Pictures provides a meaningful case study of the love for film, what an indie film company could achieve in a comparatively less interfered-with political environment, and how it actively integrates resources and talents from an underground period and manages to create a space where interesting films can be produced and legally circulated within the realm of the PRC.

3.2 Black Fin

There are some films which are just not that profitable under any commercial mode. However, art does not set any limitations. It might just be the case that it does not make that much money and does not attract that much investment.

What we need to do is to pay the price for our choices. It is a little bit more difficult. It needs to be a bit more financially cautious. What is at stake, really, is just whether we would really like to make this film. (Wang Zijian, interview with Deep Focus (Yu 2017))

In late 2018, when I was preparing my fieldwork for this chapter, I consulted some friends who have been working in the industry about where to start. After learning about my interest in indie film companies and my intention to start my research with Heaven Pictures, they told me, jokingly, that the industry mapping has changed greatly during the couple of years when I was “away”. Heaven Pictures has long been something considered as belonging to the past, and I was told that “Black Fin is where you should look if you would like to know what is happening at the moment in China” (#anonymous informant). It has indeed been difficult for anyone who is interested in what new is going on in China not to be aware of “Black Fin”, as the films it has produced have been not only well received by different international and domestic film festivals, but they have also been shown on different streaming platforms, and discussions of the films have gone viral on the internet.

What put Black Fin onto the map of industry as an indie film company was the success of *Kaili Blues* in 2016. Black Fin, along with Heaven Pictures, was one of the few film companies that participated in the production to the exhibition phase of the film before it

got internationally acknowledged and eventually became the favourite of all. According to Wang Zijian, founder and CEO of Black Fin, who brought the film and the whole crew of *Kaili Blues* to the Lugano International Film festival in 2015, the film has outperformed everyone's expectations, "to the point that we felt that the *Kaili Blues* other people were talking about was a completely different film"³⁵ As a film company established in 2013 with an initial capital investment of ¥ 3 million, Black Fin has grown quickly not only as a productive film company that has produced more than ten films over the span of six years, but also as one of the recognised go-to hubs for films that are fresh and interesting in mainland China. If Heaven Pictures as a company functions in a straightforward way, in which a couple of selected filmmakers with a strong independent filmmaking background are able to secure the main funding directly from the company in a philanthropical way, and eventually get exhibited via theatrical or online windows, then Black Fin stands out by its distinct aim of actively claiming its place in the market and quickly building its public image as a film company dedicated to niche filmmaking.

Before diving into the specific way that Black Fin has functioned as a hub for indie filmmaking, it would be useful to revisit the contextualisation of hubs within the larger picture of the Chinese film industry since the beginning of early 2010, when the Chinese film industry began developing at a staggering pace.

³⁵ "Yiwei 'heiqi' shuaichu yishu dianying zhuduoshi 一尾'黑鳍'甩出艺术电影诸多事" [Black Fin ripples the pond of art cinema], last modified 20 February 2017, n.d., https://m.sohu.com/n/481179156/?wscrid=95360_1. (accessed 14 June 2020).

Year	Box Office (billion)	Number of films	Number of Audience(billion)
2011	11.843	531	0.336
2012	16.557	849	0.463
2013	15.508	1006	0.419
2014	29.47	751	0.834
2015	43.87	730	1.261
2016	49.105	741	1.374
2017	55.864	983	1.622
2018	60.668	1569	1.717
2019	63.285	1603	1.731

Table 1 Chinese box office, number of films, and audience 2011-2019 (Source: Chinese Film Data Network 中国电影数据网 <http://www.films.cn/boxoffice>)

According to the Chinese Film Data Network, the overall box office for theatrical distribution in mainland China had almost reached 50 billion by 2015, a four-fold increase on that of 2011. Traditional theatrical distribution is not the only variable that can reveal the expansion of the industry. Along with the soaring market came the unprecedented amount of investment pouring in from outside the film industry. Internet companies such as online streaming platforms are not merely participants in the game but have become gamechangers by throwing money at buying the copyright to films, making their own web films and TV series, as well as attracting filmmakers who would like to try their luck on the small screen; IP adaptation from video games, online fandom novels, and so on, have also emerged as a lucrative business for investors within and beyond the industry. As one of the film companies founded during the brief prosperity of Chinese film market since the early 2010s, Black Fin

needs to face the challenging industry recession at the end of 2010s. As reported by Entertainment and Business Observation,³⁶ in early 2020 a combination of domestic financial recession and the global COVID-19 pandemic led 5,328 film companies to file for bankruptcy. Another article states that the Chinese domestic box office from January to May 2020 has shown negative growth, for the first time since 2011.³⁷

The industry recession highlighted the difference between Black Fin and Heaven Pictures in terms of how much they rely on and could be affected by the overall climate of the market.

While Black Fin and Heaven Pictures share similar traits by both being hubs which make indie gem with unconventional aesthetics, the former just does not have the same degree of financial security given that the latter is backed up by philanthropist support. One of the most recent examples was when the pandemic hit the film industry hard in early 2020. One of the interviewees from my fieldwork posted thanks on their WeChat friend circle to Heaven Pictures for “offering coal during snowy days” (*xuezhong songtan* 雪中送炭) by providing financial support for certain film companies. This generosity would be difficult to imagine for film companies run without philanthropic support. To use the words of an interviewee during the field work, the main difference between Heaven Pictures and other similar indie film companies is that “the company is loaded! Don’t you know that they can always be the main investing company for their own films? Nobody else is able to do that” (#anonymous informant). In a world where the initial investment does not come from the

³⁶ “5328jia yingshi gongsi pochan, yiqing hou haiyou naxie guochan dapian zhide qidai 5328 家影视公司破产，疫情后还有哪些国产大片值得期待？” [5,328 film companies went bankrupt: what domestic big budget films are expected in the post-COVID film market?], last modified 17 April 2020, <https://36kr.com/p/668793094281475> (accessed 10 November 2020),

³⁷ “Zhongguo dianying fansi: weiji helai, handong zendu 中国电影反思：危机何来，寒冬怎度” [Reflection on Chinese films: where does the crisis come from? How to survive the winter], last modified 23 June 2020, <https://www.yicai.com/news/100234310.html> (accessed 4 October 2020).

kindness of strangers, small indie film companies like Black Fin cannot afford to be the main investor company (*zhutougongsi* 主投公司) for the films it produces. As a coping strategy, Black Fin concentrates on establishing a reputation as a main production company (*zhuzhigongsi* 主制公司) and reaches out for more investors in the market who are interested in the type of films the company specialises in making. Relying on the market adds more fragility to the indie network. To be more specific, the more the hubs are reliant on capital and other external factors (such as changing censorship regulations, public expectation, and so on), the more unstable the network itself is. As a result, the network can be temporarily/partially deactivated when the hubs are not functioning, and consequently the fragility of a hub means that indie filmmaking will never be the mainstream in the film industry and therefore will never attract attention in terms of its humble share of the market. Thus, the fragility is proof that, as a hub, indie film companies like Black Fin have been penetrating varied social, economic, and cultural spheres to which the Chinese indie film network extends. And in this sense, the fragility means that without the capacity to insert itself into the existing environment and without being able to interact with other existing social actants, Black Fin as a hub would perish in a heartbeat.

In light of this, without seeing Black Fin's self-positioning within the market as a constraint, I propose that the compromised position Black Fin takes can be understood as proof of the existence of a larger, more panned-out and resilient indie network that is formed by the activations of multiple social actants like Black Fin. Once this larger indie network is activated, it then further facilitates the circulation of indie films in today's mainland China. The significance of the indie network stands out, particularly because of the hubs' unique position of being "in between" – between capital and talents, between art and commercial market, between censorship and creativity.

In other words, by bringing feature films which would otherwise be labelled

“independent” to market circulation, Black Fin allows Chinese films with an alternative aesthetic, style or subject to circulate and be watched legally, right under the eyes of tightening censorship, and to stand side by side with other mainstream franchises. Unlike the individual approach, which is deeply related to Chinese independent filmmaking, the legal status and pressure to maintain itself as a collective entity means that to survive, Black Fin would need to be able to navigate around different parties and maximise the domestic and international resources and channels they can secure to circulate the products. In the following section, I examine the ways Black Fin establishes itself as a hub specialising in indie film production. Although Heaven Pictures serves as an apt case study to demonstrate the role and impact of philanthropy within the industry, an analysis of Black Fin can speak to and inform the experiences of a broader subset of indie film companies.

3.2.1 Deeper into the Commercial World

As a hub, Black Fin maintains itself by reaching out to private investment in the market and seeking short-term alliances. It seeks collaborations with other film production companies and finds external capital to be the main investor of the films they aim to produce. Compared to what Heaven Pictures has been doing, which is to be credited as the main production company for films including *Don't Expect Praise* and *Fly with the Crane*, Black Fin remains at the bottom of the opening production credits in films such as *Knife in the Clear Water* in 2016, while six other film companies from various backgrounds ranked above it.³⁸ It is not a surprise to see a higher interest and a growing amount of confidence from the market, given that 2014 was the year that saw the commercial waterloo of *Golden Age* (Huangjin shidai 黄金时代, dir. Ann Hui, 2013), which was a conventional box-office-guarantee with a famous director and full star cast, and the reign of *Black Coal, Thin Ice*, an ice-cracking art-house thriller directed by Diao Yinan, whose former feature films have only been screened in independent film festivals in China. Although there was still little hope for indie films to get funding support from the government due to their non-compliance with official ideology, the fuel for the hub to function does not necessarily have to rely solely on philanthropist support, as market investment is another viable source of investment as well.

Further market integration is not the only trait of Black Fin. As a hub, it plays the role of buffer zone between the film talents and the market. This role of coordinator is particularly

³⁸ *Knives in the Water* (2016), a film tells a story of an elderly Muslim's emotional journey after his wife's death. The film is presented by Zhejiang Jiashang Film and Media (Zhejiang Jishang yingshi chuanmei youxian gongsi 浙江嘉上影视传媒有限公司), Beijing Ocean&Time Culture Communication(Beijing Haiyang shiguang wenhua chuanbo youxian gongsi 北京海洋时光文化传播有限公司, XINHUANET (Xinhuaawang gufen youxian gongsi 新华网股份有限公司四川分公司), Ning Xia Ming Dao Culture Development (Ningxia mingdao wenhua fazhan youxian gongsi 宁夏明道文化发展有限公司), Beijing Bolaa Advertisement Media (Beijing bola guanggao wenhua chuanbo youxian gongsi 北京博拉广告文化传媒有限公司), and Black Fin (Heiqi Beijing wenhua youxian gongsi 黑鳍(北京)文化有限公司).

significant, as the involvement of external investment from the market in indie filmmaking in China has brought the eternal conflict between money and creativity onto the table. While filmmakers who are struggling for freedom of artistic pursuit suffer from precarity in any time period across the film industry worldwide, the distance between domestic private investment and the talent has never been so close as it is in the context of contemporary Chinese film – not under the state monopoly system in the 1980s, and not during the independent filmmaking period, in which, according to Paul G. Pickowicz in *From Underground to Independent*, an independent filmmaker would need to take a big detour by first making it in the foreign film festival circuit and then forcing the state “to pay attention to them and later provide them opportunities to make expensive aboveground movies and earn a lot of money” (2006, 10). This newly emerged demand from both sides – filmmakers’ will to be understood by the investors, and the latter’s desire to find original, high-quality content – has foregrounded the unique in-between position where Black Fin has situated itself. To introduce film talents properly to domestic capital without completely compromising their unique creativity needs the transformative power of hubs like Black Fin. As articulated by Wang Zijian in the media:³⁹

If I was the director, my aim would be to get my film done. Everything would be most ideally under my control. However, the investors feel they have provided the money. They would like to get their ideas across in the film too. This is the most direct conflict. And things would work completely differently if there were a buffering zone in the middle. When we [Black Fin] step in, we would translate

³⁹ “‘Baiyi shichang, zhiqu yipiao’ de lengmen shengyi, bei ta zuode fengshengshuiqi 「百億市場，只取一瓢」的冷門生意，被他做得風生水起” [Niche Business in a Market of Millions" and He Nailed it with a Huge Success], last modified February 8, 2017. <https://kknews.cc/entertainment/926rnk5.html>. (accessed July 25, 2019)

the filmmakers' vision to the investors, and eventually include investors' demands in the film.

In a sense, the buffer zone provided by Black Fin can be very commonly spotted in the business world. Take IT companies for example. Similar "translations" happen on a daily basis when the needs of clients have to be understood by the programming team and the other way around. To acquire the ability to translate, one would need to speak the language from both sides, which in this particular case, means the language of business and the language of film. And this leads to the significance of Black Fin's role as a hub in the Chinese film industry, which is to continuously absorb filmmakers with strong individual styles and introduce them to the market, and eventually, to a larger audience. Companies like Black Fin have the opportunity to thrive due to the continued marketisation of the Chinese film industry and the collective determination to create aesthetically original films that go beyond mainstream blockbusters. The presence of hubs like Black Fin has helped preserve a segment of the independent cinema scene in mainland China, fostering the "independent spirit" and allowing it to thrive as long as the circumstances remain favourable.

The following section lays out the ways Black Fin functions as an activated hub specialising in indie cinema production from 2013 and beyond. I argue that the hub, along with the network within which these films are circulated, regardless of how fragile and compromised they might be, are invaluable as their existence indicates the ceaseless effort to claim a small amount space for making films which are neither going for sheer entertainment nor toeing the line of state propaganda. To elaborate, first I focus on the operational structure of the hub and examine how Black Fin cultivates and maintains collaboration with filmmakers of diverse backgrounds. I am particularly interested in the successes scored by Black Fin through their role as buffering zone. In other words, what would the mapping of

the industry be like if hubs like Black Fin did not exist? Meanwhile, what does a producer-oriented system mean for indie filmmaking in China? Second, I focus on the survival strategy developed by Black Fin. What does it mean to make a small-budget film in China's film market today? Finally, taking Black Fin as a representative case study, I propose that the best way to examine the concept of indie film in a specific contemporary Chinese context is neither one that directly borrows a Hollywood paradigm, nor one that dwells entirely upon the analysis of films. Rather, it is an approach that observes how the concept of "indie film" is used and developed by the industry insiders who produce the content. By engaging in content-making and circulation, hubs like Black Fin both maintain and preserve the creativity of low-budget feature filmmaking within mainland China. More importantly, their existence has changed the landscape of the industry by making indie film a substantial category, both as a circulatable commercial product and as an accessible, discussible cultural phenomenon with broad social impact.

3.2.2 The Formation of Case-based Collaboration

While both Black Fin and Heaven Pictures are hubs specialised in indie film production, one main difference between the two is the relationship between the companies and the film talents with whom they choose to collaborate. As mentioned above, by signing loose, long-term contracts with filmmakers, Heaven Pictures provided a basic monthly salary to its in-house filmmakers in exchange for the filmmakers' time as well as the right to their films. The semi-employer–employee system that Heaven Pictures deployed was first and foremost based on its unique philanthropical background. Although the salaries they paid were humble in monetary value, they nonetheless represented a gesture of kindness and trust placed by the company in the filmmaker. Compared to the Heaven Pictures mode, Black Fin operates in the way that most small-size film companies would do – keeping the personnel costs as low as possible by downsizing the regular employees of the company and collaborating with other industry practitioners on a case-by-case basis. For instance, according to one of my interviewees who founded a small film company specialising in web films and on-demand video making, they have an office that stays empty for days unless they need to set up a client meeting, and they keep the size minimal by only keeping essential administrative staff and looking for short-term collaborations for different projects. In her words:

“We do not keep people around. We summon teams for different projects. Lighting, cinematography, props ... people come over on a day-to-day basis. Most of them had a good record of collaboration in the past. So it does not take a lot of time to explain what we want” (Anonymous informant#).

My interview with a co-founder of Black Fin on the early days of the company revealed a similar picture: the hub started off as one of the small film companies which focus on taking commissions:

We decided to set up a company called Black Fin. We were initially aiming to provide a service for the post-production phase, since we knew some friends in the field. An independent film needs work such as first cut and colour-correction, and that's our initial direction. But in one case after another, we started to participate more deeply in independent filmmaking and gradually shifted to production with *Kaili Blues* as our first production project.

(#anonymous informant)

If a case-by-case collaboration provides the financial and schedule flexibility for small film companies, then from the perspective of the filmmakers, the new attention of the market on alternative filmmaking since the early 2010s means that the window between finding a talent and the return on investment has been significantly shortened. In fact, the Heaven Pictures model of signing longer-term contracts with loose stipulations does not work if a film achieves real breakout mainstream success. Thus, after the success of *Kaili Blues*, Bi Gan immediately left Black Fin and teamed up with Shan Zuolong, one of the former CEOs of Heaven Pictures, and founded his own film company, Dangmai Films 荡麦影业. The decision of Bi Gan is not illogical, both in terms of maximising financial benefit and also creative freedom. Therefore, the case-based collaboration model that Black Fin deploys lowers the operation cost of the company, and it also means that the talents are granted more agency to choose whether it works in their best interest to place trust in the film company financially and creatively, and with which film company to collaborate. Of course, this

flexibility goes both ways. A case-based collaboration system also means that the company can update their talent pool at a faster pace. Filmmakers who do not conform with the vision of the company or who are particularly difficult to collaborate with would be removed from the list very soon. In short, beneath a case-based collaboration mode is a more vibrant indie film production scene. Within it, all the social actants who keep the hub activated are interacting with each other much more intensively and frequently as many more negotiations are happening along the way in a much larger game with a faster pace.

If the Heaven Pictures model with its philanthropist support means that, as a hub, Heaven Pictures is still able to stay afloat by not having to worry too much about the initial investment for a potential project and consequently lacks a layer of complication, then the constant tension between artistic pursuit, social expectation, personal interests and, last but not least, emerging market demand has highlighted Black Fin's capacity to play the role of buffering zone. As mentioned before, a hub activates itself by bridging capital with talent, as well as navigating other intangible obstacles, including imposed censorship and the lack of state support. The significance of a hub's capacity to play this role has brought another type of social actant, indispensable for filmmaking and yet underestimated by related scholarship, onto the table. In the following section, I elaborate on the importance of a good producer who can enable Black Fin to function as a hub by integrating further into the market.

3.2.3 A Producer-oriented Mode and the link between Indie Worlds

In *Contempt* (Le Mépris, directed by Jean-Luc Godard, 1963), Jean-Luc Godard used Michel Piccoli's words to say something that all filmmakers with a desire for any level of individual creativity want but never have the chance to say on film: "Like all producers, he doesn't know." Despite being a cynical person in general, Godard in the early 1960s was at a turning point in his career. "I don't care about the criticism anymore. Say whatever you want," he said in a clip from an archival interview about, "as long as you buy the ticket and watch my film in a cinema".⁴⁰ In a sense, Godard was in a dilemma extremely similar to that in which a cluster of today's Chinese indie filmmakers find themselves. Choices need to be made on Godard's side: should he keep making films on the streets with absolute freedom and no money, or should he make the most of his newly established reputation and take the olive branch offered by the producers from rich American studios and negotiate how many shots of Brigitte Bardot's nudity are needed for the film? To put things back into the context of indie filmmakers in today's China, particularly those with their own stories to tell, once having entered the market, the tension between artistic pursuit and market demands means that the need for a good producer – who, on the one hand, has a good understanding of the creative pursuit of the filmmaker and, on the other hand, is able to arrange and coordinate different social actants (from handling bureaucratic procedures and finding proper investment to looking for proper exhibition channels) – has never been higher. Good producers have always played a significant role in the Chinese film market. However, the diversification of the market and the mushrooming of private film companies have further highlighted the importance of a producer's role. "Everyone calls themselves a producer now," stated one of

⁴⁰ "Jean-Luc Godard Interview." N.d. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XJbPHboAsbQ>. (Accessed January 12, 2019)

the interviewees, who continued:

It does sound good. But do you really have the capacity and resources to call yourself a producer? When you introduce yourself to a director saying that you are a producer, does it mean that you can summon a whole crew? Does it mean that you can find the right cast? Does it mean that you can find a good promotion team? I've met a lot of so-called "producers" who were very quiet about the answers to these questions. (#anonymous informant)

The growing number of producers reflects a soaring demand for their specific skills in pulling different resources together. The role of producers in a Chinese film context has always been underdiscussed. This is particularly true when it comes to the art-house, independent feature cinema scene in China, where the discourses have always been developed around directors. The absence of research on producers reflects what is happening in the industry, as the very few filmmakers who are established enough to secure their own funding and summon their own teams are more likely to set up their own director studios so as to be in control of their own production. Normally, this would entail a film company operating under the actual control of the filmmaker. Xstream 西河星汇 owned by Jia Zhangke, Dongchun Film 冬春电影 owned by Wang Xiaoshuai, and Chuan Film 川影视 owned by Lu Chuan are all examples. And the filmmakers who do not run their own studios normally have long-established collaborative relationships with particular producers. Nai An 耐安, Lou Ye, Wen Yan 文晏 and Diao Yinan are examples of this mode of one-on-one collaboration. In this mode, the collaboration between the filmmakers and the producers mostly lasts for decades. Whether working as a director studio or functioning on a smaller scale by collaborating with one producer, these models both work on the basis that a singular

filmmaker is at the centre of a functioning system. The director-centred approach has the advantages of being flexible, and the reputation of the filmmakers and their previous success are good guarantees for the future opportunities. However, the existing director-studio mode is not beginner friendly, particularly when the limited opportunities for recognition and financial success have already largely been taken by more established predecessors.

In other words, the chances for filmmakers who are just starting out to make it on their own is even lower in today's market. "I have got an agent, who is also my producer," said one interviewee. Talking about the difficulty of doing everything on his own, he continued:

If someone was working for me full-time, then I could accept a lot more offers for films. But because the producer has to work for other filmmakers too, and I need to work on my scripts, there is no way to make money out of this career.
(#anonymous informant)

This lack of support and management is not limited to young filmmakers. Explaining the current dilemma, a former independent filmmaker is going through, one informant emphasised the importance of teamwork nowadays:

He needs a whole team on board if he wants to sell his film abroad. He can't afford it. (#anonymous informant)

In this regard, as a hub, Black Fin fits in with and develops around the demands of a cluster of indie filmmakers, who have the talent to make films with individualistic styles but

are not yet resourceful or well-known enough to do it on their own. And just as a hub functions as a base for vehicles and shields them from extreme weather conditions, Black Fin introduces the filmmakers to the market by “standing on the side of the filmmaker” (Ma 2016). As Wang Zijian emphasised in the press: ⁴¹

It seems like we are a producer-oriented company, but in practice what we are doing is making auteur films, and we will definitely leave the final say to the director in terms of the film’s artistic outlook. After all, film[making] is not purely business.

The emergence of indie hubs has further brought the importance of the existence of indie producers into the spotlight. In 2018, *Screen Magazine* published a list of 50 future leading producers worldwide. Three out of the 50 are ethnically Chinese and two out of the three, Yang Cheng and Wang Zijian, are from mainland China.⁴² I suggest that their success should be considered, once again, as confirmation of how indie film hubs are situated in the unique cross-current of the commercial world and the formerly flourishing Chinese independent film scene.⁴³ Compared to Yang Cheng’s traditional institution-trained background, the trajectory of Wang Zijian’s personal growth and success is more telling in

⁴¹ "Meinian yibu baokuan, heiqi wenhua CEO iemi wenyipian zenme xiang dianyingyuan yiyang zhuanqian 每年一部爆款，黑鳍文化 CEO 揭秘文艺片怎么像电影院一样赚钱" [One mega-success every year: the CEO of Black Fin reveals how to make as much money with art films as with theatrical-distributed films],last modified December 12, 2019, <http://www.ylzb.com/article/1879>. (accessed August 10, 2020)

⁴² Screen, "Future Leaders 2018: the Producers Who Are Rising Stars". Last modified 10 May 2018, <https://www.screendaily.com/features/future-leaders-2018-the-producers-who-are-rising-stars/5129115.article> (accessed 4 Feb 2020)

⁴³ After accumulating enough experience by being the former key manager of Heaven Pictures as well as the producer of Liu Jian 刘建’s award-winning dark animation film *Have a Nice Day* (dashijie 大世界, dir. Liu Jian 刘建, 2016), Yang Cheng founded his own film company, Nezha Brothers Films (哪吒兄弟 Nezha Xiongdi) in 2016. Meanwhile, Wang Zijian founded Black Fin and became one of the first to recognise and invest in the potential of Bi Gan before the viral success of *Kaili Blues*. Both Yang and Wang started their careers by being deeply involved in the independent filmmaking scene.

terms of acknowledging the legacy of Chinese independent cinema not only as a movement of alternative individual filmmaking imbued with social and political significance, but also as the partial genesis of a whole network of non-institutional film education resources and a talent pool of potential industry practitioners. In this specific instance, informal film education institutions such as the Li Xianting Film Academy 栗宪庭电影学校 have been maintaining and training film practitioners by offering intensive summer courses since 2009. The tutors of the school, who have all played important roles in the field of independent filmmaking, have taken the role of training students of various backgrounds who are interested in and determined to make films, including Wang Zijian, who later became the CEO of Black Fin. Affected by government constraints on independent filmmaking, the school has been moving its teaching locations around and further away from Beijing. However, it remains active and continues to produce film talents who have already made it to the market, including Yang Mingming 杨明明, the director of *Girl Always Happy* (Rouqingshi 柔情史, 2018) and Gu Xiaogang 顾晓刚, director of *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains* (Chunjiangshuinan 春江水暖, 2019).

The ongoing impact of informal film institutions such as the Li Xianting Film School remains part of the unexplored legacy of independent filmmaking as a movement and a brief discussion of it is helpful to understand what the “in-betweenness” of hubs such as Black Fin is about – it is the capacity to be flexibly situated at the cross-current of where different forces meet. As an indie film company, Black Fin has its legal status and strives for financial stability in the market. Meanwhile, it has preserved a previous unofficial network that Chinese independent cinema as a movement initially created. The existence of a hub like Black Fin activates the commercialisable elements which always existed in the previous independent scene, but which stayed inert, awaiting activation when external conditions permit. Despite the difference in terms of the amount of official consent or budget, the

structure of indie filmmaking in China as a network is not that different from the officially acceptable one. This means that when external conditions permit, the differences between mainstream and informal filmmaking in China could, in theory, become very blurry. The further blending of indie and mainstream filmmaking has provided a new insight into older discourses on the relationship between private film companies and state power. Writing on the changing relationship between the Chinese State Film Administration and the emerging private sector in the film industry since the early 2000s, Elena Meyer-Clement observes a strong embeddedness of small private film companies and private film producers. These social actants who are not affiliated to the state-owned sectors, according to Meyer-Clement, “are pressured by the institutional environment of film production...[and] thus voluntarily responded to the government’s attempt to integrate individual stakeholders in government networks and contributed to their own political embedment” (2016, 230).

My observations on indie film companies in today’s China suggest that after the initial embedding stage, a network is created, and the indie film companies and private producers then function in a mode which I describe as parasitism. Very similar to the relationship between parasite and host, indie film companies feed on the state system and commercial interests; they are constrained within the vicinity of the host’s activity scope. However, compared to the host, the parasite is still by nature a very different species with its own agenda. Differently from Elena Meyer-Clement’s emphasis on the aspect of compromise among private film companies, which is caused by their inevitably embedded nature, I suggest that the embeddedness noted by Meyer-Clement serves more as an entrance ticket to the domestic market. And parasitism tells a truer story about what indie film companies are doing within the Chinese film market in today’s China. By using this “within the system” position, indie film companies, along with private producers such as Wang Zijian, contain the viability of the informal network, create links with the previously volatile and exciting

independent film scene, and, most importantly, take them from the underground to the public domain.

3.2.4 Defining and Testing Indie in a Market Setting

The in-between nature of indie film companies as a hub, and the emergence of indie film producers, both facilitate the production of indie film. However, to maintain the activeness of the larger indie network, indie hubs like Black Fin need to deal with more social actants with different, and sometimes even strongly conflicting interests. Factors such as the need for financial stability, the constraints of censorship, underlying audience expectations, and the longing for creative freedom are constantly at play and failing to accommodate any of them would negatively impact the hub's operation and even lead to its demise. That said, the more complicated the game gets, the better the opportunity it offers us to observe what indie film as a concept really entails in mainland China.

The significance of defining what indie film is in contemporary China is more than discovering something new, as behind the concept lies a nexus of social and cultural phenomena fused with economic and political considerations, which lurk as the elephant in the room. In a sense, the vocalness of Black Fin, the moves it makes to proactively claim its spot in the market by telling everyone else what is special about the films it makes are vital when it comes to the understanding of where the term "indie film" in a Chinese context is derived, and why it cannot be summoned from aesthetic analysis of a certain type of film. This is because the concept of "Chinese indie film" has been used more as a tool for hubs like Black Fin to brand themselves, and as a label that related industry insiders started to use to get across the specific types of films they are making. Hubs provide stable locations for indie film production. Because of this stability, the hubs create a tangible and intangible network of information, which offers the core definition of Chinese indie film – namely, a body of

useful, accessible information, which is provided by multiple social actants.

Understanding the Chinese indie film firstly as an industry-based concept in the making has made it easier to answer the question “how much does it cost to make an indie film in China?”⁴⁴ Films with a lower budget have been emerging in the film market for over a decade, and yet according to one of the interviewees, the real budget for a film may still vary but a rough consensus has been reached:

People so often talk about low-budget film. But the understanding of low-budget film as a concept has been so random. When it comes to commercial filmmaking, industry practitioners have more or less come to an agreement recently that a film under the budget of 10 million would be considered a low-budget film. (#anonymous informant)

With a clearer industry standard on the horizon, Black Fin further plans its budget range to balance the conflict between artistic pursuit and commercial consideration. With an average budget of ¥ 5 million (Cao 2016), Black Fin aims to maintain the balance between artistic pursuit and the interest of the investors. As Wang Zijian put in an interview (2019),⁴⁵ Black Fin either turns to auteur film with a comparatively larger budget, or to films with a much lower budget with the aim of later reinvesting the profit from the smaller films into larger projects. By being clear about what the company is and remaining relatively transparent about their vision and operational plans, the hub advocates for itself so that it

⁴⁴ In my transfer paper of 2018, I was unable to provide information on the average budget for an indie film, as at that time the budget for each film varied significantly, and therefore a statistical average would not have provided reliable information on the cost of making an indie film.

⁴⁵ “Zhuanfang Heiqi chuangshiren Wangzijian: jibian langchao tuiqu le, heiqi yijiu hui jianchi xiaqu 专访黑鳍创始人王子剑：即便浪潮退去了，黑鳍依旧会坚持下去” [Exclusive interview with Wang Zijian, the founder of Black Fin: Black Fin will stay, even if the tide goes out one day], last modified 19 November 2019, <https://kuaibao.qq.com/s/20191119A06DD500?refer=spider> (Accessed 5 February 2020).

becomes easier to find compatible investors, filmmakers, and actors to collaborate with, and most importantly, to attract audiences who would be interested in what they make.

In Black Fin's blueprint for an indie film, a healthy production rate entails 3-4 finished films that are ready for final exhibition and distribution yearly. And a relatively clear budget target roughly sketches out the outlook of the films, from the production cycle to what kind of actors could be secured. The role of these small but crucial production details should not be underestimated. In the real world, the style of a film is not always completely decided by the creativity and artistic vision of filmmakers but depends also on what can be afforded. For example, non-professional actors are used not only because of their authentic performance, but also because casting A-list actors would exceed the budget. Likewise, local shooting locations are chosen not only because they have local characteristics and are better at depicting the drastic urbanisation in contemporary China (Zhang 2007), but also because the daily shooting expenses would be much more affordable there. Through practice, Black Fin, along with other similar film companies, is on its way to "establishing an industry method which gradually familiarised itself with the market, and this is a step forward towards standardisation".⁴⁶ A relatively set budget indicates more than how much a film costs, as it indicates predictability, traceability, and a repeatable formula. The making of an industry standard, which the indie hubs are driving toward, is exactly the process of substantialising indie film as a concept that can be accepted and further discussed beyond an industry context. In this sense, we are witnessing a new category of film production in the film history contemporary China, with indie hubs acting as the main contributors to this new page of exploration.

⁴⁶ "Jujiao qingnian daoyan, zuo duli dianying, heiqi yao fajue diege bigan 聚焦青年导演，做独立电影，黑鳍要发掘第二个毕赣" [Focusing on new filmmakers, making independent films, Black Fin aims to discover another Bi Gan]. last modified 19 December 2018. https://k.sina.cn/article_5806933453_15a1ec5cd019001pye.html. (Accessed July 28, 2019)

The full impact of the 2018 film law on the industry needs time to be observed, but it does not change the fact that during the first decade of the 2000s, various elements played a crucial role in facilitating the integration of indie hubs. Notably, there was a shift in the administrative film bureau's approach, allowing private film companies to obtain shooting licenses without the need for a voucher from a state-owned film studio by 2004.⁴⁷ Additionally, censorship rights were dedicated to local governments by 2010.⁴⁸ The rise of online platforms also contributed to the growth of a potential audience for indie films. Moreover, the indie hubs' efforts at vertical integration further bolstered their position by expanding their operations beyond the production stage and into the exhibition and distribution circuits.

However, as stated before, as a concept in the making, indie cinema in China is currently fragile for various reasons. First, putting the obstacle of censorship aside, it is almost impossible for Chinese indie film – unlike arthouse cinema elsewhere – to secure any substantial amount of funding from the state, which has a clear agenda for what type of film it favours. Secondly, although the funding situation for Black Fin has improved throughout the years – in fact, as Wang Zijian stated in a recent interview, “the most important thing now is not how to find the money, but how to find the right money”⁴⁹ – there is still not a well-developed completion guarantee system for the production of non-blockbuster films in China. According to Angus Finney (2015), a completion guarantee company (*wanpian danbao*

⁴⁷ Chinese Film Bureau. “Dianying qiye jingying zige zhunru zanxing guiding 电影企业经营资格准入暂行规定 [Interim Provisions on Operation Qualification Access for Movie Enterprises].” Last modified Oct 2004, https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2021-12/14/content_5711915.htm (accessed 15 Aug 2020)

⁴⁸ China Film Co-production Corporation, “Guojia xinwen chubian guangdian zongju guanyu shixing guochan dianying shudi shencha de tongzhi 国家新闻出版广电总局关于试行国产电影属地审查的通知 [Notice of the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television on the Interim Provisions on Local Censorship of Domestic Film].” Last modified 2014, <http://www.cfcc-film.com.cn/polic/content/id/18.html> (accessed 15 Aug 2021)

⁴⁹ “Shenjiao × Wang Zijian: zhongguodianying hui shengzhangchu xinde yiyi 深焦×王子剑: 中国电影会生长出新的意义来” [New Meaning Will Grow Out of Chinese Cinema], last modified October 5, 2017, https://www.sohu.com/a/196320033_758090. (Accessed November 25, 2019)

gongsi 完片担保公司) plays a crucial role in building the confidence of the investors in small- to medium-sized film companies, since, by being a third party to the agreement between the company and the investors, the completion guarantee company steps in and pays for any loss suffered by the investors if the production phase does not go as agreed in the initial contract (Finney 2015, 45). However, as a completion guarantee company would only survive in a mature market setting, every step a film project takes needs to have an existing industry standard that is agreed upon by industry practitioners and rarely disturbed by bureaucratic and censorship reasons. “We used to work for Cinhello (*Yingshi gongye wang* 影视工业网)⁵⁰ and it has a completion guarantee service, it’s a joke,” an interviewee told me, “It just didn’t pan out the same when the business mode was introduced to the mainland market.” The problem to which the interviewee refers is that to mitigate the risks, the completion guarantees service favours mainstream projects with much larger budgets and more solid reputational backing. Ironically, the favoured big-budget film projects are not really the ones that need to worry about start-up money, while the ones who need money, namely the indie film projects with lower budgets, cannot get the guarantee.

Although sentiment, whether generated for philanthropic reason or from the support of friends and family, still plays a key role when it comes to the initial fundraising phase for indie filmmaking, the set industry standard Black Fin is aiming to create is no doubt essential if indie hubs are further to establish themselves as a substantial part of the film market. Such a standard will also enhance the capacity of indie film to be recognised as a category of production and as a concept that stands on its own. Aside from the fact that forming an industrial-standard budget scale is an important indicator for the conceptualisation of Chinese

⁵⁰ Hello Cine 影视工业网(<https://107cine.com>), founded in 2008, is an online social platform targeting industry insiders and/or film practitioners-to-be.

indie film, I find it is also important to consider the hub's own voice as it claims its territory in the market. Compared to Heaven Pictures, Black Fin has been much more vocal and upfront about the company's vision of claiming a small, but specific, share of the film market. As stated by Wang Zijian, Black Fin is aiming to produce films with unique, auteur style:

This is an age in which passing on a distinct voice is really valuable. This brand [Black Fin] carries a certain value, responsibility and culture orientation.

Everything we do has been done under a certain value. Therefore, even if we made some films which appear to be market-oriented, people would still understand that we have deeper demands.⁵¹

A list of films Black Fin produced during 2017–19 proves that Wang Zijian was not simply paying lip service here. *Free and Easy* (Qingsong jia yukuai 轻松+愉快, dir. Geng Jun, 2018) is a dark, allegorical comedy about a group of outlaws; *Clouds in Her Room* (Ta fangjiande yun 她房间的云, dir. Zhenglu Xinyuan 郑路心源, 2019) won the Golden Tiger Award at Rotterdam Film Festival in 2019 and is very unlikely to be distributed in the mainland China market due to its audacious story-telling and visual style; *Mosaic Girl* (Masaike shaonv 马赛克少女, dir. Zhai Yixiang 翟义祥, 2019) depicts a journalist's journey of discovering the complicated truth behind the sexual assault of a teenage girl. At the time of the writing of this chapter, *Clouds in Her Room* has had some small-scale screenings in several cinemas in Hong Kong in 2020; and after receiving criticism for the director's

⁵¹ “Shenjiao × Wang Zijian: zhongguodianying hui shengzhangchu xinde yiyi 深焦×王子剑: 中国电影会生长出新的意义来”[New Meaning Will Grow Out of Chinese Cinema], last modified October 5, 2017, https://www.sohu.com/a/196320033_758090. (Accessed November 25, 2019)

ambiguous moral stance towards the depiction of the sex-abuse case after its initial screening at the FIRST International Film Festival in 2019, the domestic release date of *Mosaic Girl* is still up in the air in 2021. Responding to harsh criticism of *Mosaic Girl*, Wang Zijian advocated for a less morally judgemental attitude towards what to expect from a film on one of his weibo posts: “What we need are different modes of aesthetic expression and angles to observe the world,” he said, “and the pursuit of art is for progress, not for playing safe”.⁵²

Wang Zijian’s defence of *Mosaic Girl* highlights a more general but pressing dilemma that all indie films are faced with when they become accessible to the market: the reception of the audience. Even in an ideal world, in which neither money nor state censorship are the main concerns for the development of indie cinema in China, the question of whether the audience likes a film or not would still remain. That is to say, after conquering a range of difficulties, from finding the sufficient amount of financial support to getting greenlit from the state film bureau, a hub still needs to negotiate with the audience expectations. In the case of *Mosaic Girl*, audience response has shown that in today’s China, it is still very uncertain whether a story about minor sexual assault can be told without a direct, socially acceptable moral stand. Nevertheless, the debate is necessary, since both the stability of Black Fin as a hub and sequentially how observable indie cinema can be as a concept rely on the back and forth of these debates. The final outcome comes with practise, and as Zhai Yixiang, the director of *Mosaic Girl*, stated of his relationship with Black Fin, it has been a learning process for both the company and the filmmaker:

This is a completely new stage for me. And it is a new stage for Black Fin too. As

⁵² Wang, Zijian 王子剑. “Guanyu masaike shaonv wo hai you hua shuo 关于《马赛克少女》，我还有话说 “[I Still have Something to Say about Mosaic Girl]. last modified 22 July 2019. <https://weibo.com/blackfinjean?from=feed&loc=at&nick=Blackfin> (accessed November 12, 2020)

a company, they only used to get involved in a project during its middle and late production phase. Mosaic Girl is their first attempt to get involved with the production of a film from the very beginning. We grow together. They are also figuring it out with the production. It's a new phase for everyone. (Yu and Xu 2019)

3.3 Factory Gate

The motto of Factory Gate as a film company is “beauty and good will”. That is to say, there is no hard index in terms of our choice of either “commercial film” or “art-house cinema”. What we care about is the creation itself and the value of the work. On a practical level, scriptwriting, and the ability to enact visual transformation are our top priorities. I do not think it’s an “either/or” relationship with regard to art and profit. (Liang Ying, Partner of Factory Gate 2019)⁵³

Founded in 2017, Factory Gate is a considered a newcomer to the indie scene in China. However, the company has been growing at an impressively fast pace. By 2020, there was already a significant list of films, from *Balloon* to *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountain*, produced under the name of the company. I present Factory Gate as the last of the three case studies for this chapter because, while sharing many similarities with Black Fin, the corporate mode of Factory Gate provides another model for how indie film companies can be run and understood in contemporary China.

3.3.1 Teaming up with Corporates

If philanthropical support boosted Heaven Pictures, and if Wang Zijian plays the key role in Black Fin’s march towards the market, then as an indie film company, Factory Gate

⁵³ “Dianying haiwai faxing you name nanma? Zhuanfang gongchangdamen hehuoren liangying 电影海外发行有那么难吗？专访工厂大门影业国际业务合伙人梁颖” [Is overseas distribution that difficult? An interview with Liang Ying, the international business liaison and partner of Factory Gate], last modified 12 October 2019, <https://www.xinpianchang.com/e18767> (accessed 7 July 2020).

has been operating in a very different setting from the very beginning in terms of company organisation. As demonstrated below, while Wang Zijian is the literal “main person” of Black Fin as he owns 100% of the company, the equity shares of Huang Xufeng, the founder and CEO of Factory Gate, constitute 63.9%. And for Huang, Factory Gate is only one of nine companies in which he holds shares.

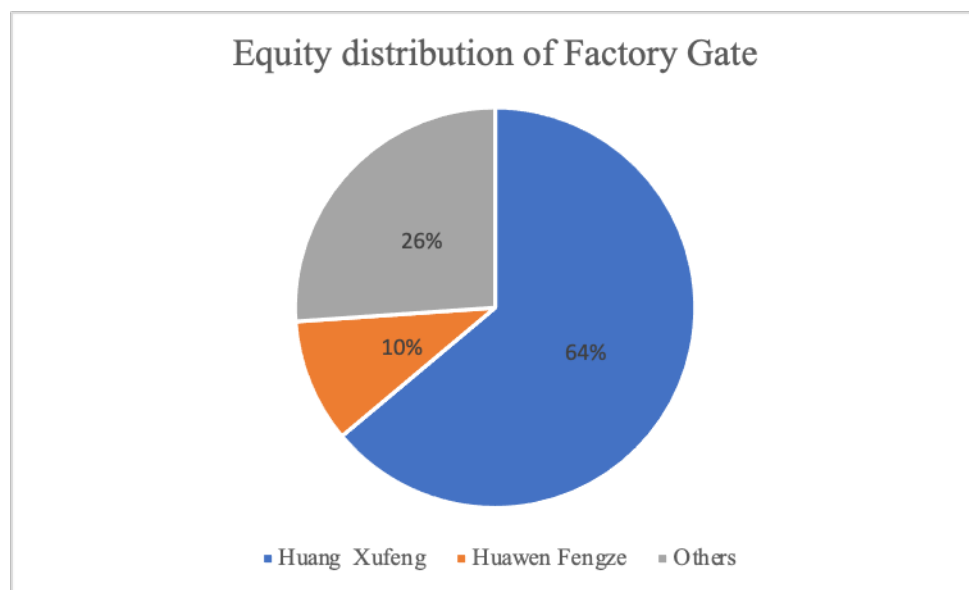


Figure 1 Equity Distribution of Factory Gate (Source: Tianyancha 天眼查)

It is noteworthy that among the remaining 36% of the stock share, 10% is owned by Huawen Fengze 华文风泽, a sub-company of Huawen Pictures 华文集团.⁵⁴ “Thanks to the support of Huawen Picture group”, said Huang Xufeng 黄旭锋 in a 2019 interview,⁵⁵

⁵⁴ As the angel investor for Factory Gate, Huawen Picture Group 华文电影集团 was founded in 2017 with a diverse focus. Aside from film production and distribution, it also has its own cinema lines and a film equipment rental business. During the first two years after the company was founded, Huawen Pictures not only produced popular blockbusters such as *Detective Chinatown 2* (Tangrenjie tanan 唐人街探案 2, dir. Chen Sicheng 陈思成, 2018), it also secured the opportunities of producing mainstream propaganda films such as *The Founding of An Army*. Allying with a larger corporation means not only extra financial support or at least credibility, but also connections and resources which put Factory Gate in a stronger position than other such companies.

⁵⁵ “Zhuanfang gongchangdamen chuangshiren huangxufeng: women haimeiyou kuiben de xiangmu 专访工厂大门创始人黄旭锋：我们还没有亏本的项目” [An exclusive interview with Huang Xufeng, the founder of

“Factory Gate has been making films without immediate concerns about profit.” The way Factory Gate is run and its relationship with Huawen Picture Group sheds some familiar light on the workings of indie film production beyond the Hollywood system. Particularly in the past ten years, American independent film companies which specialise in producing and distributing niche content have been increasingly bought and absorbed into a larger, corporate system: United Artists merged with MGM in 2015; Fox Searchlight Pictures was officially bought by Disney and got rid of the “Fox” in its name in order to distinguish itself from the Fox Corporation in 2020. Writing on the history of the American independent film industry, Yannis Tzioumakis has noted that there have already been precedents for this process of integration in the 1980s and 1990s, when independent film production or distribution companies were gradually bought by larger corporates but still ran semi-independently (Tzioumakis 2017, 224). Tzioumakis argues that becoming a part of a media corporate scene does not necessarily mean compromising in terms of the quality of the content the indie film companies produce. On the contrary, it is exactly the continuous process of merging over the past thirty years that has created a special type of film labelled as independent (or indie). To quote Tzioumakis, this type of film can be considered unique

primarily because of its difference from mainstream American cinema (here associated with effects-driven blockbusters and expensive genre-star vehicles) and very often regardless of whether the film has been financed, produced and/or distributed by an independent company, a speciality film division, a major independent or even a major company. (Tzioumakis 2017, 226)

Factory Gate: we do not have any defective project yet], last modified 28 October, n.d.
https://k.sina.cn/article_5592412189_14d55701d00100jhk8.html (Accessed 12 November 2020).

It is interesting to compare Tzioumakis's analysis on the progressive merging and constant tension between indie and mainstream in the American film market with what has been happening in mainland China. The scenarios in both the American and Chinese contexts are strikingly similar, particularly when it comes to how capital devours talents by sucking in their originality and creativity as long as they are profitable. In a sense, the phenomenon has been more prominent in a Chinese context, because as difficult as it is to secure investment from private or corporate entities, it is even more unlikely for the indie film companies to gain any favour from public funding. Looking at the short history of the marketisation of the Chinese film industry, large film companies have never been absent from the "alternative filmmaking scene",⁵⁶ though it was not until the 2010s that the role of larger corporate investors became more visible to the public through the acclaim of the films in which they had invested (Yang 2010). One of the most notable examples of this is how the success of Diao Yinan and his *Black Coal, Thin Ice* brought the investor Omnijoi, another publicly listed film corporation founded in 2005, into the spotlight as well. More recently, J.Q. Pictures (Jiaying wenhua 嘉映文化), a large film company specialising in commercial big-budget filmmaking, became well-known within and beyond the industry for its investment in *Angels Wear White* (Jianianhua 嘉年华, dir. Wen Yan 文晏, 2017). The film won the Taiwan Golden Horse Award in 2018, which garnered J.Q. Pictures unexpected exposure. Interestingly, the initial investment of *Angels Wear White* was described by one of my interviewees as a random surprise none of the parties expected. In their words:

⁵⁶ Throughout the early 2000s, while companies including Huayi Brothers tested the waters of indie films by investing in such films as *Mountain Patrol* (kekexili 可可西里, dir. Lu Chuan 陆川, 2004), *Cala, My Dog!* (Kala shitiao gou 卡拉是条狗, dir. Lu Xuechang 陆学长, 2003), and *The Equation of Love and Death* (Limi de caixiang 李米的猜想, dir. Cao Baoping 曹宝平, 2008).

J.Q. Pictures initially had zero interest in and expectations of the film [*Angels Wear White*]. But hey, who could imagine that *Line Walker* (Shitu xingzhe 使徒行者, dir. Jazz Boon 文伟鸿, 2016), a gangster film adapted from an extremely outdated TV drama, could be so successful at the box office during the summer movie season in 2016? It did so well that the company did not have to worry about its profits at all for that year. That is how they got so relaxed and comparatively generous when it came to the production and promotion of *Angel Wears White* the following year in 2017. (#anonymous informant)

This short account in fact echoes many aspects of the overall picture of the film market in today's China. Entrepreneurial power has been growing at a significant pace in the last few decades, and despite the randomness of the investment, it has gradually become a new ally for indie hubs. Here, although alternative content with artistic and auteur aims and potential social impact are not the central concern of the larger film corporates, their pragmatic interests in indie film come out of the consideration that, borrowing Wang Zijian's description, owning diverse film projects can bring strategic gain:

For a mature film company, they wouldn't want to put all their eggs in one basket. For them, making an indie film with a (small) budget would not crush them even if it is not profitable. And if there is a high-quality, auteur film which is not very expensive, it would immensely elevate the overall profile of the company. Besides, investing in indie film fits the grand strategy of larger film companies. They can scout out filmmakers who are capable of handling genre films, and that might lead to

collaboration of higher quality [commercial] films.⁵⁷

Positioning itself more deeply in between the market and the talent means that as an indie hub, Black Fin becomes an ideal steppingstone for indie filmmakers to build up their portfolio for future investment. And it also provides a chance for the investors to get to know and evaluate fresh talent entering the market from a safe distance. As one of the interviewees, whose commercial film company would normally make standard action films with budgets around ¥ 40m–6m, pointed out, filmmakers like Bi Gan are compelling because a film such as *Kaili Blues* demonstrates the filmmaker's extraordinary ability to imitate:

Bi Gan is all about *Kaili*. He should really try some more commercial projects. He is so good at imitation. He has pulled off such a good Tarkovsky. Anyone can “pay tribute” but being able to execute it with precision is a talent. (#anonymous informant)

While the attention from the commercial world means more opportunities to go bigger and more mainstream, the other side of the process does not always lead to success. The performance of Bi Gan's second film *Long Day's Journey into Night* (Diqiushang zuihou de yewan 地球上最后的夜晚, dir. Bi Gan, 2018) demonstrated how risky things can become once creativity is harnessed to capital and fame. That said, fairy tales do not stop happening. Hao Jie, one of the in-house filmmakers of Heaven Pictures, secured investment for his third

⁵⁷ "Wang Zijian: duli zhizuo zheng chuyu langchao qianxi, bi yuaxiang yao zao daolai 王子剑：独立制作正处于浪潮前期，比预想要早到来" [Wang Zijian: the wave of independent filmmaking has arrived earlier than expected]. last modified 8 April, n.d. https://k.sina.cn/article_5806933453_15a1ec5cd019005ppr.html. (Accessed October 8, 2019)

film *My Original Dream* (Wode qingchunqi 我的青春期, dir. Hao Jie 郝杰, 2015) from Wanda Film Group; one year earlier than Hao Jie tied the commercial knot with Wanda Films, Diao Yinan's *Black Coal, Thin Ice* would not have made it to theatrical distribution without the investment of Omnijoi Media Corporation. However, all the successes mentioned above have been achieved on a case-by-case basis and presumably not scalable. In other words, what Tzioumakis argues of the American indie scene, in which independent filmmaking survives as a special division conjugated to larger film corporates, has not yet happened on a comprehensive scale in the Chinese film market. Nonetheless, the alliance between Factory Gate and Huawei Film Group offers a primitive case study of how indie hubs can exist when they cluster under a much larger corporate power. Keeping its “in-between” place, Factory Gate utilises larger corporations to secure potential investment, as well as the credibility, resources, and connections it needs on the one hand; and, on the other hand, it owns the majority stock share so that it keeps its sovereignty, thus dodging the fate of a lot of small film companies in the market, which is simply to become outsourcing suppliers for larger corporates.

While still remaining as a hub dedicated to indie film production, the set-up of Factory Gate, or at least the vision of how the company should be run, is already sliding towards a miniature version of a standard mainstream film company. As stated by Huang Xufeng in an interview about the outlook for Factory Gate in the future, “No matter if it’s script development, production, distribution, or promotion, the professionalism of Factory Gate speaks for itself. The company has established a streamlined operation entailing project development, production, branding and so on”⁵⁸. Aside from setting up an image of an indie

⁵⁸ “Zhuanfang Gongchang Damen chuangshiren Huang Xufeng:women hai meiyou kuiben de xiangmu 专访工厂大门创始人黄旭峰：我们还没有亏本的项目” [an Exclusive Interview with the Founder of Factory Gate, Huang Xufeng: “We do Not have any Defective Project Yet]. last modified 28 October 2019. https://k.sina.cn/article_5592412189_14d55701d00100jkh8.html. (Accessed

film company that provides professional and comprehensive services, Factory Gate has also developed a systemic way of organising the film talents the company chooses to collaborate with. At the time of writing, 21 filmmakers (18 directors, two actors/actresses and one screenplay writer) have been listed on the official website of Factory Gate. And the company has developed different strategies to collaborate with filmmakers at different stages of their careers. According to Liang Ying, the partner of Factory Gate who is in charge of international business, while the company is much more hands on with filmmakers working on their debut film by “getting involved from the start of the project with the development of the script and concept” (2019), it maintains a much more flexible collaborative relationship with filmmakers who are already established. By applying a multi-level, hierarchical operation management, the hub maximises its capacity to absorb and host talents.

3.3.2 Drifting Further Away from Independent

The lowest point of my fieldwork in China in late 2019 came when I interviewed an old acquaintance. Both of us had worked for the independent film festival in Nanjing before its first shutdown in 2012. This person is now working successfully in the industry. I could sense that he was only doing the interview for old times' sake, and when I asked him about his take on the independent scene in today's China, he replied, "You know that nobody talks about independent film now? You know that it is illegal in China right now, right?" Then he fell silent. I spent a whole day after that in my hotel room, questioning whether or not my basic research question was valid. If it is true that independent cinema is illegal in mainland China now and that no one talks about it anymore, what is the point of this project?

But what if the acquaintance's attitude is in fact the key to understanding the whole scene of indie filmmaking? The denial, the reluctance, the defensive attitude, and the careful wording he used to describe indie filmmaking is representative, and it tells the unspoken story of the afterlife of independent cinema in contemporary China. The past decade has seen the term "independent" disappearing at an accelerating pace, so fast, in fact, that it has become difficult to believe that books dedicated to independent cinema, such as *Chinese Independent Film Archive* (Zhongguo dulijilupian dangan 中国独立纪录片档案, Mei and Zhu, 2004) and *My Camera Doesn't Lie* (Wode shexiangji bushuohuang 我的摄像机不说谎, Cheng, 2002) were actually published openly in mainland China at the time. Compared to the relatively relaxed attitude towards independent filmmaking twenty years ago, it is telling to observe how indie hubs seem to take on the role of "actors" themselves by skirting around the term "independent" and finding safer alternatives to describe the type of film they produce without provoking unwanted attention from the authorities.

"Independent film is an ambiguous and awkward term for mainland China,"

explained Wang Zijian in a 2017 press interview.⁵⁹ He argued, in fact, that “it refers to more to an attitude than a method. And it has never existed in any official history...To me, independent cinema in its original context is naturally in conflict with its desire to be accepted by the market.” Wang’s euphemistic comments explain the industry insiders’ decision to choose a new terminology in order to break with the burden of the past. For Wang Zijian and Black Fin, auteur film is a term which is both much more inclusive and also flexible enough to describe the type of films the company aims to support: films that are small and new and are “aesthetically aggressive enough to challenge something conventional without hedging around the safety consensus”.⁶⁰ Compared to Wang Zijian’s approach of dancing around sensitive topics, Factory Gate has taken a step further. By promoting the company motto of “beauty and good will”, it succeeds in further distancing the company image from anything considered “challenging”, “risky”, or “new”. In fact, it even rejects the label of “art-house-production” company. When it comes to the self-positioning of the company, Liang Ying emphasised that “it’s just because all the partners of the Factory Gate are film buffs, and they will approve a good script if they see one”.⁶¹ Liang’s account echoes one of Huang Xufeng’s interviews, in which he stated:

Factory Gate is more than a film company, and it is not a web-film production company either. It is a film company which focuses on making interesting and

⁵⁹ “Shenjiao × Wang Zijian: zhongguodianying hui shengzhangchu xinde yiyi 深焦×王子剑: 中国电影会生长出新的意义来”[New meaning will grow out of Chinese cinema], last modified 5 October 2017, https://www.sohu.com/a/196320033_758090 (accessed 25 November 2019).

⁶⁰ “Zhuanfang Heiqi chuangshiren Wangzijian: jibian langchao tuiqu le, heiqi yijiu hui jianchi xiaqu 专访黑鳍创始人王子剑: 即便浪潮退去了, 黑鳍依旧会坚持下去” [Exclusive interview with Wang Zijian, the founder of Black Fin: Black Fin will stay, even if the Tide Goes Away One Day]. last modified 19 November 2019. <https://kuaibao.qq.com/s/20191119A06DD500?refer=spider>. (Accessed February 5, 2020)

⁶¹ “Dianying haiwai faxing you name nan aa? zhuanfang gongchangdamen yingye hehuoren liangying 电影海外发行有那么难吗? 专访工厂大门影业国际业务合伙人梁颖” [Is oversea distribution that difficult? an exclusive interview with Liang Ying, the international business liaison and partner of Factory Gate). “last modified 12October 2019. <https://www.xinpianchang.com/e18767>. (Accessed July 7, 2020)

valuable content.⁶²

What is striking here is that in contrast to the strong, clear statement of the company's good financial record, words such as "beauty", "good will", "interesting", and "valuable", used to describe the company's vision, are all abstract. They sound compelling but they do not say anything specific about what kind of company Factory Gate is. In my understanding, this attitude of ambiguity – which contrasts with Black Fin's audacious claim of making films which are "small and risky" – is not random and can be understood in two ways. First, it is evidence that indie hubs are more situating themselves more deeply in the market. To do that, Factory Gate is deploying the strategy of being as inclusive as possible to attract investments and talent with different interests. Hence, any keywords (such as arthouse cinema) that might have a negative impact on commercial profitability would be omitted. Second, and more importantly, because of the promulgation of the Film Industry Promotion Law (Zhonghua renmin gongheguo dianying chanye cujinfa 中华人民共和国电影产业促进法 2016)⁶³ promulgated by SARFT (State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television 国家广播电影电视总局 Guojia guangbo dianying dianshi zongju), along with the overall tightening of the legalisation on film screening and distribution, the grey area that independent cinema once occupied has been almost entirely squeezed out of existence. Therefore, to tone down any association with the previous independent scene is a pragmatic

⁶² "Zhuanfang Gongchang Damen chuangshiren Huang Xufeng:women hai meiyou kuiben de xiangmu 专访工厂大门创始人黄旭烽：我们还没有亏本的项目" [an Exclusive Interview with the Founder of Factory Gate, Huang Xufeng: "We do Not have any Defective Project Yet]. last modified 28 October 2019. https://k.sina.cn/article_5592412189_14d55701d00100jkh8.html. (Accessed November 12, 2020)

⁶³ National People's Congress. "Zhonghua renmin gongheguo dianying chanye cujinfa 中华人民共和国电影产业促进法" [Film Industry Promotion Law], last modified 7 November 2016, http://www.npc.gov.cn/zgrdw/npc/xinwen/2016-11/07/content_2001625.htm (accessed 28 May 2021).

move.

Does the entrepreneurialism and cautious wording of the company vision undermine Factory Gate's accountability as a hub? The short answer would be "yes", as the compromise – or as Meyer-Clement would put it, the "embedding" – would have to happen for any film company to claim a place within the mainland China market now and in the near future.

However, I find that the "business is business attitude" could also be interpreted as a protective mechanism enabling hubs to do what they aim to do, without coming across as a potential threat to authority. One of the noticeable consequences of the self-protectionism I spotted in my fieldwork is that crucial figures who are key to the activation of indie hubs avoid talking about the significance of their work. For example, one told me that there is no difference between what he does and what a real-estate agent does, that "it is not that different from selling flats – you tell them how much it is and why it is worth the price" (anonymous informant#).

The discretion and common refusal to talk makes great sense for these social actants, especially when talking about their deeds and thoughts in the film industry could potentially bring more damage than profit. It is therefore important to acknowledge the performative aspect of both first- and second-hand interviews which focus more on what the hubs do than on any kind of mission statement. In this specific regard, I argue that although Factory Gate claims not to be a film company specialising in indie filmmaking, what it is has been doing tells a different story. Admittedly, compared to the degree of involvement Black Fin maintains with filmmakers who experiment with more risky subjects, Factory Gate plays it safe by foregrounding the aesthetic quality of the film projects. Still, as a hub, it has not only

transferred filmmakers such as Ju Anqi 睢安奇,⁶⁴ Pema Tseden,⁶⁵ and Gao Ming 高鸣⁶⁶ from the independent cinema scene where they were well-known to the public, but also brought new filmmakers such as Gu Xiaogang⁶⁷ into the spotlight.

In sum, securing a place within the system does not come without a price. By allying with larger film corporates, Factory Gate differentiates itself from its peers by actively advertising its outstanding financial accountability and professionalism. It also further disassociates itself from the previous independent scene and set up a company image with a positive, aesthetically pleasing tone. However, I propose that while it noticeably keeps a distance from any edgy self-positioning that might undermine the stability of the company, Factory Gate steadily integrates itself deeper within the system and into the market. The propeller power of the indie hub means that Factory Gate continues to absorb filmmakers from different stages of their careers and presents them in a circulatable way to film festivals, the market, and audiences, and subsequently enhances the visibility of indie film as a substantial, specific mode of film in mainland China.

⁶⁴ Ju Anqi was born in Xinjiang in 1975. His work as an independent filmmaker includes the documentary films *There's a Strong Wind in Beijing* (Beijing de feng henda 北京的风很大, 2000) and *Poet on a Business Trip* (Shiren chuchai le 诗人出差了, 2015). His latest feature film, *A Trophy on the Sea* (Haimianshang piaoguo de jiangbei 海面上漂过的奖杯, 2019) has exhibited and won Feimu Awards (Feimu jiang 费穆奖) during Pingyao International Film Festival (Pingyao guoji dianying jie 平遥国际电影节) in 2019. The film's theatrical distribution took place as planned in spring 2021.

⁶⁵ Pema Tseden was born in Qinghai in 1968. As a director, his works have been known for their powerful depiction of Tibetan protagonists' daily lives. His recent films, *Tharlo* (Taluo 塔洛 2015), *Jinpa* (Zhuangsile yizhiyang 撞死了一只羊, 2018), and *Balloon* (2020) have been distributed both theatrically and via streaming platforms.

⁶⁶ As a former independent filmmaker, Gao Ming made his documentary film *Pai Gu* (Paigu 排骨, 2006) about a pirate DVD-seller in Shenzhen, China. His latest film *Damp Season* (Huinantian 回南天, 2019) was theatrically distributed in 2021.

⁶⁷ Gu Xiaogang was born in 1988. As a fashion design and sales major, Gu got his first-hand experiment in filmmaking by attending a summer short course at the Li Xianting Film school. His debut *Dwelling in Fuchun Mountain* was firstly screened at Cannes, 2019 and was online distributed via iQIYI in mainland China in August 2020.

3.4 Conclusion: An Ongoing Reshuffling

Behind the progression of the three different indie film companies (Heaven Pictures, Black Fin, and Factory Gate) there lies an indie filmmaking network in the making in today's China. This chapter has observed how different social actants weave the net of "in-betweenness" together and thereby produce films with alternative aesthetics and distribute them legally in mainland China by taking indie film companies as their basis. As is the case for indie film production anywhere around the world, in contemporary China the practice remains a very small, confined portion of the current film industry. However, by staying away from high-risk labels such as "independent" to focus on branding themselves as creative, interesting content providers, Chinese indie film practitioners have kept the industry practice going, continuing to crack little holes from inside the structure of tightening culture control and surveillance deployed by the regime, which in turn lets the fresh air of cinematic creativity out and in.

To fully investigate indie film companies as a newly emerged phenomenon in the Chinese film industry, I have proposed the idea of a "hub" in this chapter as a new mental image to represent the change that is underway in the field of filmmaking in mainland China. To frame film companies and film practitioners as passive, legal entities risks overlooking the intricacy of all the different strategies and manoeuvres enacted by social actants for survival, from utilising philanthropic power and setting up different headquarters both on the mainland and in Hong Kong to forging new alliance with larger film corporates. To capture these subtle manoeuvres, I have applied Latour's actor-network theory (ANT) as my methodology. I see Latour's ANT as a powerful counterforce to a dualistic, ideologically imbued understanding of the Chinese film industry, since, according to Latour, there are no inert actors in a good social account. Instead, a good account contains "a string of actions where each participant is treated as a full-blown mediator...where all the actors do something and

don't just sit there.” (Latour 2005, 128).

Hubs are active in various ways. Besides adopting strategies to make themselves known and acceptable to the market and the audience, the tracks of a handful of social actants in the small world of indie film production have become so intertwined with each other that their real “microhabitat” in today’s China has become much more visible. What’s more, indie film talent flows around, within, and beyond this tiny microhabitat – Heaven Pictures invested in Bi Gan’s *Kaili Blues*, while Black Fin was the film’s main production company. Recently, *Damp Season*, a film produced by Factory Gate, was distributed worldwide by Redience (Chi Jiao 赤角), an international distribution company collaborates with Black Fin. In short, the relation between each hub is not purely competitive.

Indeed, securing their place in the existing market by coming up with new films for public circulation while juggling unpredictable political dynamics is a brutal game to play.⁶⁸ While this chapter mainly focuses on the factors which reinforce the making of indie cinema, this mode of filmmaking deserves much wider academic recognition both as a recognisable industry practice and as a concept. Moreover, it is important to recognise that nothing is set in stone with regard to whether the trend of alternative filmmaking in China will survive the grimmer political climate, the global pandemic and, last but not least, the pressures and the temptations imposed upon it by the market. “Yes, there are more opportunities for the young [filmmakers]”, stated an informant who has been involved with two important indie projects in a discussion about how capital could affect the filmmakers negatively. The informant

⁶⁸ while I mainly focused on three most representative indie hubs, I by no mean suggest that I have probed all the cracks and corners of indie cinema production. Other emerging actors such as Ren Jiangzhou 任建洲, CEO of Sea Level (Haipingmian 海平面), Yang Cheng, CEO of Nezha Brothers (Nezha xiongdi 哪吒兄弟), Shan Zuolong, CEO of Flowing Wheat and so on, along with the hubs they are managing are also playing an important part to build up the indie film scene in today’s China.

continued:

The investor might show up at your door with 20k in cash while you are still polishing the script. However, nobody can really tell if this sort of money is a blessing or a curse, whether it helps you or harms you more. Just like [what capital has done to] Bi Gan and his *Long Journey into the Night*. (#anonymous informant)

The concern the informant expresses here is notable in the sense that, this time, the compromising power does not come from the outside as with state censorship. Rather, financial security and success depend on filmmakers' personal choices, and on how much they are willing to sacrifice their artistic vision in order to improve their personal circumstances and live a less precarious life and make their work accessible to larger audiences. In this sense, indie cinema never quite approaches the social and political significance once carried by independent cinema as a movement. These conflicting aspects and ongoing uncertainty have brought this chapter back to the metaphor deployed by Latour to depict the scene of the social:

The “making of” any enterprise – films, skyscrapers, facts, political meetings, initiation rituals, haute couture, cooking – offers a view that is sufficiently different from the official one. Not only does it lead you backstage and introduce you to the skills and knacks of practitioners, it also provides a rare glimpse of what it is for a thing to emerge out of inexistence by adding to any existing entity its time dimension. Even more important, when you are guided to any construction site you are experiencing the troubling and exhilarating feeling that

things could be different, or at least that they could still fail – a feeling never so deep when faced with the final product, no matter how beautiful or impressive it may be. (Latour 2005, 89)

Again, Latour's metaphor has highlighted an important aspect that is worth revisiting at the end of this chapter: namely, it is very possible that indie filmmaking in China is only an ephemeral phenomenon. The hubs might wither and die when external factors no longer support their basic need to survive. Yet the scene, for now, is still going strong. And the production that this chapter has investigated is only one of several circuits that can guarantee the active operation of indie films. I will investigate other circuits in following chapters in order to investigate via other means what indie filmmaking is in a Chinese context, and what else it can bring to the table.

Chapter 4 Distribution Companies

Over the past decade, films like *Black Coal, Thin Ice* and *Angel Wears White* have received funding from large film corporations like Omnijoi Media and J.Q. Pictures (Jiaying yingye 嘉映影业) and have been successful in the Chinese market. This chapter focuses on film distribution companies in China that dedicating in distributing smaller films. Without strong corporate backing, these indie distribution companies must develop their own strategies to expand their reach and influence within the film industry. By examining three case studies of important indie distribution companies in China – Midnight Blur, Redience, and Blow-up – this chapter traces how these actants are forming and restructuring networks within and beyond mainland China. More specifically, in the case of Redience, I argue that small distribution and production companies are collaborating to increase their market share; I then examine Midnight Blur as a case of how we-media platforms are leveraging their reputation to enter the international film distribution scene. In my analysis of Blow-up, I observe how informal film screening organisers are transitioning into domestic film distributors. These distribution companies may be small in size, but they play a significant role in shaping the networks through which Chinese indie films circulate.

In the actor-network theory framework, indie production companies, whether semi-independent or corporate affiliated, can be seen as actants that are making a significant impact on the changing cinematic scene and film market in China. However, the distribution of indie films in the Chinese market remains a complex and confusing network, with various human and non-human actants interacting in unclear and hazy ways. Even long-term industry insiders, who have been actively participating in this network for years, struggle to understand the distribution and exhibition of indie films in the Chinese market. According to one of my informants, an industry insider who has been working on various indie film

projects for the past decade:

It is almost impossible to predict whether a(n) (indie) film will be successful at domestic theatrical distribution at all...Theatrical distribution is definitely not the main way to recoup the cost of a film. But you can never tell. There might be a sudden viral success. Everything happens on a case-by-case basis. (Anonymous informant#)

Through an actor-network theory lens, this chapter aims to cut through the unpredictability of the Chinese indie film scene and provide a preliminary understanding of some of the key actants involved in the distribution of indie films in China. This includes a response to the question of how indie films reach their target audience in China, and an examination of how indie distribution film companies are becoming part of the industry practice in contemporary China.

Ramon Lobato defines the distribution of circulation of films outside of the formal channels of government and international media corporations as “the movement of media through time and space” (Lobato 2012, 10). While Lobato’s definition of distribution may seem vague, I find that it resonates with my actor-network theory approach, which emphasises the momentum and fluidity of the activity rather than evaluating impact based on scale or quantity. In this regard, Lobato’s definition of distribution allows us to examine how the microcircuits of Chinese indie film are formed and are developing within a constrained environment.

While distribution of non-mainstream films is not an easy task anywhere in the world, the challenges of developing an indie film sector within the Chinese film industry are, nonetheless, unique, as it is a scene that is emerging out of its historical legacy – a film

industry that has been under strict state control since the establishment of the regime (Su 2016). In addition to censorship, which imposes more visible barriers on the distribution of indie films, market forces also play a role in shaping the distribution of indie films as these films may face challenges in securing distribution due to the lack of resources and channels compared to larger corporates.

Examining distribution channels for indie films is valuable because determining whether to target the domestic market is a crucial factor in the conceptualisation of indie films in contemporary China. Different from the “sixth-generation” filmmakers, who are “mainly targeted at and get acknowledged by exhibiting their films through international film festivals” while they “failed to establish any dialogue with either the Chinese government or the Chinese audience” (Li 2005, 448–9), contemporary indie film distributors in China are attempting to establish a dialogue with both the government and domestic audiences.

From the perspective of actor-network theory, the focus on targeting the domestic market is a key characteristic of the contemporary Chinese indie film network. This does not mean that international recognition is not important for a film’s success in today’s China. Rather, the way in which Chinese films are perceived internationally has evolved in recent years. In the early years of contemporary Chinese film, leveraging international success to achieve domestic recognition was a common strategy for Chinese filmmakers. However, this is no longer the only way for Chinese indie films to succeed. This shift can be understood through the lens of actor-network theory as a reconfiguration of the networks connecting Chinese indie films to the international film circuit, as well as to the domestic market. As these networks have evolved, so too have the pathways to success for Chinese indie films.

One of the primary reasons for the shift towards the domestic market is the highly competitive and saturated nature of the international film market, which is dominated by Chinese filmmakers who are already internationally acclaimed. For example, Jia Zhangke

discussed the demand for Chinese language films in the international market in a public talk with Zhang Xianmin, stating:

[A]fter the distribution of *Platform* (Zhantai 站台, dir. Jia Zhangke 贾樟柯 2000), I realised that there is not that much of a demand in the international film market for Chinese films. One or two, three [Chinese films] per year is more than enough. You would have to reach the very, very top of that year's films to get the chance to be internationally distributed. The current situation is that many Chinese filmmakers still have this fantasy of the international film market, thinking of it as a massive cake waiting to be cut. That is not the case at all. The cake is tiny. Chinese language film is not the main interest of the audience. That is the reality.⁶⁹

It is important to bear in mind that the complaint mentioned above was made by one of the most internationally acclaimed filmmakers whose film *The World* (Shijie 世界, dir. Jia Zhangke 贾樟柯 2004) is managed to generate significant revenue from its overseas copyright in North America.⁷⁰ If this is Jia's situation, it is easy to imagine the limited opportunities available to lesser-known or emerging filmmakers. During my fieldwork in China in 2019, I asked an industry insider if there is a larger international film market for Chinese indie films, to which this informant responded with strong emotion.

⁶⁹ Zhang Xianmin and Jia Zhangke, "Zhang Xianmin yu Jia Zhangke duihua: *The World* 张献民与贾樟柯对话: 《世界》" [Dialogue between Zhang Xianmin and Jia Zhangke on *The World*], 1905 电影网, 2 December 2014, <http://edu.1905.com/archives/view/1707> (Accessed 4 June 2021).

⁷⁰ Feng Rui 冯睿, "Jia Zhangke: Shijie de beimei banquan yi maichu 400wan meiyuan 贾樟柯: 《世界》的北美版权已卖出 400 万美元" [Jia Zhangke: *The World* has recouped 4 million USD from its copyright sales in North America], 搜狐娱乐, 8 April 2004, <https://yule.sohu.com/20050408/n225089372.shtml> (Accessed 2 February 2018).

We are just not good enough. Nobody in China has this ability to make a film for the international market. After all, Western culture is just more dominant in the world cinema scene. Why would an American be interested in watching a Chinese film in the first place? At least at this point, there is no reason for that. We are not doing a better job than them. And there is already that much of a diversity of choice there. And the Europeans who still watch Chinese films nowadays are all grannies. That is an extremely small market. (anonymous informant#)

The testimony of the informant in 2019 aligns with both academic research and industry reports on the international film scene of the late 2010s. In 2016, Yannis Tzioumakis, who had previously predicted a more vibrant international film market in North America, admitted in the new edition of *Introduction of American Independent Film* that he was wrong. Despite initial promise shown by Chinese-language films such as *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (Wohucanglong 卧虎藏龙, dir. Ang Lee 李安 2000) and *Hero* (Yingxiong 英雄, dir. Zhang Yimou 张艺谋 2002) a thriving international film market in the United States failed to materialise. Tzioumakis noted that "a sustainable international film boom in US screens after decades of little penetration beyond a core number of art houses in major metropolitan markets, only a couple of years later seemed to have been all but finished" (Tzioumakis 2017, 294). Meanwhile, in Europe, the bankruptcy of Fortissimo in 2016 was a significant event in the international film distribution industry. Playing a key role in connecting filmmakers such as Wang Kar-wai, Zhang Yuan, Wang Xiaoshuai, and Li Shaohong 李少红 to international audiences, Fortissimo was considered a leader in the global art-house cinema scene, particularly for Asian films. The failure of this distribution company suggested the potential reshuffling of the networks connecting these filmmakers to international audiences.

The bankruptcy and subsequent resurrection of Fortissimo can be seen as a reconfiguration of the networks connecting films to international audiences. The bankruptcy of Fortissimo marked "the end of an era" in the distribution of world cinema, but the company's revival under Chinese film company Hehe Films (Hehe yingye 禾和影业)⁷¹ signals a new era in which Chinese capital is more actively engaged in the international film scene. Over the past decade, Chinese capital has increasingly been infiltrating the international film industry (Zhu 2022). The investment of Alibaba in *Green Book* and the purchase of Fortissimo by Hehe Films demonstrate the extent to which Chinese capital has expanded into both mainstream and niche markets. The success of Fortissimo (Beijing) in distributing films such as *Wrath of Silence* (Baolie wusheng 爆裂无声, dir. Xin Yukun 忻钰坤, 2017), *Meili* (Meili 美丽, dir. Zhou Zhou 周洲, 2020), and *Love After Love* (Diyi lu xiang 第一炉香, 2020) in the international market since 2017 counters the argument made by Graham Winfrey that the growth of the Chinese film market does not benefit smaller-production films (Winfrey 2016). Instead, it suggests that the involvement of Chinese capital can facilitate the success of these films in the international market.

⁷¹ Founded in 2013 by Yang Wei 杨巍, Hehe Films was merged with Alibaba4.1 in 2016. Since 2016, Hehe Films have clearly been working strategically on the diversity of the films it is involved in. Besides producing mega mainstream films such as *The Mermaid* (Meirenyu 美人鱼, dir. Stephen Chou 周星驰 2016) and *See You Tomorrow* (Biduren 摆渡人, dir. Zhang Jiajia 张佳嘉 2016), Hehe Films is also behind the indie debut thrillers *What's Behind the Dark* (Heichu you shenme 黑处有什么, dir. Wang Yitian 王一恬 2015) and *Wrath of Silence* (Baolie wusheng 爆裂无声, dir. Xin Yukun 忻钰坤 2017). The documentary film *Four Springs* (Sige chuntian 四个春天, dir. Lu Qingyi 陆庆屹 2017), distributed nationally in 2017, has grossed 11.071 million CNY, making it one of the very few indie films which to have exceeded 10 million at the box office (Endata, n.d.4.2).

4.1 "Chengli jin sannian de Heheyingye, weihe nengrang Aliyingye, Chenkun, Caobaoping deng qinglaiyoujia 成立仅 3 年的和和影业, 为何能让阿里影业、陈坤、曹保平等青睐有加?" [How does Hehe Film become the favourites of Ali Films, Chen Kun, and Can Baoping in only three years after its founding?], 虎嗅网, 28 November 2016, <https://www.huxiu.com/article/172463.html> (accessed 20 March 2020).

4.2 Yien yushu 艺恩娱数, "Sige chuntian 2018-12-20 zhi 2020-01-11 piaofangqushi 《四个春天》2018-12-20 至 2020-01-11 票房趋势" [Box office trend of Four Springs (2018-12-20-2020-01-11)], Endata 艺恩娱数, last modified 11 January 2020, <http://m.endata.com.cn/Movie/MovieDetails?Mid=674125> (accessed 20 March 2020).

With relocation of Fortissimo's headquarters from Amsterdam to Beijing,⁷² as well as the company's stated focus on both Asian and Western markets, Hehe Films represents Chinese film practitioners' ongoing negotiation and realignment of networks within the international film circuit. This chapter shifts focus from Hehe Films, a financially strong company, to smaller scale indie distribution companies. Using actor-network theory, the study examines the strategies and tactics used by three small indie distribution companies: Redience, Midnight-blur, and Blow-up- three small indie distribution companies, and see how they navigate in the film circuit without strong financial ties.

⁷² "Fortissimo Films", official website of Fortissimo Films, 1 January 2017, <https://fortissimofilms.com/newsdetail/13> (Accessed 19 January 2021).

4.1 Redience (Chijiao 赤角)

Found by Xie Meng in 2017, Redience is a film distribution company, which specialises in international distribution of indie and arthouse films from China and around the world.⁷³ This section looks at how from an actor-network theory framework, Redience can be seen as an actant that is actively participating in the distribution network of indie films in China. Its partnerships with both international and Chinese filmmakers including Cai Wenjie 蔡文杰, Hu Bo, Chen Zheyi 陈哲艺, Apichatpong Weerasethaku, and Anocha Suwichakornpong,⁷⁴ as well as its recognition by international gatekeepers,⁷⁵ demonstrate the ways in which it is connected to various other actants in the network. Through its international orientation and cooperation with other film companies, Redience is able to navigate the complex and often hostile environment of the Chinese film industry, where larger corporates and existing gatekeepers hold significant power. This case study provides insight into the strategies that indie film production and distribution companies in China are using to claim space and succeed in the industry.

The cultural influence of Chinese film within the current international film industry is a complex issue to examine. Nonetheless, it is relatively straightforward to observe the ways in which capital from mainland China is quietly and swiftly integrating into and affecting the global film market (Zhu 2022). For instance, the recent Hollywood blockbusters *Teenage*

⁷³ “黑鳍上影节公布新动向， 将开展海外销售与发行业务”[Black Fin launches its new business direction during Shanghai Film Festival, It will develop its reach to overseas sale and distribution], last modified 20th June 2017, <https://www.1905.com/news/20170620/1194388.shtml> (accessed 25 August 2021)

⁷⁴ Aside from mainland indie productions, such as *Widowed Witch* (Beifang yipian cangmang 北方一片苍茫, dir. Cai Wenjie 蔡文杰, 2017) and *An Elephant Sitting Still* (Daxiang xidi erzuo 大象席地而坐, dir. Hu Bo 胡波, 2018), international and pan-Asian projects, such as the recent Singaporean film *Wet Season* (Redaiyu 热带雨, dir. Chen Zheyi 陈哲艺, 2019), Apichatpong Weerasethaku's *Memoria* (2023), and *In the Holocene* (2019), a film co-directed by British artist Ben Rivers and Thai independent filmmaker Anocha Suwichakornpong, are also part of the business Redience is developing.

⁷⁵ Patrick Frater, “Berlin: Redience Flies the Flag for China’s Indie Movement”, *Variety*, 8 February 2019, <https://variety.com/2019/film/asia/berlin-redience-china-indie-film-movement-1203132441> (last accessed 15 January 2021).

Mutant Ninja Turtles: Out of the Shadow (dir. Dave Green 2016) and *Transformer: The Last Knight* (dir. Michael Bay 2017) were financed by major Chinese film companies including Alibaba 阿里巴巴, Wanda Films, and Bona Film Group.

While the investment of Chinese film corporations in the international film market is not the primary focus of this research, this change in narrative sheds light on the understanding and involvement of Chinese industry practitioners, including emerging practitioners who are actively participating in the distribution of indie films within the global film market, in a broader sense.

With this growing international network in mind, my examination of Redience's position in the global film circuit offers an opportunity to examine and understand how the landscape is shifting for Chinese feature films in the international circuit. Given that the film industry is inherently exclusive and hierarchical, and distribution companies must have extensive connections, the benefits of securing a deal with a well-established international distributor become evident. Reflecting on 2004, when Jia Zhangke referred to the international market as small and "harsh" for Chinese filmmakers, his films were already being distributed internationally by Ad Vitam, a French independent distribution company that specialises in showcasing auteur filmmakers such as Wang Bing 王兵 and Wang Xiaoshuai.

In 2019, Liz Manashil of the Sundance Institute conducted a survey of 32 distribution companies, including IFC, Music Box Films, Roadside Attractions, among others who are involved in the international distribution of indie films.⁷⁶ According to the survey, the majority of these companies do not accept "unsolicited submissions", meaning that new

⁷⁶ Liz Manashil and Rebecca Green, "We Spoke to Dozens of Independent Film Distributors; This is What They Want in a Project", *Sundance Institute*, 1 June 2019, <https://www.sundance.org/blogs/creative-distribution-initiative/2019-what-distributors-want-in-a-film> (accessed 4 September 2021).

filmmakers have little chance of securing deals for their debut films with established distribution companies unless they have connections or references.

Both Manashil's survey and the partnerships of established Chinese auteurs with well-connected overseas distribution companies helps to understand the difficulties of the international distribution of Chinese feature films. To be able to distribute a film internationally, it is generally necessary to work with either an international sales company or directly with distribution companies. These companies typically charge commission fees for their services, which can range from 15–25% for international sales agents and 10–50% for distribution companies (Finney 2010, 17). This can be especially challenging and costly for Chinese indie film production companies without established connections, as competition for distribution opportunities can be fierce. In a 2016 interview, Wang Zijian, CEO of Black Fin stated:

If you deduct everything from it, there is basically nothing left [for production companies]. Taking all the hassle [of paying external international sales agents] into account, I'd rather they just buy me a drink than pay me. The only way to be profitable is to make distribution your own business.⁷⁷

Since 2017, Redience has been responsible for the international distribution of all the indie films produced by Black Fin, indicating a close connection between these two actants. This partnership allows both Black Fin and Redience to leverage their respective resources

⁷⁷ “Meinian yibu baokuan, heiqi wenhua CEO jiemi wenyipian zenme xiang dianyingyuan yiyang zhuanqian 每年一部爆款，黑鳍文化 CEO 揭秘文艺片怎么像电影院一样赚钱” [One mega-success every year: the CEO of Black Fin reveals how to make as much money with art films as with cinema-distributed films], *Entertainment Capital*, 12 December 2016, <http://www.ylzbl.com/article/1879> (accessed 10 August 2020).

and capabilities in order to negotiate and shape their place within the film industry network. By working together, these actors are able to exert influence and gain a greater understanding of the complex dynamics at play within the film industry.

In the past, the exclusive Chinese film market meant that the information on international distribution was exclusive to few gatekeepers who controlled most of the resources and opportunities, leading to a limited number of people being able to become directors or work in the film industry. Additionally, the concept of the “auteur narrative”, which is widely accepted in Chinese film studies, has led to only a few Chinese filmmakers being recognised as part of the “fifth- or sixth generation” and gaining significant success over the past two decades. These filmmakers, who have established their own film production companies, continue to dominate the Chinese film scene today. However, filmmakers and films that do not belong to this pre-existing network often struggle to find the same opportunities and resources, both domestically and internationally.

The emerging indie circuit allowed new actants, such as Redience, to enter the international circuit and quickly become familiar with the industry’s norms. Redience’s practice in larger international distribution circuit has bridged the gap between the international film industry and the Chinese film industry. In a recent speech, Xie Meng, CEO of Redience, provided a detailed overview of various international festivals and offered strategies for Chinese filmmakers to consider when entering the international market.⁷⁸

Redience has achieved significant success and influence in a short period of time by promoting and distributing upcoming films that may be considered “underdogs” in the Chinese film industry, such as *An Elephant Sitting Still*, which had a difficult production

⁷⁸ Xie Meng 谢萌, “Zuozhedianying de dianyingjie xiaoshou ji guojifaxingonglue 作者电影的电影节营销及国际发行攻略” [Strategies of international distribution and film festival sales for auteur film], 影视工业网, 31 July 2020, <https://107cine.com/stream/129541> (accessed 19 October 2021).

process (which I will analyse in Chapter 4) but was ultimately distributed internationally by Redience. This success suggests that more content being produced within China that could benefit from a more inclusive distribution network.

Moreover, the success of Redience as an indie distribution company can be understood as a contrast to the awkward efforts of the Chinese government made to exert influence on the international film industry through of hosting event such as the Chinese American Film Festival.

As a state-recognised festival based in Los Angeles, the Chinese American Film Festival (Zhongmei dianying jie 中美电影节)⁷⁹ has attempted to promote mainstream and blockbuster Chinese films and a few American productions. However, the festival has had limited international impact since its inception in 2006. In contrast, Redience, as a small indie distribution company, has been able to achieve success by bringing unconventional films to the international market and negotiating its place within the network of the international film circuit.

Chinese indie film's success in international film circuits has caught the attention of the Chinese government. The Chinese government is now promoting indie films as part of the international image of Chinese cinema. This is evident in the recent launch of the China Film and Television International Copyright Trading Platform, which is directly administered by the China Film Group.⁸⁰ The website for this trading platform now includes a designated “art film” category, featuring indie films such as *Balloon*, *Are You Lonesome Tonight* (Redai wangshi 热带往事, dir. Wen Shipei 温仕培 2021), and *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains*,

⁷⁹ “Zhongmei dianyingjie guanfang wangzhan 中美电影节官方网站”[Website of Chinese American Film Festival], <https://cafilmfestival.com/zh-tw/home-zh/> (accessed 12 May 2021)

⁸⁰ “Zhongguo guoji jiaoyi pingtai 中影视国际交易平台” [China Film and Television International Trading Platform, <https://www.cfpi.com.cn> (accessed 13 January 2022).

alongside more mainstream films such as *Warriors of Honor* (Wo wei ni xisheng 我为你牺牲, dir. An Zhanjun 安战军, 2019) and *The Captain* (Zhongguo jizhang 中国机长, dir. Liu Weiqiang, 2019).

The state's attitude towards indie film and Redience's approach to the international film scene can both be understood as actors within a complex network of relationships. While the state has invested in the Chinese American Film Festival as a way of exerting influence on the film industry, Redience has taken a more non-official approach by attempting to bring unconventional films to the international market. Both the state and Redience are involved in shaping the rules and practices of the film distribution scene, and their different approaches highlight the diversity of ways in which actors can engage with and shape this network. Since 2013, Redience has engaged in a process of experimentation as a way of navigating the complex network of relationships within the film industry. For example, in bringing the film *Kaili Blues* to the Lugano International Film Festival, Wang Zijian and the crew were actively trying to understand and shape their place within this network. Similarly, Redience's distribution of Geng Jun's film *Free and Easy* at the Sundance Film Festival in 2017 was an attempt to promote the film and position it within the network. According to Xie Meng, the success of this promotion was a key factor in how well the film was received at the festival. Through these efforts, Redience and other actors within the film industry are constantly negotiating and reshaping their roles and relationships within the network:

[T]he concept of promotion and sales in an international context works differently from the domestic context. There are no bribed film critics 红包影评人 or fraudulent online reviews 网站刷分. Journalists only write about your film if they like it, and they do it independently. The problem is, the press can write about 20 films, and there are 200 films participating in one film festival, so how

to get the attention? That is where public relations comes in. The work includes communication, invitation for screenings, promotion materials such as trailers, posters, photos. The larger a film festival is, the more important the media exposure is.⁸¹

To summarise, to be successful in the global film industry, actants like Redience who do not have access to the same financial and social resources as state-supported actants or acknowledged Chinese filmmakers who have already established themselves in the circuit actively seek to understand and engage with other actants in the network. Redience's success suggests that this understanding and engagement is increasing between Chinese film practitioners and the wider world cinema scene. Partnering between Black Fin as an indie production company and Redience as an indie distribution company allows these actants to increase their profits by retaining copyright and makes a wider variety of feature films available in the international circuit. By building an expanded indie distribution network, actants can also reduce the risks posed by state censorship and regulation by gaining greater access to international markets.

⁸¹ Xie Meng 谢萌, "Haiwaifaxing: rang shijie mingbai zhongguodianying 海外发行: 让世界明白中国电影" [International film distribution: let the world understand Chinese films], 新浪财经, 8 August 2019, <https://finance.sina.com.cn/roll/2019-08-08/doc-ihytcerm9382387.shtml> (accessed 5 January 2021).

4.2 Midnight Blur (Wuye shijiao 午夜失焦)

Midnight Blur is a Chinese film production and distribution company that was founded in 2017. It is based in Beijing and has international offices in cities around the world, including in Shanghai, Tokyo, Paris, and New York. As of 2020, Midnight Blur has produced 37 films in a variety of genres and featuring filmmakers from diverse backgrounds and at different stages of their careers. The company is a good example of how the proliferation of self-media, driven by a growing cinephile culture in China, has led to a new generation of industry professionals focused on the international distribution of Chinese indie films. Midnight Blur represents an alternative model to the collaboration between distribution companies such as Redience and Black Fin, which prioritise their own interests through the integration of distribution and production nodes. Instead, the company highlights how actants who may not have traditionally had access to the film industry can adapt and evolve in response to changing cultural and technological factors, like the spread of self-media and the increasing cinephile culture in China. This process has resulted in the emergence of a new group of industry professionals dedicated to the international distribution of Chinese indie films.

Midnight Blur is one of two sub-sectors of Parallax Films (huanshi wenhua 幻视文化), a recently established film company specialising in international sales, distribution, and film festival promotion and publicity. Alongside Midnight Blur, which focuses on the international distribution of indie films, is the other sub-sector, Deep Focus (Shenjiao 深焦). As the foundation for Midnight Blur, Deep Focus operates as a cinephile organisation on multiple Chinese social media platforms, promoting film-related content such as international film festival coverage, film reviews, and interviews. Deep Focus's success emphasises the impact of social media as a non-human actant in the indie network, as the influence and connections developed through social media play a crucial role in the establishment of a new

film company specialising in international distribution and sales.

4.2.1 Deep Focus: The Journey of Xiaohuoban 小伙伴

Deep Focus has operated as a self-media account specialising in film festivals since 2015. As of 2021, it remains active and has gained a large following on popular social platforms such as WeChat, Weibo, and Douban. The content on Deep Focus's Weibo account, tailored to the different natures of online platforms, includes posts on new films in the American and European markets as well as anecdotes about film history, while its Douban account serves as an archive of translated and original film reviews and interviews with filmmakers and industry professionals. However, it is Deep Focus's coverage of international film festivals that sets it apart from other film-focused social media accounts. In the first daily journal of the Berlin International Film Festival in 2016, Cao Liuying, the current CEO of Midnight Blur, writes about the excitement of transitioning from an ordinary audience member for four years to an officially recognised member of the press:

[A]fter making all the silly mistakes that can be made, I finished the "Hajj to Macca" of the three A-list international film festivals (Cannes, Berlin, Venice) for first time in my life...Later, I was lucky enough to run festival coverage for the Chinese press, and gradually got acquainted with other journalists. Queuing and watching films together, and debating after the screenings, have become the most cherished memories of the festival. Deep Focus was then founded. This year, a team of Xiaohuoban (Little Pals 小伙伴) travelled from different parts of France and gathered in Berlin. From this tiny temporary headquarters, which is based around Potsdamer Platz, we aim to cover the festival with an alternative approach, which differentiates us from the highly entertainment-focused

coverage of the mainstream media.⁸²

The use of expressions like “Hajj to Macca” (Maijia chaosheng 麦加朝圣), “Little Pals” (*xiao huoban* 小伙伴), and “most cherished memories” (*zui zhengui de huiyi* 最珍贵的回忆) reveals a personal style more akin to a diary than a festival journal. This amateurish style and enthusiasm in the first public article on film festival coverage by Deep Focus, a self-media outlet, suggests the longing, curiosity, and determination of an outsider to be part of the global film scene. This sentiment is common among the current wave of Chinese film fans seeking to contribute to the film industry, as noted by Cao in an interview with Cinehello.com. None of the founders of Deep Focus have film-related degrees, with backgrounds in subjects such as history, anthropology, and philosophy. Instead, their passion for films and desire to make a meaningful impact drives their “twisted means of saving the nation” (*quxian jiuguo* 曲线救国).⁸³

The main advantage of Deep Focus, and a major reason behind its initial success, is the immediate and direct access to the film festival scene. This access to the tier-1 international film festivals, which used to be exclusively accessible to industry film insiders or the traditional press, is becoming inclusive enough for Chinese self-media with a growing readership to access. The making of indie network in China allows for a broader range of actants to enter and engage with the industry, which further leading to the expansion and

⁸² Cao Liuying 曹柳莺, “Shenjiao zai bolin| day 1: pibei yeshi yizhong shenchen de ai 深焦在柏林 | Day 1: 疲惫也是一种深沉的爱” [Deep Focus in Berlin| Day 1: exhaustion speaks as a special form of love] *official website of Deep Focus*, 12 February 2016, <http://www.filmdeepfocus.com/2015-/?offset=1455333232000> (Accessed 7 April 2021).

⁸³ “Yu dianying zimeiti shenjiao lianhechuangshi caoliuying de zhechang duihua, henyouyisi 与电影自媒体深焦联合创始人曹柳莺的这场对话，很有意思” [An interesting dialogue with Cao Liuying, the co-founder of film self-media Deep Focus], 影视工业网, 20 December 2020, https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/ZuvfFv-HxO3_dIPqEkpUMw (Accessed 20 November 2021).

diversification of the network. Behind actants without professional film backgrounds becomes industry insiders, is the growing interest of Chinese film audiences, who are interested in staying informed about the global film scene. In fact, founders of Deepfocus also comes from this group of Chinese film fans, who have already been exposed to the works of filmmakers such as Bazin, Godard, Tarkovsky, Ozu, and Svankmajer and are no longer satisfied with simply reminiscing about the past. The desire to be in sync with the rest of the world, albeit impeded on paper by censorship and temperamental changes of policy and regulation, has been fuelled for more than two decades by other means: grabbing the few chances of snapping up film festival tickets each year, and heavily consuming visual products from “the dark side” – pirate DVDs, online streaming, and Torrent downloads (Fan 2021).

Deep Focus can be seen as an informal, interest-driven film organisation that has gained a reputation for providing reports, updates, and reviews on prestigious film festivals. This reputation was established in a relatively short period of time, thanks in part to the organisation’s ability to secure access to these festivals and to interview notable filmmakers. Additionally, Deep Focus has facilitated events for Chinese filmmakers and organisations in France and Europe, including the screening of Bi Gan’s *Kaili Blues* at the Filmothèque du Quartier Latin and a subsequent interview with the filmmaker for Cahiers du Cinéma in 2015.⁸⁴ In collaboration with Black Fin, the organisation has also promoted Chinese indie films through events such as “CIFF in Paris” in 2016⁸⁵ and tour screenings of Chinese indie

⁸⁴ Cao Liuying 曹柳莺, “Women de baliyecan: *Lubianyecan* bali dianying yuanman yuanman yuanman 我们的巴黎野餐: 《路边野餐》巴黎点映圆满圆满” [Our picnic in Paris: the preview screening of *Roadside Picnic*! Success! Success! Success!], *official website of Deep Focus*, 4 December 2015, <http://www.filmdeepfocus.com/new-blog-3/2015/12/4> (accessed 5 November 2021).

⁸⁵ “Hanleng bali de rehuochaotian – Zhongguo duliyingxiangzhan zai bali 寒冷巴黎的热火朝天——中国独立影像展在巴黎!” [Heating up in cold Paris winter – Chinese independent film festival in Paris!], *official website of Deep Focus*, 7 March 2016, <http://www.filmdeepfocus.com/new-blog-3/2016/3/7> (Accessed 5 November 2021).

films in Spain in 2017.⁸⁶

Deep Focus can be understood as an actor within an expanding network of organisations and individuals involved in overseas publicity and event organisation for the film industry. Relying on volunteers, mostly overseas students with a passion for film, Deep Focus managed to effectively insert itself into this network and establish its reputation as a reliable local host for Chinese indie films in European cities such as Paris and Madrid between 2015 and 2018. This success can be attributed in part to the increasing demand for such services and the limited capacity or willingness of the existing network of international distribution, primarily geared towards established Chinese auteurs, to meet these needs. Deep Focus has been able to leverage its access to film festivals and opportunities to interview filmmakers, as well as its ability to host events for Chinese filmmakers and organisations in Europe, to further its goals within this network.

⁸⁶ “Shenjiao yingzhan madeli zhan|luntan jiyao 深焦影展马德里站 | 论坛纪要” [Deep Focus in Madrid| excerpt from the forum], *official website of Deep Focus*, 5 March 2017, <http://www.filmdeepfocus.com/new-blog-3/2017/3/5/-?rq=马德里> (Accessed 30 November 2021).

4.2.2 International Distribution: Learning by Doing

The gap between the development of Chinese indie film and its need for international PR was filled by the Deep Focus as a new actant, which was able to gain experience quickly and transform into Midnight Blur, a distribution company with a clear focus on the international film circuit. In an industry which is not normally so forgiving and generous with opportunities for newcomers, Midnight Blur stands out as an exception. Increasing numbers of Chinese films need to be seen by the world, and the potential opportunities in the overseas film market provided the opportunity for the newly established international distribution and PR company, previously operating solely as a self-media actor, to earn its stripes and become a proper industry practitioner.

In the beginning, Midnight Blur gained its “learning experience” from two films: *The Summer is Gone* (dir. Zhang Dalei 张大磊 2017) and *Mr. No Problem* (Bucheng wenti de wenti 不成问题的问题, dir. Mei Feng 梅峰 2016). These films were both featured at the 29th Tokyo Film Festival in 2016, with *The Summer is Gone* being shown in a non-competitive section and *Mr. No Problem* winning the Best Art Contribution Award. Cao’s task was to assist the film teams in coordinating with the press and the committee during the festival.

These two films are operated by friends who we know quite well. [We] talked and they found [festival promotion] rather complicated and often it was difficult to know what the right thing to do was. So, we offered to help out during the festival. We sent two of our Xiaohuoban to deal with the related jobs, including all the contacts with the press as well as the festival organisation committee...through working on cases like this, we found international festival promotion indispensable. You can be an independent filmmaker, or a much bigger project supported by Ali 阿里巴巴 or

Taopiaopiao 淘票票,⁸⁷ the demand is there.⁸⁸

The term Xiaohuoban brings to mind the close-knit group of Chinese film enthusiasts and the sense of camaraderie during the Deep Focus period, which was not long ago. It is now transformed to a distribution company which represents both experienced filmmakers who used to be active in the independent cinema scene⁸⁹ and newer filmmakers who have recently completed their debuts. The large number of films distributed by Midnight Blur, in return, has gained the company wider recognition from film festivals and, according to Cao, has “established relationships with very reliable film curators of many influential film festivals”, creating a positive feedback loop that attracts more indie filmmakers to seek collaboration.

In the 2020s, Deep Focus remains active with a new chief editor, while the founding members have shifted their focus to other areas. In order to maximise profits, Midnight Blur has also expanded its business to target young people interested in film education through its sub-business, Fitzcarraldo! (Luzhou Jiaoyu 陆舟教育). This agency specialises in helping Chinese students study film abroad and reflects the trend of independent film practitioners without solid corporate backing seeking a pan-industry approach, supported by the growing cinephile community in China.

⁸⁷ Owned by Alibaba, Tao Piao Piao (or Taopiaopiao) is an online movie ticket distributor and film promotion service. Together, Taopiaopiao and its main rival, Maoyan, control approximately 80% of movie ticket sales in China.

⁸⁸ “Yu dianying zimeiti shenjiao lianhechuangshi caoliuying de zhechang duihua, henyoyuyisi 与电影自媒体深焦联合创始人曹柳莺的这场对话，很有意思” [An interesting dialogue with Cao Liuying, the co-founder of film self-media Deep Focus], 影视工业网, 20 December 2020, https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/ZuvfFv-HxO3_dIPqEkpUMw (accessed 20 November 2021).

⁸⁹ This includes *Stratum 2: The Asthenosphere* (Diceng 2: ruanliuceng 地层 2:软流层, dir. Cong Feng 丛峰 2018) and *The Neo-new Adventure* (Jiaomatanghui 椒麻堂会, dir. Qiu Jiongjiong 炯炯 2021)

4.3 Blow-up (Fangda 放大)

In June 2016, Blow-up Film was founded with the goal of being the first distribution company in mainland China dedicated to the distribution and promotion of “art-house cinema”. Registered with capital of ¥ 2 million, Blow-up was co-founded by industry practitioners with diverse backgrounds who had all been involved in the independent film scene for over a decade. Unlike the two distribution companies, Redience and Midnight Blur, which target the international market, Blow-up is the only distribution company focused solely on the domestic market in mainland China. This makes Blow-up a valuable case study for examining how those previously active in the informal network of the independent cinema scene are integrating into the current market by maximising the resources they can control and generating profit in the indie film industry.

The founding of Blow-up Film can be understood as a result of the actions and interactions of various actors, including the organisers of the cinephile community and the domestic film screening organisation Rear Window. Both Blow-up Film and Parallax Midnight are relatively young companies with roots in these cinephile groups, but while Parallax was founded by overseas students, Blow-up Film is connected to Rear Window, which has played a significant role in promoting indie film culture in China since the early 2000s (Huang 2015). As an online forum, Rear Window was found by Wei Xidi 卫西谛 in December 1998. During a period when film options were limited, and opportunities for discussing films were even scarcer, Wei Xidi's creation of Rear Window, an online platform for posting about films, drew in a community of like-minded netizens. By 2003, the forum had attracted active members who would later become influential figures in China's independent film scene, including individuals with film academy backgrounds like Zhang Xianmin and Du Qingchun, as well as netizens who later become film critics industry

practitioners.⁹⁰ Among them, one of my informants, who would later become one of the main initiators of Rear Window and a key informal screening exhibitor for indie films like *Don't Expect Praise*, actively participated in Rear Window's very first offline screenings organised in the early 2000s. During my fieldwork, he fondly reminisced about his college days, where he would often idle away, more interested in film than his actual major. In our interview, he emphasised how Rear Window's unique role as a platform brought people from diverse backgrounds together, facilitating the gathering of resources. As a result, it became possible to organise off-line informal screenings of films like Jia Zhangke's *Pickpocket* and Edward Yang's *A Bright Summer Day* (Gulingjie shaonian sharen shijian 牯岭街少年杀人事件, dir. Edward Yang 杨德昌 1991):

...we organised a couple open events that held special significance for us. One of these events was (the screening of) *Pickpocket*. During that time, we had the opportunity to meet an exchange student from Taiwan, who share the official version of *A Bright Summer Day* which came with four disks with us. I remember that we get the film ripped into VCDs at Zhujiang Road. The cost for each VCD was 12 yuan, which was quite pricy. A CD-burner was a luxury that one of us could afford at the time, as it cost around thousand. Without jobs to rely on, we had to seek some financial assistance from Lao Wei (Wei Xidi) to cover the material costs. The screening (of the film) was a big hit for us, drawing in a substantial audience of nearly 90 people. The ticket cost 2 yuan per person. And the profit was for after-screening staff dinner. (anonymous informant#)

⁹⁰ Zhang, Xiaoqi. "Yingmi shidai zhi hunzai luntan de rizi – youguan Houchuang kan dianying Xianggao Zhizao Dianying yehangchuan 影迷时代之混在论坛的日子- 有关《后窗看电影》《香港制造》《电影夜航船》 [The Days of Crazy for Films – About Online Forums "Rear Window", "Made in Hong Kong" and "Night Ship of Film"]" last modified 20 Sep 2011, <https://site.douban.com/widget/notes/131812/note/173653179/> (accessed 14 July 2023)

From informal screening to indie distributor active in the film industry, Blow-up Film is a prime example of how this informal community has transformed into a business, leveraging its past connections and resources to establish a place in the Chinese film market. The impact of Blow-up Film on the domestic market and the ongoing influence of Chinese independent cinema as a movement will be examined further in the following sections.

As a result of being an actant who is active within mainland China, it is subject to the hierarchy and regulations of the domestic market, as well as the influence of the state and its laws and institutionalised norms. In order to navigate the uncertainties and gain better access to projects, it is essential for Blow-up Film to find a support system in the commercial environment. Blow-up Film has found such a support in Sky Film (Tiankong zhicheng yingye 天空之城影业), a newly established film production company responsible for the success of the animated film *Monkey King: Hero is Back* (Dasheng guilai 大圣归来, dir. Tian Xiaopeng 田晓鹏, 2015). As part of Sky Film's development strategy, which includes a focus on "animation film, art-house cinema, and thrillers",⁹¹ Blow-up Film will work with Lantern Films 马灯电影,⁹² a production company that specialises in indie film production and aims to "pave the way for art-house cinema and new films".⁹³

⁹¹ "Dujia zhuizong |cenghuo gaolingtouzi Dashengguilai chupinfang Tiankongzhicheng yingye zai rongzi 独家追踪 | 曾获高瓴投资 《大圣归来》出品方 '天空之城影业'再融资" [Exclusive | Sky Film, the production company of *Monkey King: Hero is Back* gets series funding again after investment from Hillhouse Capital Group], *Sohu*, 2 February 2020, https://www.sohu.com/a/220479673_649045 (accessed 30 November 2021).

⁹² "Madeng dianying youxian gongsi 马灯电影有限公司" [Lantern Film], 影视工业网, 13 March 2017, <https://107cine.com/company/index/763266> (accessed 10 October 2021).

⁹³ "Houchuang fangying tuandui ziwo chanye shengji, Fangda jujiao wenyipian xuanfa '后窗放映'团队自我产业升级, '放大'聚焦文艺片宣发" [Self-initiated industry upgrading of Rear Window, "Blow Up" art-house cinema distribution], 微博, 20 June 2016, <https://weibo.com/ttarticle/p/show?id=2309403988578454641842&mod=zwenzhang> (accessed 25 May 2021).

4.3.1 “Salon Distribution” (Shalong faxing 沙龙发行)

The founding of Blow-up Film represents a significant shift in the way that films are connected to their potential audiences in a commercial setting. The company’s years of organising informal screenings in China are now being used in a more stable and profitable manner on larger projects. This shift is reflected in Blow-up Film’s business philosophy of “salon distribution”,⁹⁴ which evokes the sophistication and elegance of eighteenth-century French salons, with their comfortable couches, wine, and discussions of art and poetry. Through “salon distribution”, which according to Li Jun 李俊, one of the cofounders of Blow Up, involves demassification (Fenzhong 分众), community building (Shequn 社群), word of mouth promotion (Koubei 口碑), and focus on specific topics (Huati 话题),⁹⁵ Blow-up Film helps smaller-budget films without sufficient funds for traditional distribution to reach their target audience. Interestingly, Li Jun also emphasised that films with larger budgets can benefit from “salon distribution” because it helps secure dedicated film fans who have a strong influence on word of mouth.

In terms of actor-network theory, Blow-up has utilised the concept of “salon distribution” to promote a selection of non-mainstream films since 2016, including *Song of the Phoenix* and *Paths of the Soul* (Gangrenboqi 冈仁波齐, dir. Zhang Yang 张杨 2015). The latter film experienced significant success at the Chinese box office in 2017, profiting ¥ 100.1 million on a budget of approximately ¥ 13 million.⁹⁶ It has been regarded as “the spring for

⁹⁴ Ibid

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ “Juzu huaqian dou buganjing jiu buyaotan gongyehua le! Zhuanfang zhipianren Chenggong|zhipianzhuanfang shibaqi 剧组花钱都不干净，就不要谈工业化了！专访制片人成功 | 制片专访 18 期” [No industry standard can exist without budget transparency of the crew! Exclusive interview with Cheng Gong| Producer interview No. 18], 影视工业网, 23 August 2017, <https://weibo.com/ttarticle/p/show?id=2309403988578454641842&mod=zwenzhang> (accessed 8 November 2021).

indie film in China”.⁹⁷ According to Gao Da, a co-founder of Blow-up Film, the film’s success can be attributed to the company’s efforts to build and maintain a diverse network of connections that supported its distribution:

With our own stuff, connections, resources, [we] are then qualified enough to distribute. There have been some successful experiences. Through getting acquainted with cinema managers in different cities and tiptoeing around universities and institutions, we have established connections with various (screening) spaces from cinema to campus, and are on good terms with new media celebrities, internet influencers, culture luminaries, and so on. The huge success of *Paths of the Soul* did not come from nowhere. (Interview transcript 2019)

The success of *Paths of the Soul* has demonstrated Blow-up Film’s competency as a distribution company. However, within the domestic market, a small company like Blow-up cannot rely solely on indie film distribution to sustain itself and may not have the resources to handle large projects on its own. Take the distribution of *Paths of the Soul*, for example, contradicting Gao Da’s assertion about Blow-up Film’s role in the success of *Paths of the Soul*, another informant states that the distribution of the film was “not really done only by us, it is a project shared by three to four different companies” (anonymous informant#). The anonymous informant did not provide the names of the other companies involved in the film’s distribution. Interestingly, the opening credits of the film did not give official credit to

⁹⁷ “*Gangrenbiqi* piaofang guoyi, xiaozhongyishupian zaizhongguo yinglaichuntian 《冈仁波齐》票房过亿，小众艺术片在中国迎来春天?” [*Paths of the Soul* is grossing more than ¥ 100 million. Is it the spring for niche art-house cinema in China?], *Sohu*, 26 July 2017, https://www.sohu.com/a/160068776_745022 (accessed 3 November 2021).

any of these company, including Blow-up. Instead, only Lantern Films was acknowledged as the exclusive distribution company.⁹⁸

The exclusion of Blow-up's as distribution company in the opening credit of *Paths of the Soul* reveals the subordinate situation that Blow-up finds itself in as an actant in the emerging indie distribution scene. On one hand, Blow-up Film's adoption of "salon distribution" as a strategic approach reflects its focus on catering to smaller-budget films that lack traditional distribution resources. On the other hand, although the company has proven competence in indie film distribution, its small size presents challenges in sustaining itself solely through this avenue and handling larger projects independently. In the upcoming section, we delve into the additional strategies employed by Blow-up Film to ensure its continued success and viability in the industry.

4.3.2 Finding Ways to Keep Ends Meet

Blow-up Film (as a non-human actant) must find various ways to generate consistent income to stay afloat. In addition to indie projects, the company engages in more commercial ventures and partners with emerging self-media platforms such as Ttffilm (Taojie kandianying 桃姐看电影).

Ttffilm is a film self-media that provides daily online recommendations and reviews of new films and TV shows, and in addition organises offline film group screenings (Guanyingtuan 观影团). (Fan 2021) Blow-up acts as the curator and organiser for Ttffilm's offline film screenings. Gao Da described the relationship between Blow-up Film and Ttffilm as follows:

⁹⁸ *Path of the Soul* (2015). Tencent Video, <https://v.qq.com/x/cover/w3ieh3f84a1kjgb/c0024upve8l.html> (accessed 15 Oct 2022)

We have a strategic partnership. We share the same office with Ttffilm in Beijing. In terms of the daily office time, the editors of Ttffilm are in charge of watching and browsing through films and writing reviews online; all the offline activities are in fact operated by us. (anonymous informant#)

From Hollywood blockbusters like *Avengers Endgame* (dir. Anthony Russo and Joe Russo 2019) to Chinese main-melody film *The Climbers* (Pandengzhe 攀登者, dir. Lee Daniel 李仁港 2019), it is becoming difficult to tell whether Blow-up Film is still primarily an “indie film” distribution company, or if it is simply doing whatever it can to generate profit and stay afloat. In order to adapt to the changing market environment, Blow-up Film is leveraging its resources and experience from the independent film scene to remain valuable and useful within the commercial network. However, the company lacks the capital and control to choose which projects to work on. In a sense, Blow-up Film has fully integrated into the current film market, to the point that aside from an outdated recruitment advertisement⁹⁹ and minimal coverage of the company’s launch, there is little evidence of any film-related events or activities associated with Blow-up Film. This may be because the company serves as a service provider for other corporations or companies, executing commissions without taking credit for the events (such as the successful promotion of *Paths of the Soul* in 2017).¹⁰⁰

As they enter the business world, industry practitioners often adopt a “business is

⁹⁹ “Fangda dianying gongsi jianjie 放大电影公司简介” [Company profile of Blow-up Film], 实习僧, n.d., https://www.shixiseng.com/com/com_e8uwkidflzx8 (accessed 6 November 2021).

¹⁰⁰ “Yu Gangrenbiqu yiqi jiannan xiujing: daoyan zhangyang beihou de sange shangren 与《冈仁波齐》一起艰难修行：导演张杨背后的三个商人” [A thorny pilgrimage on the *Paths of the Soul*: Three businessmen behind Zhang Yang the director], 虎嗅网, 29 June 2017, <https://www.huxiu.com/article/202121.html> (accessed 7 November 2021).

business” attitude, at least publicly. For instance, one of the informants who work closely with indie exhibition companies like Blow up seems to believe that the independent film scene is a lost cause and has no place in the current Chinese film market. He emphasises that as an industry professional, “there is only one option to the rule: acceptance. There are no other options” (anonymous informant#). This perspective is shared by many industry practitioners who have recently transitioned from informal work in film-related fields to formal roles in the film industry. In order to avoid risks or consequences, these professionals must be careful about how they present their work. This is similar to Blow-up Film as a distribution company – it functions like any small distribution company that takes on commissions to distribute commercial and entertainment films, and in the Chinese context, mutated propaganda films.

It is notable that human actants often refrain from discussing their experiences when they transition from the independent film network to a more market-oriented network. However, according to another informant, Blow-up Film’s organisation of a commemoration film (Xianlipian 献礼片) suggests that there may be more to the story:

The Climber is a really mediocre film, a 5 out of 10 film. We, however, tried to amplify the interesting aspect of that film and bring it to our audience. For the screenings in Beijing, we did not talk about Wu Jing,¹⁰¹ main-melody, patriotism or the fact that it is a commemoration film. No, we left those things out of it. What we did was to invite a geologist. And we placed boxes with limestones which were collected from different altitudes of the Himalayas. After the screening, the geologist explained to the audience how the eco-system is on the Himalayas when

¹⁰¹ Wu Jing, a Chinese actor who is famous for the viral success of *Wolf Warrior*.

it's reaching 6,000 metres, whether there are any plants up there, could a human being still climb that high and, if so, what kind of preparation would they need to make? Knowledge of ecology, that is also something this film can carry. Even if one feels a bit sick of Wu Jing, one still has some knowledge about nature to take away after the screening. (Anonymous informant#)

From an actor-network theory perspective, this excerpt raises the question of whether it is still meaningful to distinguish Chinese indie cinema within the dual constraints of the state and the market. Is it possible for a film company operating within the system to maintain its individuality as a proactive agent seeking to make a difference, or will it inevitably become homogenised and lose its distinctiveness? This is a difficult question to answer. On the one hand, it seems likely that “Chinese indie cinema” will continue to lose its uniqueness as the concept of “indie” shifts from its original meaning of “independent” to refer more broadly to a particular aesthetic. A soft, “elegant and unique” film style may be more palatable to the state and more appealing to the market. In this sense, “indie” may become just another normative category, another form of “diversity” within the Chinese film market. On the other hand, the excerpt suggests that even in a heavily regulated space where the content of films is predetermined, there is still room to consider how these films are distributed and presented.

4.3.3 Conclusion

To conclude, Blow-up provides a unique vantage point from which to observe how an informal film screening organisation, Rear Window, has transformed into an enterprise, capitalising on the connections and resources gathered from its past and searching for its place in the Chinese film market. To navigate the uncertainties of the domestic market and gain better access to projects, the film company comes up with “salon distribution” as their branding and trying to work side jobs which have nothing to do with indie films to make the ends meet.

Blow-up Film’s experience as a small indie distribution company highlights the challenges faced by indie distribution companies targeting the domestic market. Operating within the dual constraints of the state and the market, these companies are at risk of losing their individuality and distinctiveness. However, my interactions with human actants suggest that there is still room for interpretation, even when distributing films that promote state propaganda. This “wiggle room” for creativity and interpretation within the film distribution process is highly mutable and opaque, taking the form of encrypted conversations and shared live experiences among film distributors and the audience. In this context, Blow-up Film’s story has both a happy and a sad ending. As a small film distribution company in the domestic market, it must work with whatever is available, whether indie or blockbuster. However, its presence in the market also creates opportunities for more connections and, at times, allows for flexibility and space to screen films and offer their own interpretations.

4.4. Conclusion: Claiming the Space

This chapter, through its examination of three active actants in indie distribution, provides two crucial insights. Firstly, Chinese filmmakers and practitioners have become increasingly acquainted with the rules of the international film circuit. As Chinese indie cinema gains recognition in global film spaces, coinciding with the surging interest of Chinese capital in the global film market, the unique positioning of indie distributors like Redience and Midnight Blur becomes evident. This chapter interprets Elsaesser's theory — which posits that American and European cinema differences extend beyond artistry to the foundational value-making networks. By illustrating how Redience and Midnight Blur balance the aesthetics of film festivals with domestic resource leveraging, it becomes clear these actants are operating in a new way, which sets them apart from their predecessors, who partnered directly with renowned foreign sales and distribution companies.

The second point this chapter makes concerns the challenges faced by indie distribution companies in mainland China, as illustrated by the case study of Blow-up. In a film industry heavily regulated by the state and dominated by large corporations, companies like Blow-up strive to transform themselves from informal screening communities to more mainstream distribution businesses. However, they often find themselves working under the umbrella of larger corporations and need to lean towards commercial projects to keep afloat. By the conclusion of this thesis, Blow-up had ceased operations as a film firm, with its main personnel going back to organizing individual film screenings. While Blow-up's journey underscores the hurdles for small-scale distributors in mainland China, it also paves the way for two intriguing fields for future research: the growing interest of major corporations in the domestic distribution of indie films and the expansion of informal film screening communities throughout China.

Chapter 5 Negative Affects

In the last two chapters, I examined how a vibrant indie network within the film industry is in the making in today's China through the flowing of capital, talents, and the strategic manoeuvres that human actants and non-human actants (that is, marketing materials, advertising, online interviews, sentiment for films) make together. Through reading three indie feature films – *Black Coal, Thin Ice*; *Kaili Blues*; and *An Elephant Sitting Still*, this chapter further demonstrates the value of applying actor-network theory in close film analysis of Chinese indie films. More specifically, I investigate how the application of a theory, which aims to understand the relationships between objects, humans, ideas, and unique networks activated by busy actants, can be translated from study of social world to the study of cinematic space. The crucial roles non-human actants play demands my close reading of Chinese indie cinema to turn to the often-overlooked aspect of film analysis when it comes to Chinese films, which are the formal elements including cinematography, lighting, props among others.

Following these non-human actants, which formally make up a film and contribute to its overall look and feel, I argue that inert, non-individual affects of dysphoria, despair, and melancholy which enfolds in these three indie films creates alternative cinematic spaces that neither conform to the mainstream, feel-good cinematic conventions nor to the state-promulgated propaganda of a “harmonious society”. I further argue that my ANT analysis of indie film contributes to a better understanding of the significance of Chinese indie film because while compromises need to be made in terms of the content of films to get the shooting permit and pass the censorship to be screened and distributed in public, forms of films, as an integrated part of the film, cannot be censored away, as they do not directly belong to the diegetic part of a film. The negative affects the non-human actants construe

dodges the state censorship on the content of the film. It contests the propaganda of a harmonious society imposed by the state and finds its way going in between the screening to reach out to the audience.

5.1 Road Map: Actor-Network Theory as a Method

I choose actor-network theory as a tool to the analysis of Chinese indie film for the following reasons.

First, ANT connects the film industry's practices with film aesthetics. As a theory that focuses on the relationship between human and non-human actants, and the network in which these actants are embedded, ANT provides a comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding the complex relationships and networks involved in the aesthetics features of Chinese indie cinema, and how these aesthetic choices can be tightly interwoven together with indie film as a unique industry practice which is under the scrutinised by state regulation and censorship. For example, ANT can help to examine how the choice of lighting, which may be seen as an aesthetic preference, may also be influenced by the budget constraints of the film.

Second, ANT helps to identify and trace negative affects in Chinese indie films. Unlike the highly emotional Hollywood films that aim to elicit "direct emotional involvement" (Elsaesser 2021, 445), and contrasting with the "official affect" imposed by the state, which is often loud, assertive, and uplifting but hollow, the negative affect discussed in this chapter is the affect that permeates Chinese daily life and arises from mundane scenarios. To borrow Kathleen Stewart's writing on the ubiquity and transiency of ordinary affect:

The ordinary is a circuit that's always tuned in to some little something somewhere. A mode of attending to the possible and the threatening, it amasses the resonance in things.

It flows through clichés of the self, agency, home, a life.

It pops up as a dream. Or it shows up in the middle of a derailing. Or in a simple pause. It can take off in flights of fancy or go limp, tired, done for now.

It can pool up in little worlds of identity and desire.

It can draw danger.

Or it can dissipate, leaving you standing. (Stewart 2003, 14–15)

In this sense, my analysis of negative affect that I found in Chinese indie films is more akin to Zuo's concept of "un-sticky emotion" – a type of fatigue caused by uncertainty of the social, political future of contemporary China. They are collective feelings people living in China carry, yet are difficult to articulate in person, either because they are not used to, not allowed to, do not want to, or do not know how to express. With the help of ANT, this chapter can locate and examine the cinematic space where this quiet circulation take place. I argue that my analysis of the negative affect Chinese cinema carries provides a strong counter narrative against the state propaganda of "a harmonious society".

My third reason for choosing ANT as an analytical tool to film analysis is that it emphasises the important role that non-human actants such as camera, lightings, and objects play in the construction of film aesthetics. This focus allows for more space to analyse the structure and the non-diegetic aspects of a film. I argue that via the lens of ANT, the relations between non-human actants and their manoeuvres (camera–camera movement; lighting–chromatic pattern; props–object) to construct specific affect become more transparent.

Moreover, this chapter's choice of ANT as an approach to text analysis of films makes it part of an expedition of creating an ANT "grammar" which can generate new insight within the discipline of film studies. As Sonnenberg-Schrank claims in *Actor-Network Theory at the Movies* (2020):

If we claim that a film has a message, agenda, function, perpetuates ideology and values, it is crucial to identifying where exactly this manifests itself, where in the production (and consumption) process it enters the equation, and by what means and which human and non-human actants it is brought there. This process of reassembling grants access to an inquiry into how a cinematic style is produced and what agency it has, whether it is an actant, and which actants constitute it, and, ultimately, what these film-objects are, what meanings they hold, what they are made of, what they do and how they do it. (Sonnenberg-Schrank 2020, 22)

Expanding the definition of non-human actants from its classical definition (that is, objects, animals, environment, technology) to ideas, theories, and cinematic conventions, Sonnenberg-Schrank argues that the “chain of transformation”, which is formed by the interactions among these actants connects film studies and culture studies and allows for a deeper understanding of the aesthetics of films, without relying too heavily on cultural references and contextualisation, as these elements have already played a role in shaping the aesthetics of teen films as an established genre.

Fourth, ANT’s networked perspective is valuable as it directs attention away the dilemma of spectatorship and towards questions about how affect is produced in film? How does the specific circuit which facilitates the flow of affect look like? Who are the actants that are involved in making the indie scene alive? Additionally, both the application of ANT and examination of affect spare the argument of how it is appropriate to apply theories generated in a Western intellectual discourse into analysis of specific Chinese reality. Even if due to different cultural, social, and political context, people may experience and deal with

emotions differently, affect, or emotional response, is a fundamental part of the lived world.

In this sense, ANT's focus on following the actants allows for a more nuanced understanding of what is different and in common, and more importantly, what connects us as human being.

5.1.1 Affect Theory and Negative Affect

As a field of study that focuses on emotions and the ways in which they influence human behaviour and social interactions, affect theory has been firstly developed in the field of psychology and psychoanalysis. The term “affect” was originally proposed by Silvan Tomkins in the 1960s to refer to the innate, physiological responses that people have to stimuli. In an article titled “The Quest for Primary Motives” (Tomkins 1981), Tomkins refutes the Freudian interpretation that all human emotional reactions are desire-driven and criticised the research approach that prioritises cognition over embodied affect mechanism, and defines affect as such:

Affect is a loosely matched mechanism evolved to play some parts in continually changing assemblies of mechanisms. It is in some respects like a letter of an alphabet in a language, changing in significance as it is assembled with varying other letters to form different words, sentences, paragraphs (Tomkins 2010, 51).

Diverted from Tomkin’s stance of affect as a mechanism which contributes as an inherent part of bodily experience, Jacques Lacan argues for the relation between affect and symbolic order (Evans 1996, 5). In line with Lacan, Gilles Deleuze and Guattari see affect as a fundamental aspect of the human experience and that it plays a central role in the formation of the self. However, different from Lacan, Deleuze argues that affect is a pre-individual power, a “resonance” between bodies, a prelinguistic, pre-symbolic, and nonconceptual communication which “is no longer feelings or affections” (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 164). Citing the works of Cézanne, Kleist and Woolf, Deleuze suggests that posits art as a way to access affect as the “non-human becoming of man”. Like a protagonist roaming around an old town in Virginia Woolf’s novel: the sights belong to none yet resonate with all. The

experience of affect is “become-with the world” which stands on its own (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 169).

Gilles Deleuze’s theory of affect has been influential in wide array of fields, including philosophy, psychology, cultural studies, and literary criticism. Scholars and theorists coming from a variety of disciplines including Lauren Berland (2011), Erin Manning (2009), Patricia Ticineto Clough (2009), and Jane Bennet (2020) have been exploring the role affect plays in shaping social relations and cultural practice.

What lies in the core of discourse on affect is the theoretical tension between emotions and feeling as a personal experience and affect as a pre-individual power which functions as a medium, a fundamental aspect and social and culture life. Differentiating affect from “personal feelings, and emotions” (Massumi 2015, 3), Brian Massumi explores the ways in which affect and emotion shape our perceptions and actions, and how they are shaped by social and political forces. He argues that affect is the embodied feeling of possibilities for action that precedes and makes possible the recognition of the specificities of things and the meanings and values that can be attributed to them. According to Massumi, this inherent feature of affect means that intense affective states, such as anger or laughter, have the power to interrupt “the normalised interrelations and interactions that are occurring and the functions that are being fulfilled” (Massumi 2015, 8). Similar to Massumi’s analysis on the significance of daily life affect such as anger, Kathleen Stewart elaborates on the mundane scenarios in which encounters with affect happen. She argues in *Ordinary Affect* that affect functions as the connective tissues of everyday life, and the vital medium that links us to the world, to others, and to ourselves:

Ordinary affects are public feelings that begin and end in broad circulation but they’re also the stuff that seemingly intimate lives are made of. They give circuits and flows

the forms of a life. They can be experienced as a pleasure and a shock, as an empty pause or a dragging undertow, as a sensibility that snaps into place or a profound disorientation. They can be funny, perturbing, or traumatic. Rooted not in fixed conditions of possibility but in the actual lines of potential that a something coming together calls to mind and sets in motion, they can be seen as both the pressure points of events or banalities suffered and the trajectories that forces might take if they were to go unchecked. (Stewart 2003, 5)

While Massumi's research on affect emphasises the power of affect to interrupt and disrupt established norms and practices, Kathleen Stewart's concept of ordinary affect as public feelings suggests that the politics of affect can be understood in terms of connection and the "animated inhabitation of things" (Stewart 2003, 18). Despite approaching affect via different disciplines, both scholars probe the political significance of affect. Though elucidating micro, mundane ways in which affect operates, both their work suggest that affect has the potential to generate new insights and possibilities for social and political change.

While early psychologists, such as Freud, classified feelings like sadness, fear, and melancholy as conditions requiring treatment (Freud 1917), contemporary theorists have increasingly valued emotions traditionally regarded as "negative. In his work, Brian Massumi examines anger as a means to re-establish social and political norms (Massumi 2015). This emphasis on understanding the nuances of emotions is not limited to the dominant or strong feelings such as anger. Sianne Ngai, in her work *Ugly Feelings*, revisits the Kantian definition of sublimity, which celebrates pronounced emotions such as grief or rage endowed with aesthetic quality (Ngai 2005, 265). Analysing contemporary works such as Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1953) and Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1956), Ngai introduces the concept of "stupidity" to further examines often-overlooked "smaller" feelings like envy,

irritation, anxiety, and boredom (Ngai 2005, 9). She describes these affects as “something much closer to an ordinary fatigue—and one that cannot be neutralized, like the sublime’s terror, by a competing affect” (Ngai 2005, 270). By expanding academic attention to these emotions, Ngai offers a more nuanced insight into the affective dimensions of aesthetics and their impact on contemporary society.

Following the similar vein, in *Cruel Optimism*, Lauren Berlant presents a society where even aspirations for a better life can be shadowed by negative affect. Delving into the interplay of desire and attachment in a precarious post-capitalist society, she underscores how, even when confronted with evident harm, individuals tenaciously cling to a deceptive hope that “the labour of maintaining optimism will not be negated by the work of world-maintenance as such and will allow the flirtation with some good-life sweetness to continue.” (Berlant 2011, 48)

5.1.2 Film Theory and Affect: Embodied and Formal Approaches

Drawing from social and literary scholarship on emotion and societal dynamics, film emerges as a compelling medium. Within the extensive scholarship on affect in film studies, two predominant approaches surface: the embodied approach and the formative approach (Sobchack 2004, Rutherford 2011, Elsaesser 2021, Klinger 2006, Brinkema 2014, Bordwell and Thompson 2011). Instead of treating these approaches as mutually exclusive, they can be visualised on a continuum. In the subsequent sections, I will delve into their differences and how they relate to one another.

5.1.2.1 An Embodied Approach to Affect

An embodied approach to affect in film studies emphasises the role of the body in shaping our emotional responses to films. This approach draws on theories from clinical and experimental psychology, psychoanalysis, and philosophy that focus on the sensory and physical aspects of experience. During the early 1960s, there was a growing interest in the role of the body and the senses in understanding human experience. This interest was reflected in the work of a number of post-World War II philosophers, who explored the relationship between the body and the mind, and the ways in which cognitive and non-cognitive processes interact. In film studies, this shift towards an embodied approach was evident in a series of work including Thomas Elsaesser's foundational piece titled "Tales of Sound and Fury: The Family Melodrama" (1972); Barbara Klinger's work on the relationship between technology renovation and viewing experience (2006); and Jennifer Barker's analysis on the physical sensation, and audience's emotional response to the film (2009). Furthermore, translating phenomenology into film studies, Vivian Sobchack foregrounds the role of the body in the film-viewing experience. Cinematic experience, according to Sobchack, is fundamentally an embodied, synchronised, multi-sensory process because of "lived bodies' sense-making capacity" (Sobchack 2004, 8). In line with Sobchack's argument

on embodiment in cinematic experiences, Anne Rutherford argues for the importance of an embodied spectatorship in film viewing, in which the viewer has a deep, material connection with the film. Channelling the work of Miriam Hansen, Walter Benjamin, and Siegfried Kracauer's "psychophysical correspondences" (Rutherford 2011, 67–8), she refutes a formative and post-structuralist approach to film analysis, and posits that this embodied spectatorship is established through the interaction between the viewer's psychophysical, "mimetic capacity" (Rutherford 2011, 68) which facilitates the audiences to follow "the logic of the visceral" (Rutherford 2011, 176) and the material aspects of the film, which "draw in and engage the materiality of the corporeal viewer" (Rutherford 2011, 70). Keeping a cautious distance from the "I" experience in Sobchack's writings, Rutherford conceptualises embodied spectatorship as taking place within the realm of *mise-en-scène*, where the material elements of a film, such as landscapes and decor (Rutherford 2011, 172), create a "porous interface" (Rutherford 2011, 68) between the viewer and the material world of the film. This interface allows for the possibility of affects that "do not necessarily have an identifiable situational emotion or are not necessarily initiated by a fictional emotional situation that reverberates through the body" (Rutherford 20011, 58) to form a connection between the viewer and the film through the material dimension of cinematic space.

5.1.2.2 A Formal Approach to Affect

The formal approach to affect in film studies emphasises the role of form, or the structure and organisation of the film, in shaping affective responses. This approach is often associated with post-structuralist theory, which emphasises the way that meaning is produced through the interaction between language, culture, and power. Among a wide spectrum of scholars including Teresa De Laetis (1985), Laura Mulvey (1975), Brian Massumi (2015), Lauren Berlant (2011) who have engaged with a formative approach to affect in film studies, this section focuses on the theories of two theorists: Bordwell's cognitive approach, which focuses on how audiences make sense of films through inferential form, and Brinkema's "radical formalism", which emphasises the importance of treating affects as structures that work through formal means. I am looking specifically at these two theorists because they represent two different positions of an ongoing debate within the formal approach to affect in film studies. It concerns to which extent spectatorship shall be included for a sound piece of analysis.

Bordwell's approach to film is based on investigating how film can be understood by audiences. He proposes that the form of a film is "inferential" and that audiences make sense of films through this form. In dialogue with J.J Gibson's theory of ecological perception, Bordwell reflects on his earlier work *Narrative in Feature Film* (1985) and adjusts his positioning from a "cognitive approach" in which "the eyes...are a part of mind". Bordwell links emotional responses to this concept of folk psychology, suggesting that cinema is able to trigger involuntary emotional responses in audiences through its ability to capture gestures and facial expressions. These emotional responses can then be used for narrative purposes (Bordwell 2011).

Unlike Bordwell's cognitive approach to form and narrative in films, which according to the theorist, with nothing to do with "neo-Marxism, psychoanalysis, cultural studies, and

the study of modernity and postmodernity” (Bordwell 2011), Eugenie Brinkema argues for a “radical formalism” (Brinkema 2014, 37) in film analysis and advocates for a complete exclusion of spectatorship from the study of affect in film. She believes that including the perspective of the spectator risks the creation of biased, personal accounts and undermines the potential for a generalising theoretical investigation. Brinkema advocates for a return to formalist analysis and suggests that affect should be studied as a structure that operates through formal means, such as frame composition, light, colour, and rhythm.

Brinkema’s call for “a return to the roots of formalist analysis” (2014, 37) has significantly influenced my reading of films in this chapter. Her critique of the embodied approach to affect in film studies resonates with my own concern about the validity of using a single individual’s reaction to a specific mise-en-scene as a basis for academic research. In this sense, Brinkema’s radical formalism appears to effectively avoid subjectivity, as she suggests:

Reading affect for form allows a richer language for describing the concept (beyond violence or frenzies or intensities); avoids the tendency of thematising affect; and allows for a nuanced articulation of the ineluctable specificity and complexity of individual texts and individual affects as a way into something new and not as a confirmation of prior, static models. (Brinkema 2014, 39)

While strongly resonating with Brinkema’s emphasis on the meticulous analysis of films — especially in highlighting the often-neglected significance of form and non-diegetic cinematic elements in constructing specific films — there remains a contemplation on the role spectatorship holds in a film’s affective process. A review of Chinese scholarship on affect will be provided first, and later, this point will be revisited to showcase actor-network

theory as a valuable intermediary approach.

5.1.2.3 Chinese Scholarship on Negative Affect

Interestingly, the study of affect in Chinese cinema reveals two distinct yet intertwined narratives: one views cinema as a medium generating collective emotion within historical contexts, and the other, though focusing on the individual spectrum of affect, still maintains deep ties with significant political events in China.

A cluster of Chinese studies probes the role of affect and emotions to construct national identity and promote nationalist ideology throughout different historical of modern China. For example, in “Propagating the Propaganda Film: The Meaning of Film in Chinese Communist party Writings, 1949–1965”, Tina Mai Chen examines how the CCP used film as a tool to reinforce affective ties (2003, 179) and shaped the party’s message about the relationship between the individual, the state, and society. Along this line of scholarship which investigates affectivity as a means of constructing national identity and collective memory, Zhang Yingjing points out cinema can be considered as an emotional reaction to a series of disastrous political events including culture revolution (Zhang 2004, 256). Wang Yiman expands this adhesive feature of cinema as an affective medium beyond a nationalistic frame by examining the affective appeal to “home” and “imagined togetherness” in Chinese diasporic filmmaking (Wang 2016). Meanwhile, in her work *Fiery Affect* (2015), Bao Weihong 包卫红 shifts the focus from the use of affectivity in state-mobilised propaganda to its profound influence in shaping the public space of modern China. Her conceptualisation of “affective medium” as a concept which generates “a new conception of medium, space, and spectatorial body as well as the entwinement of media in a dynamic ecology” (Bao 2015, 8) opens space for her examination of early cinema in Republican China from the 1910s through to the 1940s as a complex, and lively scene which is construed of “various political regimes

and film studios, despite the wartime geopolitical divisions between Nationalist, Communist, and Japanese colonial regimes” (2015, 19).

Victor Fan’s work *Cinema Approaching Reality* (2015) also examines the film history of Republican China, focusing on the discourse surrounding affective spectatorship and its relationship with cinema through the lens of “vernacular critiques” (pinglun 评论) of Chinese film theorists and critics such as Liu Naou 刘呐鸥, Fei Mu 费穆, and Gu Kenfu 顾肯, Fan argues that Marxist film practice in the 1930s as a “form of sensorial intervention”

thinks, feels, and activates political actions by instilling a mode of consciousness in the sentient bodies of its viewers, which makes tangible and ideological work that informs the modality of their political existence...it makes palpable the distance between the image-consciousness these viewers apprehend and the political reality that has concealed from them, thus allowing a yishi – a yet-to-be-defined schema that permits the audience to be aware of the intricate distance itself, but has yet to take the form a consciousness – to be engendered. (Fan 2015, 200)

Both Bao and Fan’s work on early Chinese cinema emphasises the ability of cinema as an affective medium to create real, particularly political, impact (Bao 2015, 14). Together, their work helps to understand the role of affect as a significant force in the construction of modern China through the joint effort of technology developments, industry practitioners, audience, theorists, and critics in modern Republican China.

Unlike the scholarship mentioned above, which focuses on examining affect as a direct force shaping the social sphere, a cluster of Chinese studies probes affect via text analysis of films which depict feelings, emotions, and desires of individuals. For example, in his analysis of *Lanyu*, David L. Eng suggests that “the domain of the affect” provides an

alternative space for the relocation of the traumatic political events of Tiananmen Square (Eng 2000). Analysing *Summer Palace*, which is another film depicting the Tiananmen Square incident as a political trauma in contemporary China, Mila Zuo examines the affect of boredom as a consequence of the political fatigue which is caused by June Fourth Incident as “political failure”.

Drawing on Sianne Ngai’s concept of “stuplimity”, which describes negative or inert emotions such as boredom, anxiety, and envy that do not fit within the framework of Kantian sublimity (Ngai 2005, 271), Zuo argues that the impact of the June Fourth Incident on the affective state of the characters in *Summer Palace* goes beyond state censorship and silencing where “the facts of the night, including the exact events and the number of those who died, remain unclear” (Zuo 2019, 106). In contrast to sticky emotions like love and hate, “‘un-sticky’ emotions and minor negative affects propagate exhaustion, irritation, boredom, and ambivalence” (Zuo 209, 108).

Zuo’s analysis of boredom as an affect in *Summer Palace* offers a unique perspective on affect as a theoretical lens to probe the impact of political events on the emotional state of the Chinese collective. It demonstrates how affect can be used as a lens through which to examine and reach deeper understanding of unspeakable political traumas in contemporary China. Furthermore, Zuo’s examination of boredom and other “unsticky” emotions aligns with Massumi’s analysis of intense affect as a “deal breaker” for established social order. Both analyses highlight the cross-disciplinary significance of studying negative affect in various forms and intensities.

Furthermore, affect of melancholy is examined as a specific theoretical thread in Ma Ran 马然’s work on the aesthetics of transnational filmmakers including Hou Hsiao-Hsien 侯孝贤, Tsai Ming-liang 蔡明亮, and Wong Kar-wai 王家卫 (2015). Channelling Peter Fritzsche’s “disquiet past” (Ma 2010, 153), where “contemporary attitudes towards memory

share in the ambivalent structure of melancholy – haunted by the disquiet of absence, unwilling to simply lay the past to rest” (Ma 2010, 11), Jean Ma proposes the affect of melancholy as a special temporal-spatial indicator for contemporary Chinese art cinema, arguing that the affect of melancholy contains a counterforce that reflects both on a past that can never be regained and on an uncertain future. Drawing on Kracauer’s analysis of melancholy as a “shock”, a form of seeing with “disinterested intensity” (2010, 15), Ma distinguishes melancholy from nostalgia, which has become overused in post-war Chinese literature and cinema. Focusing on technical elements such as flashbacks, freeze-frames, voiceovers, the film-within-the-film, and recursive narratives (2010, 17), Ma interprets the strangeness of melancholy as a constructive force – a “mechanical melancholy” that is anti-nostalgic while also holding onto the past and offering the potential for expanding perception beyond its usual limits (2010, 16).

In brief, studies on affect in Chinese cinema, whether anchored in national historical narratives or delving into individual emotions, consistently engage with China’s intricate political terrain. Such connections underscore the plurality of affect and cinema’s role in reflecting and shaping China’s societal and political currents. Yet, this often results in a significant gap: when subtler affects such as sorrow or melancholy do not align with the specific political frameworks of the PRC, often leaving them side-lined in discourse. This underscores indie cinema’s vital role and this thesis’s focus on negative affect with subtle political implications. Indie films, accessible to ordinary audience in mainland China, spotlight these often-overlooked affects, presenting an alternative, potentially subversive, narrative.

5.1.2.4 Spectator vs Form: Actor-Network theory as a Middle Ground

Building upon the discussion in earlier sections, the application of ANT in this study offers a new perspective on Chinese indie cinema and contributes to the ongoing discourse of “spectator vs form” in film studies. As a cornerstone in film studies, “spectator vs form” debate continually probes the structure-agency dilemma: is the essence of film entrenched in its formal elements or moulded by the audience’s interpretation? While Raymond Williams positions the “structure of feelings” as a “cultural hypothesis” (William 2014), Brinkema approaches the scene differently, presenting “reading affect as having forms” as a critical “theoretical intervention” (Brinkema 2014, 37). Yet, as insightful as Brinkema’s perspective is, it carries complexity and often requires navigating through “restless detours... and endless alternative routes” (Brinkema 2014, 30).

Bearing this larger discourse in mind, ANT allows for a more flexible approach to film analysis by taking both human and non-human actants onboard. This is particularly relevant in the context of Chinese indie cinema where aesthetic choices, industry practices, and state interventions intricately weave together. ANT’s emphasis on the interconnectedness of these elements helps to reveal how even subtle cinematic choices can reflect broader societal and political intricacies in contemporary China.

As I have suggested in the earlier sections, a distinct “negative affect” in Chinese indie cinema subtly resonates with the societal and political uncertainties in contemporary China. These indie films serve as a poignant counter-narrative to the state’s harmonious imagery. By focusing on non-human actants including camera movements, colour palettes, and props in mis-en-scene, ANT brings into focus these nuanced emotional strata and giving voice to the whispered sentiments echoing in the alleyways of Chinese society.

Revisiting the start of this section, ANT’s application in analysing Chinese cinema does not only serve as an academic exercise. It deepens our understanding of indie cinema

within today's Chinese cinema and enriches the "embodied vs. formal" academic debate. By shifting from spectator-centric or formalist analysis to an actant-focused approach, ANT transcends the conventional Western-Eastern theoretical limits of affect studies. It foregrounds the materiality of tangible non-human actants, facilitating access to universal human experiences that cut across cultural divides. With its emphasis on actants and their ties, ANT provides a valuable perspective that interprets Chinese indie films across varied social and cultural contexts for understanding affect.

5.2 Black Coal, Thin Ice: Neon Lights and Affect of Dysphoria

This chapter opens with analysis of Diao Yinan's *Black Coal, Thin Ice*. I have selected Diao Yinan's film *Black Coal, Thin Ice* for analysis because it represents a significant moment in the making of Chinese indie cinema. Produced by Omnijoi, a film corporate which is affiliated to Jiangsu TV, the film was both a critical and commercial success, and its achievement helped to bring wider recognition and success to both Diao Yinan as a filmmaker and the Chinese indie film's potential in the Chinese film industry. Moreover, the film marked a shift in Diao Yinan's role working primarily in the independent cinema scene to achieving greater mainstream success.

Zhang Xianmin has characterized Diao Yinan as one of the few Chinese filmmakers who craft "desire-driven" films.¹⁰² In both of Diao Yinan's early films, *Uniform* (Zhifu 制服, 2003) and *Night Train* (Yeche 夜车, 2007), the protagonists are driven by their profound desire to break free from their monotonous and unfulfilling lives. These powerful desires and set them on exhilarating chance encounters, but at the same time, they find themselves confronted with escalating dangers and challenging tests that threaten to jeopardise everything they hold dear. Both films create thought-provoking and visually striking films that challenge mainstream conventions, exploring the dark and gritty aspects of human nature. Diao Yinan's filmmaking style, characterised by its reserved and inward approach, has often resulted in his work receiving less attention compared to his peers who excel in films with direct social critique, such as Jia Zhangke. Nevertheless, Diao Yinan's feature films are an integral part of the vibrant landscape of independent cinema. Both of his films, *Uniform* and *Night Train*, have been showcased in the heyday of CIFF, with *Uniform* being

¹⁰² Zhang, Xianmin. "Zhijie Diaoyinan 肢解刁亦男[Dismembering Diao Yinan]" last modified 7 Apr 2014, <https://cinephilia.net/25652/> (accessed 15 Aug 2023)

screened at the 3rd Chinese Independent Film Festival in 2006, and *Night Train* at the 5th in 2008.¹⁰³ In his interview with Lü Meijing, Diao Yinan discusses his relationship with Chinese independent cinema and emphasises its significance as a crucial stage of growth for aspiring filmmakers:

The meaning and value of independent cinema lie in its role as an entry platform for a generation of filmmakers. The bar was not set too high, allowing anyone with the passion to pursue their filmmaking dreams. Above all, the most significant aspect of independent cinema is the spirit of independent thinking that it embodies.¹⁰⁴

The choice to make *Black Coal, Thin Ice* the opening case study for my research on the alternative aesthetics of Chinese indie cinema aligns with Diao Yinan's own remarks about its significance as a trial for emerging filmmakers. The remarkable success of "Black Coal, Thin Ice" stands as a powerful testament to the potential and significance of the Chinese indie film circuit within the broader film industry. Diao Yinan's ability to produce a film that captivates a broad audience while maintaining its unique artistic identity showcases the resilience and potential accessibility of indie filmmakers from the previous independent cinema scene. This achievement also underscores the influential legacy of independent cinema as a significant movement in today's China.

This chapter focus on the use of neon lighting as a non-human actant. I argue that the film's use of neon lighting, as well as the contrasting colour as a chromatic pattern, serves to highlight the affect of dysphoria and alienation that is central to the film's atmosphere and

¹⁰³ Art China. "Zhongguo duli yingxiang nianduzhan 中国独立影像年度展[China Independent Film Festival] 2004-2005" http://art.china.cn/zixun/2006-04/17/content_78118.htm, last modified 17 Apr 2006, http://art.china.cn/zixun/2006-04/17/content_78118.htm (accessed 28 Aug 2023)

¹⁰⁴ Lü, Meijing. "Geduo weibi lai, zui miren de shi dengdai 戈多未必来，最迷人的是等待[Godard Might Not Come, Waiting Might Be the Most Alluring Part]" Last modified 2 Apr 2014, <https://www.artda.cn/yingxiangdangan-c-8881.html> (accessed 28 Aug 2023)

themes. Moreover, I argue that non-lighting as a non-human actant flowing through the cinematic space does not only help to underscore the isolation and alienation of the film's characters. More importantly, I argue that the neon lighting in *Black Coal, Thin Ice* serves as a non-human actant that travels between two worlds: the cinematic space and reality. Through its deployment in the film, the neon lighting activates a sense of unease and detachment that is integral to the film's noir aesthetic and helps to highlight the isolation and alienation of the film's characters and, at the same time, it serves to underscore the excess and unsavoury colour palette of Harbin as a Chinese city. As unwanted excess, the shimmering LED lights light up the gap between the official, sanitised version of the cityscape that the government is trying to promote and the cold, messy, yet lively realities that exist beyond this official version.

5.2.1 An Unexpected Hit

Winning the Golden Bear at the 64th Berlin International Film Festival in 2014 and hitting total domestic box office sales of ¥ 104.3 million¹⁰⁵ the same year, *Black Coal, Thin Ice* did more than prove to the Chinese domestic market that the time had come – well-resourced “arty films” could make money too. The tremendous commercial success of *Black Coal, Thin Ice* demonstrated the potential for indie filmmaking to thrive in the industry. As a result, from 2014 and onward, films and TV shows labelled as “thriller romance”, such as *Wrath of Silence* and *Day and Night* (Baiye zhuixiong 白夜追凶, dir. Wang Wei 王伟, 2017) were becoming especially popular in project markets and at film festivals in China. The influence of *Black Coal, Thin Ice* was so significant that during my interview with an industry insider who was developing a music comedy project complained in 2019 that it was difficult to find interested investors because project markets were only interested in “art-house or criminal drama”:

[A proposed film project needs to be] either art-house or criminal drama. Like, arty, deeply traumatised, extra miserable. Very difficult to get attention otherwise.

(Anonymous informant#)

Black Coal, Thin Ice provides a valuable case study for exploring the making of the indie scene in contemporary China, including the convergence and tension between independent cinema, mainstream film, the film industry, and state censorship in China through the lens of actor-network theory. Located at the intersection of this emerging

¹⁰⁵ “Heise dianying Bairiyanhuo piaofang guoyi 黑色电影《白日焰火》票房过亿” [Box office of film noir *Black Coal, Thin Ice* exceeded ¥ 100 million], last modified 18 April 2014, <https://cn.wsj.com/articles/CN-FLM-20140418170442> (accessed 5 April 2019).

network, Diao Yinan, a central figure in the independent cinema scene, emphasised in multiple interviews how the making of *Black Coal, Thin Ice* involved a series of compromises and how the final film differed significantly from the original script, which Diao intended to be a personal project with no outside interference. Diao describes the process of joining, or in Latourian term, being enrolled into a network of the film market as an active actant, as one of acceptance:

[T]he process of coming up with a third draft] has taken a lot out of me. The reality is cruel. When you're young, filming something on a budget of ¥ 200–300K is no problem. However, gradually you grow up, and set your eyes on doing a few things that are even bigger, or more complex. And that requires you to be more tolerant and wiser.¹⁰⁶

While the difficulty of transitioning from writing as an individual to writing for a wider audience is likely a universal experience for filmmakers, Diao Yinan's perspective on this process is particularly interesting in the context of actor-network theory, which views the relationships between enrolled actants within the indie film network as multidirectional and interconnected. Therefore, I argue that the indie film network brings together actants from the previous independent cinema scene and the film industry practice, two previously separate networks, and forms new connections between them.

Furthermore, I argue that the emerging indie film scene creates an open space within the system, within the boundaries of official approval, and within the market. This means that

¹⁰⁶ “Zhuanfang Jinxiongjiang yingpian Bairiyanhuo daoyan Diao Yinan 专访金熊奖影片《白日焰火》导演刁亦男” [Exclusive interview with Golden Bear Award-winning film *Black Coal, Thin Ice* and its director Diao Yinan], last modified 6 March 2014, http://ent.sina.com.cn/m/2014-03-06/17064107425_2.shtml (accessed 14 July 2019).

even though an indie film like *Black Coal, Thin Ice* may be the result of compromises to the state censorship,¹⁰⁷ it has still been able to establish itself and create an open space within the industry by functioning as a network. This open space may be small in the grand scheme of things, but it represents something new and innovative in the existing industry landscape and serves as a counterforce to strict state control.

The unique circuit which facilitates the making of *Black Coal, Thin Ice* leads to my curiosity of the alternative aesthetics this film presents. This film differs significantly from the calculated, pre-packaged, polished, and artificial emotions often found in mainstream, big-budget films – and in the particular context of Chinese cinema, main-melody films. This very slow film, which only consists of 418 shots with an average shot length (ASL) of 14.9 seconds¹⁰⁸ allows the audiences to fully engage with neon lights as an actant and observe how the lighting binds physical locales and cinematic space together, revealing the affect of dysphoria.

¹⁰⁷ “Bairiyanhuo shangyingban de shangai qingkuang ji pingshu 《白日焰火》上映版的删改情况及评述” [How is the domestically screened version of *Black Coal, Thin Ice* censored? and comments on it], last modified 22 March 2014, https://www.douban.com/note/337957873/?type=rec&_i=94262015YpNUcW (accessed 3 February 2021).

¹⁰⁸ For comparison, *Black Coal, Thin Ice*, has a significantly lower number of shots and longer average shot length compared to two other thriller/horror films released in the same year, *It Follows* (620 shots with an average shot length of 7.7 seconds) and *Gone Girl* (2,400 shots with an average shot length of 3.7 seconds).

5.2.2 Technicolor as Colour Palette in *Black Coal, Thin Ice*

Neon lighting of green, red, cyan, and pink in the key mise-en-scène in *Black Coal, Thin Ice* resonates with Hillenbrand's analysis of red and green as a pair of complementary colours, especially in terms of its ubiquitous presence and distance from the ongoing narrative. In her analysis of red and green as a pair of contrasting colours in Fruit Chen's horror film *Dumplings* (Jiaozi 饺子, 2004), Hillenbrand proposes a concept of "chromatic montage" (Hillenbrand 2012, 226), which works as a potential unification of "cinema as narrative" and "cinema as attraction" (Hillenbrand 2012, 228). Further differentiating chromatic montage from a "narrative-driven" understanding of colour, Hillenbrand directs the readers beyond the symbolism of colour to the non-diegetic, kinetic aspect of the chromatic palette. The deployment of a bold, highly saturated green and red contrast, according to Hillenbrand, can find its resonance in Van Gogh's painting and expressionism. Writing on the colour of Wong Kar Wai's films, Shohini Chaudhuri arrives at a similar conclusion – that lighting, hues, and contrasting colours which do not please but rather provoke the eyes link cinematic practice with modern art movements such as Fauvism and modernism (Chaudhuri 2016, 162).

In accordance with these two studies on colour palettes in Chinese films, I observed that the use of neon lighting in *Black Coal, Thin Ice* not only connects the film to established conventions in horror film making, but also to Hong Kong horror and experimental films from the 1980s and other lesser-known colour palettes and references from Chinese tales of mystery and the supernatural.

As John Gage notes in *Colour and Meaning* (2013), the earliest recorded use of red and green as contrasting colours that have a psychological impact on the viewer can be traced back to medieval times. According to Bartholomeus Auglicus's *De Proprietatibus Rerum* [on the Properties of Things], the colour green "restoreth and conforeth the sight. Therefore

hertes and othere whilde bestes loveth and haunteth grene place...Therefore hunters clotheth himself in grene...” whereas the colour red “toschede the spirit of sight” (Gage 2013, 97). It is interesting to note that a similar pairing of green and red can also be found in Chinese vernacular classics, which document less formal Chinese history and popular folklore. For instance, in *Taiping guangji* (太平广记), a collection of tales from the Tang Dynasty (AD 618–907), green hair (绿毛) appears in seven stories where a creature, monster, or human acquires a special bless from nature.¹⁰⁹ In the story of “Yaohong” (姚鸿), the hermit escapes to the mountains, roams freely, investigates peaceful huts in blessed lands, eats no cooked meals, scales a mountain peak, and savours his freedom. And he shares his story with the monk who finds him as such: “After many years, my entire body sprouted these green feathers. I’ve already attained the Way of Undying Long Life” (Tale from Tang Dynasty China 2017, 75). “In contrast, the unsettling colour red was used in short stories like “Poem of Ye Jingneng” (叶静能诗) to depict a monstrous snake that “emerged from a cloud of fog and darkness. Its eyes were like a mirror, its mouth was like a basin of blood” (Pan 1994, 478).

Although I have not conducted extensive research on the connection between red and green in Chinese vernacular folk tales, it is clear that the contrasting colour palette of red, green, and blue has been widely applied in Hong Kong horror films since the 1980s. A number of Hong Kong horror films at the time, including *Exorcist Master* (Qumo dao zhang 驱魔道长, dir. Wu Ma 午马, 1993) and *Haunted Office* (Office yougui office 有鬼, dir. Marco Mak 麦子善, 2002) have perpetuated the image of the ferocious ghost (ligui 厉鬼) in

¹⁰⁹ The six other stories in *Taiping Guangji* that include “green hair” (or “green feather” translated by Sarah M Allen) are: Liu Qingzhen (刘清真), Yu Nü (玉女), Xiaoshi Rumu (萧氏乳母), Liyuer (鲤鱼儿), Wantianshu (挽天枢), Gan Chong (甘虫).

red. Meanwhile, a series of uniquely Hong Kong-made zombie films has established a distinctive, emotionally evocative colour palette consisting of blue, pale white, green, yellow, and red, which has unsettled generations of Asian audiences.



Figure 2 Exorcist Master (1993)



Figure 3 Haunted Office (2002)



Figure 4 *Mr Vampire II* (*Jiangshi jiazu* 僵尸家族, dir. Ricky Lau 刘关伟 1986)



Figure 5 *Encounters of the Spooky Kind* (*Guidagui* 鬼打鬼, dir. Hung Kam-po 洪金宝 1980)

A coincidence it might be, but horror films produced in other parts of the world around the same time period, such as *Carrie* (dir. Brian De Palma 1976) and *Suspiria* (dir. Dario Argento 1977), have demonstrated that the combination of red, green, and blue is highly unsettling across different cultures. In recalling the bold design of the colour palette in *Suspiria*, cinematographer Luciano Tovoli – who previously worked with Michelangelo Antonioni on *Chung Kuo* (China dir. Michelangelo Antonioni 1972) and *The Passenger* (dir. Michelangelo Antonioni 1975) – explains that he selected the primary colours of red, green, and blue as the foundation for the chromatic palette and then incorporated the complementary colour of yellow to disturb the viewer:

To immediately make *Suspiria* a total abstraction from what we call “everyday” life, I use the usually reassuring primary colours only in their purest essence, making them immediately, surprisingly violent and provocative. This brings the audience into the world of *Suspiria*.¹¹⁰

Tovoli’s account highlights two other significant aspects of colour palettes: the intensity and volume of colour, and the source of the colour palette. First, even with the same hues, differences in intensity and volume of colour can produce significantly different visual effects. To return to the colour pattern in *Black Coal, Thin Ice*, unlike the bold, aggressive red–green contrast that is used like brushstrokes in Fruit Chan’s *Dumplings* or Jean-Pierre Jeunet’s *Amélie* (2001), the red–green contrast in the banquet scene (1:37:57–1:38:08) is both low-saturated and much less prominent. In this specific shot, the contrasting colours of neon pink and green function more as an alliance, hovering briefly in the background and

¹¹⁰ “*Suspiria*: Terror in technicolour”, last modified February 2020, <https://ascmag.com/articles/suspiria-terror-in-technicolour> (accessed 10 June 2022).

drawing a clear distinction from the dull colours of the black jacket and brown jumper. The jarring, nightmarish quality created by this pair of colours resonates, yet is much quieter and more mixed than the classic scene in *Suspiria* where the pure primary colours of red and blue are pouring into Susie’s face and all her surroundings. “The disorienting, nightmarish quality created by this pair of colours is similar, but much quieter and more mixed than the classic scene in *Suspiria*, where pure primary colours of red and blue flood into Susie’s face and surroundings.

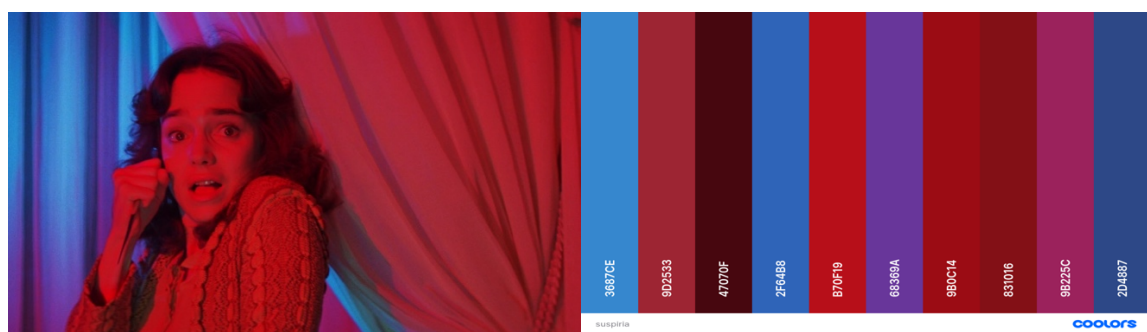


Figure 6 *Ending of Suspiria* (dir. Dario Argento, 1977) (1:35:45)

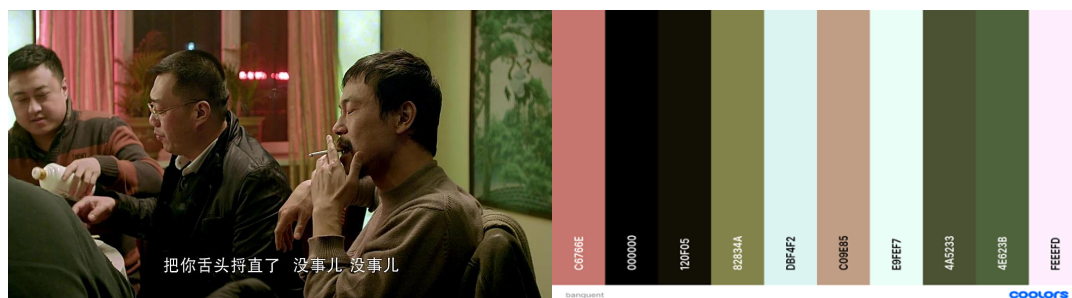


Figure 7 *Banquet scene in Black Coal, Thin Ice* (1:37:57–1:38:08)

It is certainly true that colour palettes are created to match a narrative and set the tone of a film. However, an ANT approach constantly reminds me to trace both the human actants and the non-human actants and find different contexts from which these colour palettes originate. While Tovoli’s experimental use of colour, according to the director himself,

comes directly from an artist's desire to fill a blank canvas with pure colour,¹¹¹ the lighting plan of *Black Coal, Thin Ice* takes a different approach – the film's cinematographer, Dong Jinsong, has described how his approach to lighting in the film was to utilise as much natural light on the scene as possible.¹¹² As I will argue in the next section, the neon lighting in *Black Coal, Thin Ice* cannot solely be explained in terms of cinematography, as the source of the colour does not come from art and literature, cinema conventions. Neon lights in *Black Coal, Thin Ice* are also non-actants enrolled from the lived experiences of the world.

¹¹¹ "I wanted to create light that would simulate the colour coming from pots of paint thrown very respectfully on the actors' faces, recalling Jackson Pollock's fundamental gesture of splashing pure colour on the canvas. In my imagination, our canvas was our actors' faces." Luciano Tovoli in his interview; see "*Suspiria*: Terror in technicolour", last modified February 2020, <https://ascmag.com/articles/suspiria-terror-in-technicolour> (accessed 10 June 2022).

¹¹² "Zhuanfang jinma dezhu Dong Jinsong | Xian weihe yunyu shuliangzhongduo de 'dianying yishujia'? 专访金马得主董劲松|西安为何孕育数量众多的'电影艺术家'?" [Exclusive with Golden Horse Award-winner Dong Jinsong: Why is Xi'an the incubator for 'film artist'?], last modified 18 November 2018, https://www.sohu.com/a/276237682_696271 (accessed 14 June 2019).

6.2.3 Neon Lights as Non-human Actants

The first time the colour neon pink invades and occupies the frame, the life of the protagonist, Zhang Zili, is about to turn completely upside down (00:10:42). This man's love life has already shattered into pieces before this scene. Making passionate love (00:04:08–00:04:23) or turning the break-up goodbye into a nasty wrestling scene (00:04:53–00:05:13) cannot stop the divorce. He loses the fight and watches as his ex-wife leaves. The train departs. He has no control over where the woman or the train are heading. What he has control over is his work as a police detective. His toxic masculinity aligns well with this role, which demands decisiveness, determination, and the use of force. Vulgarity not only bonds the detectives as a “code of conduct” or a masculine way of doing things among the detectives, but it is also evident in the environments inhabited by the protagonist, such as the run-down community bath house (00:08:58–00:09:04) and the coal factory where a broken limb is discovered (00:04:03–00:05:08). Despite containing body parts of the victim, these environments or mise-en-scènes appear to be light and pleasant due to the presence of natural light as a non-human actant, which enhances the mise-en-scènes and adds a sense of airy playfulness to them. For example, when everyone is gathered in the lodger's room at the coal factory, discussing how the murderer could have disposed of the victim's dismembered body throughout the province overnight, while slurping watermelon lazily (00:10:04–00:10:41), the natural light from the window pours generously into the room, making the investigation of a murder feel almost like a noon break, a big boys' game.

Neon light, on the other hand, brings out the opposite of naturalness¹¹³ and is easy to

¹¹³ As sung by Kraftwerk in the lyrics of their 1978 song “Neon Lights”, neon light shimmers and belongs to the city of light. Filmmakers at the time nudged this statement in a different direction, for while both Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) and Wim Wenders' *Paris, Texas* (1984) implement neon light as a strong visual element in their works, neon light in their films belongs more to the “shadowed side” of space. While this thesis does not intend to give a full historical review of how neon light is implemented in contemporary films (although such an endeavour would indeed be interesting), it can be argued that these two films, despite being drastically different in their genres, share some unspeakable similarity – two protagonists who are living on the

film. In the scene in which the suspects are detained (00:10:42–00:14:48), moreover, neon light does not only add to the mood – it dictates it. Crawling into sofas, spray bottles, mirrors, crimping irons, and the tiled floor, the contrasting shift from the scene of a daytime watermelon (frame 00:10:41) to the first shot of the next scene in the night salon produces a drastic “visual dive” because of the change in chromatic palettes.



Figure 8 *Starting from 00:10:42, the police enter a salon which is submerged in neon light*

Take Frame 00:10:42 for example, in which the bright streetlight on the left is the last trace of the outside space, and from this point, the four-minute sequence consists only of neon and electric light in pink, lime green, red, and yellow. Writing regarding the colour of Wong Kar Wai’s film, Shohini Chaudhuri channels Edward Branigan and Natalie Kalmus and reiterates colour’s function not only as a marker for spatiality and temporality, reality and dreams (Chaudhuri 2016, 159–60), but also as a mood setter that works expressively (Chaudhuri 2016, 160). I argued that similar to how Wong Kar-Wai’s use of neon colors in his films is associated with rundown teashops, shabby hotels, and the old Wanchai district, which are "derelict or outmoded spaces [that] are destined for disappearance" (Chaudhuri

edge (again, in very different ways) and are confused about their past and memory. There, neon light provides loyal companionship to the protagonists as they walk through some of the not-so-presentable spaces – physical and mental – of their journeys.

2016, 146), Diao Yinan's use of neon lightings with contrasting colour belong to his visual image of Harbin.

Writing on designing elements that define the look of an American city, Kevin Lynch mentions how the city environment is a complex of evolving temporality that “exhibit[s] a melodic sequence of image elements or a formed succession of space, texture, motion, light, or silhouette” (Lynch 1990, 107–8). The city of Harbin in *Black Coal, Thin Ice* presents no such melody, as the sound of neon light is cacophonous rather than harmoniously composed.

While sharing the exact same materiality, neon lights as non-actants are only welcomed as positive contributors to the city's image when they are used as part of an official effort to promote a desirable image of the city. In an official document for the fortieth celebration of National Day of the People's Republic of China in 1989, the then Shanghai major, Zhu Rongji 朱镕基, notes that “to become an international city, Shanghai must light up its night with light”. As a response to this informal administration order, the Shanghai government initiated a new project:

On the eve of the National Day, the crystal floodlighting in Bund, the shimmering neon signs on East Nanjing Road, as well as the bright light box advertising, are lighting up the night of Shanghai. (Shanghai City Appearance and Environmental Sanitation Administrative Bureau 2021, 11)

Unlike the neon lights that fit into the agenda of promoting a forward-going, clean, luminous, and charming city image that is officially promulgated and celebrated, the news piece below describes the neon lights of LED signs and other floor signs that flow above Zhang Zili's head when he walks thorough the cold, narrow street to find the potential owner of the leather jacket which is the potential lead necessary to solve the murder case (1:20:04–

1:20:17):

In Taiping Street district, business owners put on different colours of mini-LED neon signs to attract customers. After several warnings and video recordings, the law enforcement officers have detained and cleared up all the LED signs...¹¹⁴



Figure 9 *In Black Coal, Thin Ice*, neon light as a non-human actant belongs to both the cinematic space and the lived world.

They are doomed to disappear during the waves of gentrification and the environmental sanitation movement;¹¹⁵ they are part of the excess of city planning, an

¹¹⁴ “Harbin daowaiqu kaizhan jiemian huanjing ‘dasaochu’ 哈尔滨道外区开展街面环境‘大扫除’” [Daowai District, Harbin ‘cleans up’ the street environment], last modified 5 January 2021, https://www.sohu.com/a/442675069_172952 (accessed 5 February 2022).

¹¹⁵ “Harbin gequ kaizhan zhengzhi shirongshimao huodong 哈尔滨各区展开整治市容市貌活动” [Different districts in Harbin are carrying out city environment sanitisation projects], last modified 11 June 2004, <http://news.sohu.com/2004/06/11/26/news220492651.shtml> (accessed 5 February 2022).

eyesore for the public gaze. They are inappropriate, belonging to the unsensitised part of the cityscape. They are, however, integral to the city – a city that is loud, random, unplanned, vulgar, disorganised, full of dark corners and dirty, secret desires, lust, and violence; but despite all that, these neon lights grow out of each individual locale – an internet café, a barbecue restaurant, a salon – which belongs to both the cinematic space and the lived world.

6.2.4 Conclusion

I will conclude my case with a short analysis of a sequence in which the equal presence of neon lighting as a non-human actants and human actants is highlighted. In this clip which lasts 18 seconds, we see Zhang Zili steps out of a club called “Daylight Fireworks”, which is also the direct Chinese translation of the film’s title (1:26:01–1:26:19). I find that the strong presence of the neon lights in this scene creates a sense of tension between the non-human lighting and the human actants. The neon lights seem to claim and occupy so much space that they become a force to be reckoned with, standing against the human actants in the scene.

In this scene, the neon sign on top of the building towers over the protagonist, making the human figure appear insignificant in comparison. The neon light is visually and semantically separate from the protagonist, Zhang Zili, and does not contribute to the mood of the scene. Instead, it seems to have its own agency and gaze, almost as if it is staring at Zhang and the audience. This is further emphasised in the two medium shots that follow, which give equal screen time to both the neon sign and Zhang. In the first shot, Zhang looks up solemnly at the neon sign (1:26:20-1:26:26), and in the second shot, the neon sign stares down at Zhang and the audience from a high angle (1:26:26-1:26:32). Both shots last for exactly six seconds, which frames a sequence of reverse shots that is typically used for dialogue between human actors.



Figure 10 *1:26:26-1:26:32 Neon-light shimmers back at Zhang Zili*

Pursuing neon light as a non-human actant leads to the opportunity, as well as the necessity, to identify its double circulation within the cinematic space and physical city space, whose relationship cannot be simplified as a form of realism. This is because neon light belongs to both spaces. It does not talk back to the protagonist. It remains science. It represents nothing. It reflects nothing. Rather, the beams and auras of these shimmering neon lights tangle together, like untrimmed tree branches, piercing the already blurred line between what is real and belongs to the mundane, and what is staged and belongs to the cinematography. This is also why the unmatching colour palette that neon lights create and the oscillating feelings it might generate cannot, at least in the first place, be explained via colour theories, because they grow out of the randomness, chaos, and the vitality of the reality of Harbin as a Chinese city – and many other cities besides. Like weeds, these neon lights are unsupervised, unwelcome, but also indestructible.

5.3 An Elephant Sitting Still: Camera Movement and Affect of Despair

An Elephant Sitting Still has a special place in this chapter. The film, originally titled “The Golden Yarn” (Jinyangmao 金羊毛) was pitched at the market section of FIRST International Film Festival in 2016 and was soon picked up by Dongchun Films, a film company which is owned by Wang Xiaoshuai. It was then distributed by Redience, the indie distribution company which I examined in the previous chapter on indie distribution.

Unfortunately, *An Elephant Sitting Still* did not end up serving as a prime example of how activating indie cinema as a network can contribute to a thriving cinematic scene in China. First, the film did not receive a dragon seal, which means it cannot be publicly screened in China like the other two films studied in this chapter. Second, the film was the only film directed by Hu Bo, who tragically took his own life in 2017 after completing the writing, directing, pitching, and editing of the film. The 233-minute film, which already conveys a sense of despair, is now also a testament to the filmmaker’s untimely death.

In the first section of the chapter, I discuss the conflict between Hu Bo and his production company in the context of the making of indie network in China. Rather than assigning fault to either side, I argue that the situation highlights the vulnerabilities of the indie film circuits, with which the production company and the filmmaker were two actants engaged in a struggle over the final form of the film. Rather than assigning blame to either side, I argue that this situation illustrates the power dynamics at play within the indie film circuit. Taking into account Wang’s critique of Hu Bo’s film, which focuses on its length, self-absorption, and superficiality, I propose an alternative perspective. Contrary to Wang’s assessment, I argue that the very flaws highlighted by Wang actually constitute the most significant and valuable aspects of the film. The monotonous style of *An Elephant Sitting Still* means that it does not conform to the typical Chinese film that provides social critiques. The flatness of the film allows a unique vantage point to observe how camera as a non-human

actant, along with the human actants, reveal the trajectories that shape the affect of despair.

5.3.1 A Fallout

In this section, drawing on Hu Bo's notes and articles on the internet, I give a review of the tragic incident. Rather than assigning fault to either side, I examine the conflict between Hu Bo and Dongchun Films as a crucial case which reveals the fragility of the Chinese indie network. Relating to the argument that indie production companies act as hubs, facilitating the collaboration of indie film companies and filmmakers driven by their shared passions and sentiments, I argue that Hu Bo's unfortunate death illustrates the power dynamics at play between actants within the indie film circuit. These power dynamics can be especially pronounced when the actions of different actants are misaligned or in conflict with each other. Indie filmmakers, as weaker and less influential actants, may not have the legal or social resources to effectively navigate disputes with stronger actants. These disputes may also go unseen by the broader network as they only become visible through the actions of the involved actants. Once these actants stop moving, the dispute becomes hidden from view.

In a long article titled "Hu Bo: the Story of a Suicide",¹¹⁶ Kang Lukai reveals some of the details of Hu Bo's problematic relationship with Dongchun Films. Hu Bo entered a contract with the film company that included an agreed budget of ¥ 3 million and a shooting schedule of 45 days. However, the production company later reduced the shooting schedule to 25 days and the budget to ¥ 730k. Because of this deviation from the original terms of the contract, the budget constraints meant that it was not possible to fully realise the director's vision in terms of certain scenes and casting choices. Additionally, Hu Bo's notes indicate

¹¹⁶ "Hubo: yige zishazhe de chuanshuo 胡波：一个自杀者的传说"[Hu Bo: the story of a suicide], last modified 19 November 2018, <https://www.163.com/dy/article/E10BM35C053715TN.html> (accessed 4 February 2022).

that the film producer from the production company attempted to exert influence over the shooting schedule from the outset of the project. During the editing phase, conflicting negotiations accelerated over the desired length of the final product. The film company, representing a more risk-averse position, demanded for a shorter two-hour version, while the filmmaker insisted on his own vision which included longer takes in a four-hour version. Due to the terms of the contract signed with the film company, Hu Bo was unable to exert agency during the post-production phase of the film, because the contract had granted the film company decision-making powers over copyright, final edit rights, and casting choices, leaving Hu Bo without the legal means to resolve the impasse that had arisen.

A screenshot of a conversation between Wang Xiaoshuai and Hu Bo circulated online after the incident. In the screenshot, Wang harshly criticises Hu Bo as being extremely self-absorbed and superficial. He also stated that *An Elephant Sitting Still* is a film which “even morons would know what it is about”.¹¹⁷

As I will elaborate in the following section, instead of being a flaw, the superficiality criticised by Wang is actually a unique asset of the film. The depiction of social issues such as violence in schools, animal abuse, sex with minors, adultery, parental negligence,

¹¹⁷ A screenshot of a WeChat exchange between Wang Xiaoshuai and Hu Bo was circulated on the Internet, in which Wang expressed his anger over Hu's determination to keep *An Elephant Sitting Still* as a four-hour film. The original article on the film news website Mtime (<http://news.mtime.com/2017/10/19/1574594.html>) has been deleted. I have retrieved the following content of the message from Wayback Machine: “That long version is terrible. Do you understand? I am a professional, an executive producer and an investor. I don't want to risk my reputation to be involved in such a shit show, let alone the fact that I have already invested so much energy in it. I don't want to be humiliated. The worst part is that you are too self-obsessed to realise it. Things that you'd like to express. You think people are fucking idiots to not know the superficial stuff you are getting at? Cursing the skies about how fucked the world is is making me a laughingstock! Fine, I have nothing more to say. I must face other investors and I have already failed them. If you have a highbrow candidate who appreciates your version, go find him, let him buy it, I am out.” See “Zisha daoyan Hu Bo yitigaobie yishi juxing. Wang Xiaoshuai fang: xianzai renhe taolun doushi dui wangling de fan rao 自杀导演胡波遗体告别仪式举行。王小帅方：现在任何讨论都是对亡灵的烦扰” [The funeral of Hu Bo, the filmmaker who committed suicide, was held. Wang Xiaoshuai and his correspondents: any discussion is now disturbing the peace of the deceased], last modified 19 October 2017, <http://web.archive.org/web/20190923224659/http://news.mtime.com/2017/10/19/1574594.html> (accessed 8 July 2022).

swindling, and suicide, as Tony Rayn puts it, are “relatively commonplace”.¹¹⁸ These issues, which would typically be the focus of a film set in contemporary China, are dull, repetitive, and one-sided. However, I argue that these social issues are delivered in such an intense manner that they stack on top of each other like wooden blocks in a game of Jenga. Similar to how the main focus of a game of Jenga is not the colour, shape, or volume of the blocks but the final fall, the film emphasises the artificiality of the social issues rather than their credibility as evidence for social critique of contemporary China. The film’s lack of depth in the depiction of social issues creates a flatness reminiscent of a scene in Luis Buñuel’s *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (1972), where a soldier is walking through a surreal street with a staged background. The almost plastic texture of the image immediately disrupts the established temporal-spatial order of reality.

The superficiality does not only apply to how the social issues are discredited, but also to the cinematography. The external environment and secondary characters are flattened and condensed into the background through fixed focus shots, creating a deliberately flattened cinematic space. The only visible traces in this space are the movements of the protagonists.

In the following section, I argue that from an ANT-inspired perspective, the superficiality and monotony of the cinematic space in *An Elephant Sitting Still* is not a flaw, but rather creates a perfect vantage point from which to “follow the actors themselves” (2005, 22). With no other distractions, the audience can focus solely on the human protagonists and non-human actants – camera movements and long takes – as they move through the enclosed circles, they have sketched out together, forming a shape of despair.

¹¹⁸ Rayn Tony, “An *Elephant Sitting Still* review: a howl of desperate defiance”, last modified 23 December 2019, <https://www2.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/reviews-recommendations/elephant-sitting-still-review-hu-bo-howl-desperate-defiance> (accessed 6 August 2021).

5.3.2 The World-building

“The world is a wasteland”, announced the bullied student to Wei Bu (00:34:12–00:34:21). Holding the broom, the student, along with his unexpected, prophetic comment, is squashed into the background, which is visually out of focus. If it is the literary convention that the fool speaks the truth, then it is clear from the very beginning of *An Elephant Sitting Still* that this fool, along with the poem he recited and perhaps the message coming along with it, deserves no place, or merely a blurry, peripheral place in this world that *An Elephant Sitting Still* builds.

The placement of the external world in *An Elephant Sitting Still* contests Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s vision of the lived world as bonded through intersubjectivity. The corporeal experience, namely the understanding of our flesh and the ability to navigate our bodies through space in the world, was introduced as an asset in a series of works including the essay “The Philosopher and His Shadow” (1963) and then the *Prose of the World* (1973). The lived world, along with the human body, forms an innate, pre-theoretical connection between human beings through the shared experience:

[What] makes out of my hold on the world is what makes me capable of perceiving another myself, provided that in the interior of my world there opens up a gesture resembling my own...a bond is tied without my needing to decide anything. (Merleau-Ponty 1973, 136–7)

In this vision of worldbuilding, we are bound to each other for being the witnesses for others, and the so-called objectivity of the world comes about through this bounding as “the things it [my body] perceives would really be being only if I learned that they are seen by others, that they are presumptively visible to every viewer who warrants the name” (Merleau-

Ponty 1964, 168).

An Elephant Sitting Still, however, puts a large question mark on this phenomenological vision of a body and a world where natural, pre-theoretical bonding exists between bodies. In its worldbuilding process of anti-subjectivity, all attempts for connection, righteousness, comfort, help, justice, no matter verbally, physically, or emotionally, are refuted. The depiction of the affect of despair is executed not only narratively, but also in form. The inertia and mental fatigue communicate themselves through the piled up events of misery, through which the protagonists constantly question people around them on their emotional responses in an indifferent, apathetic, disconnected tone (“What are you crying for?”, “What are you upset about?”, “Why do you care?”) as if emotion response is so foreign and alien to them that they need an explanation about what they are.

In the following section, I first analyse how formally, the manipulation of depth of field visually traps protagonists in their respective hells by implementing extreme obstruction between the protagonists and the external world, while protecting them from further damage by cocooning them in focus. Second, how the deployment of the tracking shot in long takes stalks the protagonists while they are constantly on the move and as their bodies are repetitively evicted from a space they previously occupied or long to arrive at. As non-human actants, depth of field and camera movement work together to sketch out the shape of despair, which reveals itself as a dull, bell-jar shaped circle that provides no change of circumstances, no hope.

5.3.2.1. Cocooned Love: Depth of Field

As a non-human actant, depth of field does not only create rich layers in a frame but also directs the attention of the audience. Changes of depth of field create a flow, a subtle temporal sequence within a shot, and thus create effects ranging from amplification (a portrait shot of the actor with the blurry city lights in the background adds melancholy), to suspense/reveal (a blurry figure in the background who follows a protagonist home/a sudden change of focus so that a previous image suddenly becomes accessible). In *An Elephant Sitting Still*, however, there is no such flow. The focus of the depth of field is inert. The camera lens is fixed on the four protagonists – Wei Bu, a teenager who is on the run after accidentally pushing the school bully down the stairs; Huang Lin, a girl who is neglected at home and having an affair with the vice dean of the school; Yu Cheng, a gangster whose friend committed suicide after catching Yu Cheng together with his wife; and Wang Jin, an old man whose family have been pushing him to go into a nursing home – so that it becomes clear that this consistent deployment of shallow depth of field does not add any flattering accent for the four protagonists but instead visually cuts them off from the external environment. More often than not, secondary characters – Wei Bu's alcoholic and abusive father who curses over breakfast table; Wang Jin's sheepish adult son who hides not only behind the door to the balcony but also from the will of his wife; Huang Ling's irresponsible, exhausted mother; the woman with whom Yu Cheng has an affair which is driven by complete boredom – hover in the background like long-gone ghosts, or blurry nightmares that one cannot wake up from.



Figure 11 *Huang Ling and the school dean, with whom she has an affair.*



Figure 12 *Wang Jin is being persuaded to move into an old people's home.*



Figure 13 *Yu Cheng is confronted by the woman with whom he has an affair.*

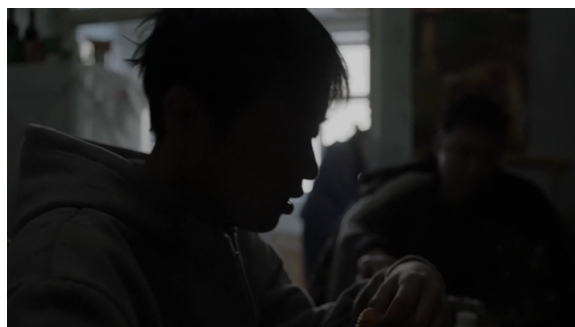


Figure 14 *Wei Bu and his father, who starts drinking and cursing over breakfast.*

Against the conventional deployment of the camera lens, in front of which human actors, either in the foreground or the background in the frame, take turns to appear and therefore form a two-way dialogue, the focus casts solely on the four protagonists in this film. Even if an interaction carries on at length between a protagonist and a secondary character, the latter's figure stays blurred, and is smudged into their respective backgrounds.

I argue that the camera puts the secondary characters in this film through a process of dehumanisation (Feirenhua 非人化) by blurring them into the background. While this term usually carries a moral judgement, I use it in a neutral way as a straightforward description of the ability of camera as a non-human actant to make the secondary characters, as human actant, lose the distinct shape of their physical being. This process of dehumanisation does not happen rhetorically or narratively (as one can still hear the dialogue and therefore the plot continues), but visually. In this sense, I argue that, unlike the way in which objects/non-human actants are so prominent that they dominate the cinematic space in *Kaili Blues* (which I will discuss in the next section on the affect of melancholy), these secondary human actors in *An Elephant Sitting Still* are dismissed from their primary roles as human by being blurred into obscurity and are degraded to human-shaped props.

I further argue that it is through this angle that the volume, consistency, and repetitiveness of cruelty, cowardice, vulgarity, indifference, fear, deceit, violence, manipulation, greed, and neglect that these secondary characters act out makes sense. These problems are not tasks that await to be investigated and resolved. These flattened human props and the dialogue-like noises constantly cancel the literal relevance and seriousness of the message they are conventionally moulded to deliver in a film that works, for example, as a social critique. This is because social critique is not the point of this film. This is a film that is made neither for conciliation nor condemnation. It is a film for the pure display of form. And to achieve that, depth of field serves relentlessly as a non-human actant and creates its

own visual logic that is independent of the narrative logic. It discards all the layers that can possibly distract the eye from spectating and absorbing the pure form of despair. The process of seeing beyond misery, agitation, and other uncomfortable feelings as a spectator demands a shift from following the narrative to picking up the clear, repetitive visual cues through which human props become no more or less important compared than anything else in the external environments – crowded and run-down residential quarters, shabby alleys, dirty streets awash with sewage and rubble, and barren suburban jungles. They become one. They become a canvas, one in which the shape of despair becomes tangible.

5.3.2.2. It Follows: Close Tracking Shot

While the fixed focus point defines the form of despair by visually flattening the already barren external environment, as well as the secondary human characters, into the background, as well as cocooning the four protagonists in the frames and isolating them further from their external environments, the close tracking shot in this film functions as another crucial non-human actant that further sketches out the structure of despair. This structure is a continuous void consisting of constant obstructions caused by the wilful action of leaping towards hope and the simultaneous failure of reaching it. In the following section, I articulate how, parallel to the narrative, this specific camera movement in *An Elephant Sitting Still* brings out the form of despair by implementing it cinematographically throughout the film.

In her analysis of the affect of anxiety in the indie horror film *Open Water* (2003), Eugenie Brinkema argues that instead of being static, the structure of anxiety inherits a unique type of momentum that enfolds as a “difficult movement of form”. Channelling Kierkegaard, Freud, and Lacan’s theorisation of anxiety, Brinkema anchors her main arguments on how two formal cinematic elements in the film – the framing of two spaces above and below the horizontal line of the sea and the chromatic contrasts of blue – create a formal disposition which is independent from the storyline. The open water where the diving couple lost their lives to the sharks is neither narratively interesting nor metaphorically deep and profound. The film is primarily a formal presentation of anxiety itself, in which anxiety is a repetitive movement that restlessly generates from nowhere, going from nowhere to nowhere. As there is no end goal, anxiety as a movement quickly becomes “a form that begins to choke, that is strangled and restricted, has nowhere to go, moves in motor iterations that do not displace or enact change but return in a flailing stupid repetition” (Brinkema 2019, 209).

In *An Elephant Sitting Still*, a 225-minute film which consists of only 81 shots, close tracking shots consist of 69.14% (56 shots) of the screen time. This means that despite being visually “in their own worlds” for more than half of the film, the protagonists are constantly on the move, escaping something or finding something. The Arri Alexa Mini camera and Ultra Prime lens serve as loyal companions for the four protagonists’ quests. As Fan Chao, the cinematographer of the film describes, “lightweight, portable, suitable for limited space...and more affordable”¹¹⁹ devices make it possible for the cinematographer to stay as close as possible. Justine Smith insightfully notes this overlooked bond between the camera and the four protagonists and argues that the latter “are imbued with love and adoration by a camera that feels invested in shedding light on their struggle and endurance”.¹²⁰

As an expression of love from a non-human actant, the relationship between the camera and the protagonists demands revaluation of the setting or the purpose of the cinematic world in which they are considered trapped. Yes, one can argue that behind a camera is a cinematographer, who executes a director’s vision, and that the camera is then no more than a tool to execute the shooting list that has been impeccably planned.¹²¹ Under an ANT-inspired vision, however, the Arri Alexa Mini¹²² is recruited to the film as a solid ally for its unique qualities as a non-human actant – its versatility as something small, light, and easily carried around; and its high exposure index (EI) range which is forgiving enough to

¹¹⁹ Aaron Hunt, “At the Mercy of the Sun: Cinematographer Fan Chao on Shooting *An Elephant Sitting Still*”, last modified 8 April 2019, <https://filmmakermagazine.com/107340-at-the-mercy-of-the-sun-cinematographer-fan-chao-on-shooting-an-elephant-sitting-still/#.YyMXOuzMIWo> (accessed 5 February 2021).

¹²⁰ Justine Smith, “Reviews: An Elephant Sitting Still”, last modified 8 March 2019, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/an-elephant-sitting-still-2019#:~:text=%E2%80%9CA%20Elephant%20Sitting%20Still%E2%80%9D%20runs,by%20an%20uncomfortably%20intimate%20camera> (accessed 17 October 2021).

¹²¹ As Fan Chao stated in an interview with Aaron Hunt, “The only coverage we got for the scenes are the long shots that you see in the film.” See <https://filmmakermagazine.com/107340-at-the-mercy-of-the-sun-cinematographer-fan-chao-on-shooting-an-elephant-sitting-still/>

¹²² See Arri Alexa Mini leaflet, last modified 25 November 2018, <https://www.arri.com/en/camera-systems/cameras/alexa-mini> (accessed 4 June 2022).

shoot with natural light.¹²³ These qualities are no less compelling and stand on their own compared to how other human actants are enrolled: the personality and charm of a human actor, or the competence of an experienced gaffer or camera man. Therefore, a true relationship has been formed between the camera and the protagonists/body of actors in this film. Despite both being movements, a crucial difference between the affect of anxiety, which in Brinkema's account is the intermittency and repetition of nothingness, and the affect of despair that I observe in this film, is that the latter has a solid trace. The affect of despair is first and foremost the longing to go somewhere: the final leap towards the impossible elephant. The longing is so concrete that the only thing that matters is the trajectories these protagonists take which are initially diverse and then gradually converge on that impossible place. It is a journey on which the protagonists and the camera are allowed to embark.

To revisit the flatness of secondary characters and the external environment: they are not only visually flat but also shallow in terms of the diegesis. They are, to be precise, non-player characters (NPC) that “do not have any or at least only a restricted gameplay function” (Domsch 2013, 45) in this first-person-perspective video game that Hu Bo seamlessly designed. Abundant close tracking shots, in particular close over-the-shoulder tracking shots from the back, create identical viewsheds which are heavily deployed in various types of video game. This alignment between players and game characters is described by Chris Solarski as a rule of thumb to create intimacy and empathy between players and the characters: a first-person view that is “perfectly aligning the player's gaze with that of their in-game character” (Solarski 2017, 61).



Figure 15 *Journey* (Thatgamecompany, 2012)



Figure 16 *The Witcher 3* (CD Project RED 2015)

Two further points can be added to Solarski's view: first, it takes more than seeing what the in-game-character is seeing to establish the bond. A reasonably continuous span of time and repetition of movement grant a player familiarity with the game world. One needs to “waste time” walking through the forest with the character, getting lost, and feeling frustrated about not being able to trigger the event that opens the closed gate to the secret pathway. Second, aside from empathy, familiarity is established between a player and a character. With a sense of familiarity, a player can scroll the mouse to view the surroundings and zoom in and out to get a broader view of the map. Familiarity does not require a sense of intimacy. In other words, a player can easily control a character without necessarily feeling they are in any sense emotionally connected to that character.

To apply the same idea to the long sequences in *An Elephant Sitting Still*, the affect of despair does become accessible because of the alignment of eyes – both characters and spectators – pointing in same direction; but it also becomes clear through the elongation of

time and space. It is not a feeling which needs resonance. It is a movement which requires familiarisation, like picking up a dance step – a lot of repetition and a lot of mistakes. The long take of Wei Bu's first confrontation with the school bully is a good elaboration on how this repetition of trajectory is executed: after walking upstairs with his friend (00:28:47–), Wei Bu is confronted by the bully in the hallway of the second floor (00:29:31–). After the bully threatens them, Wei Bu leaves his friend (00:31:36), turns around, and goes back down the same staircase (00:31:42–). He turns left on the ground floor (00:32:04–), passing another student who is mopping the floor. The boy is in shallow focus, although one can tell from the silhouette that he has been bullied in the previous scene on the second floor (00:32:08). He walks into the school vice dean's office (00:32:31). An event is triggered: he is trying to compensate for the desk that he had damaged but is told that the school is going to shut down. Wei Bu is mocked for being serious and is told that his future is hopeless (00:32:37–). After the conversation, Wei Bu is asked by the school vice dean to "tell the boy with the mop to come in" (00:33:49). Walking out of the office, Wei Bu speaks to the student, from whom he receives a confusing message: "The world is a wasteland." Walking away from the office, Wei Bu again walks back along to the same staircase (00:35:20–). He turns right again, and this time, instead of the bullies and the other student with the mop, it is Huang Ling, another protagonist of the film, who is leaning against the wall of the hallway (00:35:25–).



Figure 17 *the hallway at the beginning of the sequence.*



Figure 18 *the hallway at the end of the sequence with the same framing, different characters and events waiting to be triggered.*

The repetition of framing and camera movement at a monotonous pace creates a trajectory which is connected by the various physical locations in the film: the school yard, staircase, the hallway where the various encounters take place, and vice dean's office where no light comes through. Following the human actants, the camera as a non-human actant links these locations. Through these set, concrete movements which resembles tram tracks in a city, the structure of despair is introduced and becomes familiar to the audience as they follow the trajectories of not just one, but four of the protagonists, who can be seen as human actants who also play a crucial part in illuminating the pathways of despair.

Returning to my conceptualisation of “dehumanisation”, I previously argued that the use of a fixed focus point in this film cancels the importance of secondary characters by blurring them into the background. In this section, I further argue that the close tracking shot, as a non-human actant, reduces the four protagonists to “moving thing”. The close proximity

between the camera and the protagonists does not create an emotional connection between them and the audience in a conventional sense. Instead, the film consistently creates a sense of discomfort that prevents the protagonists from being relatable according to socially acceptable “human nature” (ren zhi changqing 人之常情): Wei Bu tells Huang Ling that he punches the bully merely because “I followed the process” (Wo an liucheng laide 我按流程来的) (1:37:18); Yu Cheng blames the death of his friend on the girl who rejected him and tells her that he has an affair because of her (“because you refused to see me”, 2:11:57); Huang Ling sneers at the school vice dean who panics when she questions his marital status, and tells him that she does not care (“Easy, I am kidding”, 2:01:45).



Figure 19 00:32:09 Wei Bu Walking



Figure 20 1:02:50 Huang Ling Walking

While the connections among human actants are almost deliberately denied, the pathways created by close tracking shots, however, remain consistent and concrete. In the screenshots above, the camera follows both Wei Bu and Huang Ling as they walk down from the same staircase, make the same turn, and make the same entrance into the vice dean’s

office. Backshots of them in the frame, wearing the same style of school uniform, further obscure their faces, making them virtually identical and interchangeable at this moment. In these close tracking shots from the back, their weight as unique characters in a film is compromised. They become one of the characters in a classic role-play game, in which they are picked for their background stories and different abilities, but what they do is functional: they go through pre-programmed pathways and trigger events to continue the storyline. It is indeed those pathways that push the cinematic time forwards.

5.3.3 Conclusion: The Leap

The analysis of the close tracking shot of Wei Bu at school is only one example of how pathways to despair are formed through repetitive movement which is carried out by close tracking shots. There are thirteen events that happen to Wei Bu and which continue through the whole film (see Appendix 3). All of these events are monotonous and neither enrich nor complicate the plot but add already existing pressure to the protagonists and accent the form. It is these events that gradually break Wei Bu and eventually nudge him to make up his mind towards the elephant in Manchuria.

In this section, I end my analysis of the film by providing a short reading of one of these thirteen events, which has a different texture to the rest. It occurs after Wei Bu has finally lost hope that the bully whom he has accidentally pushed off the stairs might still recover.

In this long take which lasts 7.5 minutes (2:43:53–2:51:19), the camera slowly slides and lets Wei Bu slightly drift away from the centre of the shot. It then captures Wei Bu screaming at the wasteland:

Go to fucking hell and die! You are a scumbag! You are dog shit! You
are the most disgusting thing I have ever seen! Damn you! Fuck off and die!
Fuck off and die!!

Before this final breakdown, Wei Bu murmurs, “Fuck you, go to hell” twice. There is a certain fragility to this moment. The curse is spelled out clumsily, as though he were an infant just starting to learn how to speak, or as though he had not spoken for such a long time that he is taking time to regain the capacity to speak. It is a strange moment. After hours of being cold, distanced, and cynical, Wei Bu pours his heart out. He starts to speak; he starts to

express himself; he starts to weep and sob. However, this final burst is yelled as though there is nothing else he would have wanted or have been capable of saying, other than pouring the curse of hatred and callousness into the void in front of him.

It is without a doubt a cathartic moment. However, unlike the cathartic relief which serves as a clichéd trope that can often be spotted in TV shows, Wei Bu's shouting into the void resonates with Brian Massumi's analysis of anger:

...Anger forces the situation to attention, it forces a pause filled with an intensity that is often too extreme to be expressed in words. Anger often degenerates into noise and inarticulate gestures. This forces the situation to rearray itself around that irruption, and to deal with the intensity in one way or another. In that sense it's brought something positive out – a reconfiguration. (Massumi 2015, 9)

Wei Bu's situation, however, does not allow such a reconfiguration to happen. Why not? I would argue that this is because, as a film which depicts the pure form of despair, *An Elephant Sitting Still* does not allow such a space for Wei Bu to resettle and regain his human form and his right to release. This is also why there is no clear recipient for Wei Bu's string of curse words other than the ambiguous "you". It is a *Flaschenpost* situation in Žižek's account, in which "a letter reaches its true destination the moment it is delivered, thrown into the water – its true addressee is namely not the empirical other which may receive it or not, but the big other, the symbolic order itself, which receives it the moment the letter is put into circulation..." (Žižek 2007, 10)

To conclude, the letter is sent, the imprecation is for no one and yet at the same for

everyone, as the camera, a non-human actants, shifted its focus to the side. It witnesses Wei Bu's final furious leap towards "destination impossible".

5.4 *Kaili Blues*: Objects and Affect of Melancholy

In using its freedom to bring the inanimate to the fore and make it a carrier of action, film only protests its peculiar requirement to explore all of physical existence, human or nonhuman. (Kracauer 1997, 45)

This section of the analysis focuses on the role of ordinary objects from daily life as non-human actants in illuminating the affect of melancholy in *Kaili Blues*. As previously discussed in the chapter on indie production companies as hubs, Black Fin serves as a hub within an emerging indie network and creates an open space for Chinese films with alternative aesthetics to have a sustainable presence and agency within the industry. This open space which is generated throughout the making of Chinese indie film network is significant not only as an industry practice, but also as an aesthetic quality, offering a platform for the exploration and expression of unique and innovative forms of cinematic art. The analysis of *Kaili Blues* in this chapter highlights the aesthetic value and significance of this open space within the Chinese indie film network, which allows affect of melancholy to roam.

One crucial aspect that differentiates melancholy as a negative affect from the affect of dysphoria or despair is that it is a negative affect which builds. The characteristics of what melancholy initially entails – a psychological condition which, according to Freud, features as “a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings” (Freud 1953, 244) and therefore needs treatment – has been translated by a cluster of contemporary theorists into a concept which bears political, ethical, and aesthetic significance. In short, it is a negative affect that lingers and builds, an open space that “is in a

unique position to imagine the world otherwise, to speak to (or for) and grapple with the new” (Brikema 2019, 68).

Produced by indie film company Black Fin on an initial budget of ¥ 20k, *Kaili Blues* features an iconic 41-minute-long take that adds to its allure. Described as a “dreamy journey”,¹²⁴ the film garnered acclaim not only from film festivals and enthusiasts in China and beyond but also provided Bi Gan with a significant boost for his career as an indie filmmaker, which could be seen as both a blessing and a curse.

As a film that depicts themes of “remembrance and fantasy” (*zhuiyi yu huanxiang* 追忆与幻想),¹²⁵ *Kaili Blues* follows the protagonist, Chen Sheng’s road trip from Kaili 凯里 to Zhenyuan 镇远.¹²⁶ Focusing on how the affect of melancholy is illuminated through the unique deployment of objects as non-human objects, particularly ordinary objects from daily life in the film, this section of the analysis focuses on the film *Kaili Blues* and examines the following: First, how objects in the film contribute to the creation and circulation of melancholy; and secondly, how this affect, as described by Margaret Hillenbrand’s conceptualisation of photo form, creates an open space our understanding of ways to remember in contemporary China.

¹²⁴ Ken Jaworowski, “Review: *Kaili Blues*, a Dreamy Trek with Otherworldly Beauty”, last modified 19 May 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/20/movies/kaili-blues-review.html> (accessed 7 December 2019).

¹²⁵ “Woshi Bi Gan, zenyang pai yibu zhengfu wenyiqingnian he dianyingjie pingwei de dichengben chunvzuo, wenwoba!我是毕赣，怎样拍一部征服文艺青年和电影节评委的低成本处女作，问我吧！” [I am Bi Gan, ask me about how to make a low-budget debut film that’s become the favourite of both hipsters and the film festival juries!], last modified 15 July 2016, https://m.thepaper.cn/asktopic_detail_10005232 (accessed 4 July 2018).

¹²⁶ Short synopsis of the film: after getting out of prison, Chen Sheng is working as a local doctor in a small clinic in Kaili city. Despite constant conflict with his half-brother, Chen is fond of his brother’s son, Weiwei. When he receives news that the boy has been taken away to Zhenyuan city for the summer break, he decides to take a train trip with a double mission: to bring Weiwei back and to deliver some souvenirs to an old acquaintance of Chen’s colleague at the clinic. On the way, Chen follows a group of Miao musicians, goes through a tunnel, and reaches Dangmai, where past and present, memory and longings bewilderingly mix together.

5.4.1 Object: From Blue Kite to Blue Tablecloth

When we concentrate on a material object, whatever its situation, the very act of attention may lead to our involuntarily sinking into the history of that object.

Novices must learn to skim over matter if they want matter to stay at the exact level of the moment. Transparent things, through which the past shines!

(Vladimir Nabokov 1972, 1)

Contemplating cinema as a unique medium which shares similar technological veins with photography, Siegfried Kracauer reminds us of what he describes as the “photographic approach” of films (Kracauer 1997, 16). Camera regulates the attention of the audience by delimiting what one sees. Behind different ways of seeing are different spatial and temporal markers which simultaneously construct scenarios, kaleidoscopic moments of lives. By amplifying inanimate objects in the foreground, cinema further differs from theatre performance with its flexibility to zoom in and reveal what is otherwise unseen or neglected. Close-ups of objects with a prolonged duration can engender melancholy as they create self-estrangement, caused by a disturbance to the established order between us and the environment. He describes the relationship between melancholy and individual encounters with objects as such:

Melancholy as an inner disposition not only makes elegiac objects seem attractive but carries still another, more important implication: it favours self-estrangement, which on its part entails identification with all kinds of objects. The dejected individual is likely to lose himself in the incidental configurations of his environment, absorbing them with a disinterested intensity no longer determined by his preference. (Kracauer 1997, 17)

As non-human actants, ordinary objects in *Kaili Blues* dutifully play such roles by persistently and firmly claiming their space and declaring their present-at-hand (*Vorhandenheit*) status. The fresh visual order created by these objects means that there is a need for the objects in this film to be understood beyond the chain of signifier and signified and be taken as the true force-benders that construct a collage of temporality and spatiality, a Dangmai¹²⁷ where the past, the present, and the future converge – where reality, fantasy, and dream dwell.

Objects conventionally work as clues. They push the story forward. Rosebud in *Citizen Kane* (dir. Orson Welles 1942) symbolises the innocence of childhood; the wooden horse in *Bladerunner 2049* (dir. Denis Villeneuve 2017) points at lost memories. They refer to a grander theme and work as an important signifier to construe the narrative. In an interview with Mark Cousins, Tian Zhuangzhuang elaborates on how his initial idea of naming the film *Blue Kite* (Lan fengzheng 蓝风筝, dir. Tian Zhuangzhuang 1993) came from his understanding of Chinese history and mentality: “I feel that a kite is just like the Chinese. Why? It wants to fly in the sky, but there is always a thread controlling it. But if there is no thread, the kite cannot fly at all” (Cousins 2009, 256). Jia Zhangke demonstrates in *Still Life* how objects can be effectively recruited in ways other than direct signifiers that bear symbolic significance: “cigarette”, “booze”, “sugar”, and “tea” – four items which are ordinary but indispensable in Chinese daily life – become the markers that loosely define the four segments of the film. They are signposts which bear indexical significance. They are much more spread out, contributing to the formal structure of the film while interacting loosely with the narrative. One can observe similar strategies when it comes to the

¹²⁷ In the Miao 苗 language, Dangmai 荡麦 refers to “an imaginary place”. See Xiao Jiwei and Dudley Andrew, “Poetic and the Periphery: The Journey of *Kaili Blues*” (web exclusive), last modified n.d. 2019, <https://www.cineaste.com/summer2019/poetics-and-periphery-journey-of-kaili-blues> (accessed 4 March 2021).

deployment of objects in *Kaili Blues*. A train and shots on moving rail track can indicate a flashback as in Lee Changdong's *Peppermint Candy* (1999); a clock that goes backwards can hardly refer to anything other than one's contemplation of the past. Bi Gan states in his interview with Xiao Jiwei that he has consistently implemented little details which "mark the time and structure of the film" (Xiao 2019, 20).

It is interesting, however, how Bi Gan implements what he calls "coordinates", which are "signposts in the film...these road signs can help you find your way. Whether you make the right turn or not is your own business" (Xiao 2019, 20). This idea of generating a cinematic space which allows the audience to roam leads to my initial interest in the strong and unique presence of objects. As a recurring motif, everyday objects – cigarette cartons, dolls, spinning fans, television, clocks, shirts – are visually taking over the scenes by "standing" at the front, in focus, with a strong sense of presence while human characters, most of the time, hang loosely in the background. For example, having occupied the foreground of the shot while the news of the wild man is being played on the radio at the beginning of the film, a spinning fan, which looks exactly like the one in the previous frame, reappears at the end of the film – it sits on the front seat while the protagonist, Chen Sheng, who is in the back seat, is completely blocked from view.



Figure 21 *Chen Sheng in Kaili with the spinning fan in the front*



Figure 22 *Chen Sheng visits the Monk in Zhenyuan, a spinning fan is sitting in the front seat of the car*

This seemingly baffling relationship between the spinning fan as non-human actant and human actants in *Kaili Blues* leads to the display of objects – objects in *Kaili Blues* do more than merely occupy the cinematic screen. They group together. They combine with each other and provide visual structure, links, and clues. The sequences between the protagonist, Chen Sheng and Guanglian, Chen Sheng's colleague at the local clinic, are good examples of the crucial moment when, in a Kracauerian sense, human actors lose themselves to the non-human actants.

Figure 24-27 demonstrates that in scene of the handover, non-human actants are the main characters to which the camera has generously given the floor. In this still, tableau shot, the table is covered by a blue tablecloth. Amidst trivial dialogues hovering over the image about dinner and food, Chen Sheng's items (a watch, a set of keys, and a cell phone) are placed in a seemingly random way on the right side of the table, until Guanglian brings over

an old suitcase. She puts the suitcase on the left of the desk, at which point a floral patterned, purple shirt, which belongs to Guanglian's former lover, covers up Chen Sheng's items completely. At the end of this sequence, the set of items on the table has become a cassette, an old photo, the shirt, and half a jar of homemade pickle. None of them belong to Chen Sheng anymore. In other words, Chen Sheng's visual "footprint" is gone and has been replaced by a man who does not have an image yet is now fully present in this film.



Figure 23 *Chen Sheng's belongs: a watch, a phone, and a set of keys*



Figure 24 *the flora shirt covers Chen Sheng's personal belongs*



Figure 25 *a shirt, a cassette, an old photo of the young man, and jar of pickle*

Analysing the possible mental game behind the trendy “organisation porn” on Instagram, which refers to a visual pallet in which objects normally belonging to a certain individual are displayed in an extremely organised way, Johan Wagemans proposes an intricate relationship between perception and meaning:

Whenever we see things in our environment or when we look at images, the brain is organising the inputs or trying to make sense of them. Usually, perception is after meaning, but when you start playing with images in a way like this, it’s clear that it’s not about meaning, it’s about the special relationship between things and how they form a group or a composition.¹²⁸

Wageman’s assertion of a plausible priority in which things combined into a structure takes precedence over meaning-deciphering echoes Margaret Hillenbrand’s conceptualisation of “photo-form”. As a conceptual tool to explore public secrecy in contemporary China, Hillenbrand defines “photo-form” as a specific type of image work that travels between contexts. It “meld(s) well-known historical photographs with different material substrates” (Hillenbrand 2020, 26). Taking the exhibit of a victim of the Cultural Revolution, Bian Zhongyun’s 卞仲耘 belongings in Hu Jie’s 胡杰 documentary film *Though I am Gone* as an example, Hillenbrand highlights a community of artists-activists that continually repurpose Bian’s portrait with alterations which “widen the range of this communitas, presenting not just a single exhibit but an extended *exhibition* of the numinous whose online movements expand the belonging of spectatorship” (Hillenbrand 2020, 152).

¹²⁸ Alleyne, Allyssia. “This Is Your Brain on Tidiness: The Psychology of ‘Organisation Porn’”, last modified 12 October 2015, <https://edition.cnn.com/style/article/this-is-your-brain-on-tidiness/index.html> (accessed 1 March 2019).



Figure 26 00:56:22 the personal belongings of Bian Zhongyun in *Though I am Gone* (2006)



Figure 27 *a cassette player, a bag, and a suitcase in Wes Anderson's Moonrise Kingdom (2012)*



Figure 28 *Negative Space* (di. Ru Kuwahata and Max Porter 2017)

It would be wrong to claim that *Kaili Blues* makes any intentional effort to be taken as part of this movement of visual remembrance of the political past of China. Bi Gan is not in any sense an activist. Quite the contrary, he is very clear about his stance by disassociating himself from Chinese filmmakers of “earlier generations” and states that “now and perhaps in

the future, we filmmakers might turn to the experience of the self more and focus on dream and time” (Xiao 2019, 21). It is, however, not easy to draw a line in this case because of *Kaili Blues*’ special approach to objects. By giving these ordinary objects space, and displaying them in a carefully arranged palette, the film releases objects from their inert “ready-to-hand” status and demonstrates that human actants have no dominance over the material nature of non-human actants, which are capable of transcending different means of medias, and contexts because of their inevitable role as carriers of brief, fleeting moments which peel off from the lived world.

Objects, be they man-made or otherwise, are covered by what Vladimir Nabokov describes as a “thin veneer of immediate reality” which grants access to “the now” and “whoever wishes to remain in the now, with the now, on the now, should please not break its tension film” (Nabokov 1972, 1). This subtle but ubiquitous layer that lies between object and human is reminiscent of the Kracauerean alienation that points to melancholy – a mild interruption to the auto-pilot routine of life, and a chance that prepares one for a glimpse of one’s own lived experience through things. It is in this sense that we can understand why Bi Gan describes *Kaili Blues*, a film that is very personal to the filmmaker himself, as a map, and identifies objects as non-human actants – be they dogs, clocks, chairs, cigarette packages, dolls – as “coordinate” signposts for audience to walk around the cinematic space with their own agenda and their own interactions with these non-human actants. This is because Bi Gan’s clearly individual approach to the self, past, and memory spares extra manipulation of the objects and keeps this thin veneer of immediate reality intact. This means that while it is very likely that the personal belongings of Bian Zhongyun in Hu Jie’s documentary film, and the display of “an incredibly brave exposé of events that the communist regime would prefer to forget” would never make it to an ordinary Chinese film audience, we get to see Guanglian’s souvenirs, which interestingly emanate from the same era of the Cultural

Revolution. The latter, however, only vaguely point at a past, a shared past that is only mildly painful and filled not with grief but with melancholy. Unlike grief, the inwardness of melancholy makes it too weak an affect. It can neither mobilise the movement to remember the past nor construct any evidence. Melancholy construes no testimony. It does, however, provide access for the audience to contemplate themselves. Travelling through identical photo forms, ordinary objects in *Kaili Blues* carry the potential to open access to the immediate reality, from where the link with the past is weak, individual, but accessible, and plural. Censorship in China means that some films may never be seen by the general public, but the forms of film that do exist can prepare viewers for those that have not yet been seen. In this way, ordinary objects in *Kaili Blues* can offer access to the present reality and a weak, individual, yet accessible and plural connection to the past.

5.4.2 Animated Object and Object-Human

Objects in *Kaili Blues* do more than claim the forefront of cinematic space, or form alliances with each other as repurposable visual forms. There is an intricate relationship between human and non-human actants in this film. Things speculate, and even crawl into humans and possess them. Animated objects in *Kaili Blues* are not in any sense personified or anthropomorphised. Rather, they participate in the construction of the cinematic space in *Kaili Blues* while maintaining their silence and therefore keeping their shimmering veneer intact.

Other scholars have also noticed this prevailing materiality in *Kaili Blues* and interpret it differently. Xiao Jiwei proposes an intricate link between mundane objects in *Kaili Blues* and Chinese classical poetry. Taking the silver disco ball in the film as an example, she references the kaleidoscopic texture of the disco ball with both the richness of the cinematic scenes in which “mutating colours that successively float atop and transform what one sees”¹²⁹ and with poems which “shimmer with neologisms, imagery, and figures of speech”.

I find it necessary to make a digression and to examine the poems in *Kaili Blues*, with a specific focus on objects and how are they placed in the poems. After locating where the eight poems are inserted in relation to the cinematic moments in Appendix 1, my finding is that what links the poems and the film is the materiality of words and images, which refers to the placement of words together with the composition of ordinary objects in the film that co-create what can be called the poetics of the film. For example, in the first poem, nouns such as “windscreen wiper” and “umbrella” are placed side by side on one line. This placement of

¹²⁹ Xiao Jiwei and Dudley Andrew, “Poetic and the Periphery: The Journey of *Kaili Blues*” (web exclusive), last modified n.d. 2019, <https://www.cineaste.com/summer2019/poetics-and-periphery-journey-of-kaili-blues> (accessed 4 March 2021).

words resonates on screen with how Chen Sheng and the disco ball are positioned vis-à-vis each other on the balcony. Parallel to how mundane objects are narrated in the poem, the disco ball hangs in an equal position vertically with the protagonist – the two of them share, not metaphorically but virtually, the cinematic space and one can almost describe the dynamics as the two standing side by side on the balcony.



Figure 29 *The disco ball “stands” side by side with the protagonist during the day*
(00:10:18–00:10:28)



Figure 30 Similar visual composition between the human and the disco ball during the evening.



Figure 31 it stands there during the night, even when the protagonist has left the frame.

(00:09:06–00:09:36)

This equal spatial relationship between Chen Sheng and the disco ball already occurs earlier in the film. After being awakened by the mysterious shadows on the wall and unearthly tone played by the *xiao* 箫, the classic Chinese bamboo flute (00:08:41–00:09:05), Chen Sheng leans over the balcony to ascertain the source that has meddled with his slumberous dream. There, the disco ball and Chen Sheng stand side by side, with the disco ball still occupying the screen after Chen Sheng retreats to the bedroom from the balcony (00:09:36–00:09:54).

In my close reading of the transfer of object between Guang Lian and Chen Cheng in the previous section, I resort to the psychological explanation on the Instagram trend of displaying of things arranged in order and Margaret Hillenbrand's conceptualisation of "photo form" to argue that the compelling visual assemblage of ordinary objects can go ahead of meaning deciphering. This quality of object allows the form of the assemblage to travel through different medias and genre. The disco ball on the balcony works similarly as a visual signpost, a companion to the human actors.

Bridging Latour's conceptualisation of the quasi-object in *We Have Never Been Modern* (Latour 1991, 55) and visual studies, Bill Brown reminds us of the power of cinema which "didn't separate people and things but brought them closer, granting props the status of

individuals, enabling neglected objects to assume their rightful value” (Brown 2001, 16). Non-human actants and human actants in both the poem-scape and the cinematic space of *Kaili Blues* present themselves as such examples in which objects are given space so generously that they work relentlessly together with the human actors. By becoming what Rancière describes as “pensive” (Rancière 2011, 108-132) when the “the logic of visibility no longer arrives to supplement action. It arrives to suspend it or rather to duplicate it” (2011, 123), certain objects in *Kaili Blues* reject conventional interpretations of how things are related to humans, and subsequently construe a slight distortion from reality where objects are tools or vessels overloaded with meanings and signifieds. In this slightly other-worldly order of time and space where human and object act ambiguously in accordance with each other, the line between human actors and objects has been deliberately blurred, to the point where they trespass the conventional boundary between the object as a thing and the human body by introducing relations other than “owners” and ‘belongings” to them.

Let’s go back to the disco ball again. Analysing the scene in which Chen Sheng picks up his nephew, Weiwei, who is locked in the room by his father, Xiao and Andrew point out that the disco ball acts “like a hypnotist’s dangling pendant, immediately triggering a flashback”.¹³⁰ My reading is slightly different from that of Xiao and Andrew, as I find that the role the disco ball plays here is more than a metaphor. It is more than a shimmering thing. It is a powerful being, not only in the sense that it remains as the optical focus of the shot while the protagonists are merely moving in the background (00:05:01–), but also because it works like an “Dokodemo door”,¹³¹ a portkey which pulls Chen Sheng to a different

¹³⁰ Xiao Jiwei and Dudley Andrew, “Poetic and the Periphery: The Journey of *Kaili Blues*” (web exclusive), last modified n.d. 2019, <https://www.cineaste.com/summer2019/poetics-and-periphery-journey-of-kaili-blues> (accessed 4 March 2021).

¹³¹ “The everywhere door” is one of the most famous gadgets in *Doraemon*, a Japanese manga (1969–96) created by Fujiko F. Fujio. With the everywhere door, one can travel to wherever one wants with few limitations.

temporality, in this case the past where he and his wife meet. It is therefore by no means a coincidence that on several occasions, the disco ball completely replaces the head of Chen Sheng (00:05:16–00:05:19, 00:05:24–00:05:26, 00:05:30–00:05:32) and transports this “disco ball-head human” to a flashback of the past.



Figure 32 This image does not appear in the film, the disco ball is in the very locus of the composition



Figure 33 00:05:31–00:05:32 the disco ball has taken over the head of the Chen Sheng

This image of a disco ball-headed human evokes again the ambiguous relationship between human and non-human in this film. If objects figuratively taking the place of a human head make the former a quasi-object and the latter a quasi-subject, what can this new relationship bring? Chen Sheng's adventure in Dangmai provides a tentative answer to this question. While, as illustrated above, the souvenirs with which Guanglian entrusted Chen Sheng formally take over Chen Sheng's own belongings, and the alignment of the objects tell their own stories, something different happens after Chen Sheng puts on the floral shirt in Dangmai. The shirt, which belongs to Guanglian's former lover, seems to live off Chen

Sheng. As a conventional trope, cursed objects – dolls, mirrors, videotapes, necklaces – are generously deployed in horror films, such as the videotape in *Ringu* (dir. Hideo Nakata, 1998) or *Oculus* (dir. Mike Flanagan, 2013). While applied differently in different plots, what they have in common is the capacity to exert an overwhelming force over the humans who unfortunately find and establish a relationship with them. While *Kaili Blues* is not a horror film, and the purple shirt with floral pattern has not changed the new owner's temper or meddled with his fate, this shirt does resonate with its more evil peers in the sense that after putting it on, Chen Sheng's journey in Dangmai becomes complex and involves multiple trajectories and temporal distortions: when Chen Sheng holds the young woman's hand in the hair salon and shines a flashlight near it, the moment resembles the romance that Guanglian described to Chen Sheng between her and her lover in the past; the young man he meets who shares the same name as his nephew (as well as Bi Gan's real-life nickname). As companions, objects set up the porousness of Dangmai as an in-between place. Channelling Laura Marks's analysis of a potential visual autonomy of "nonhuman and inanimate objects" (Duan 2021, 351), Duan Siyi proposes how concepts including Qingjing Jiaorong 情景交融 ("fusion of feeling/emotion and scenery/landscape") (Duan 2021, 354) and Xushi xiangsheng 虚实相生 ("the actual and virtual mutually give birth to each other") (Duan 2021, 357) can be channelled through the interplay between "empty shot" as a cinematic technique and Chinese philosophy. She points out that a new understanding of how the empty shot creates space for the resonance between human and non-human in a film and allows the audiences to "fully experience natural scenery and to encounter other beings while suspending everyday experiences, existing biases, and the separation between self and other" (Duan 2021, 346).

I am fully on board with Duan's observation that *Kaili Blues* successfully creates a cinematic space which challenges not only conventional orders of temporality and spatiality but also addresses issues of self, other, and collective memory. However, rather than Duan's

focus on the empty shot, I am more interested in how this in-between cinematic space is construed through collaborations between quasi-objects (the disco ball) and quasi-subjects (Chen Sheng with his floral-patterned shirt) which, borrowing Michel Serres's elaboration in *Parasite* (1980), rely on each other's existence to become fully "in the world":

This quasi-object is not an object, but it is one nevertheless, since it is not a subject, since it is in the world; it is also a quasi-subject, since it marks or designates a subject who, without it, would not be a subject...A ball is not an ordinary object, for it is what it is only if a subject holds it. Over there, on the ground, it is nothing; it is stupid; it has no meaning, no function, and no value. Ball isn't played alone. (Serres 1980, 225)

Serres's narration of a world of quasi-objects/subjects resonates with the cinematic space in *Kaili Blues*, in which the boundaries between the past, the present, and memory start to become ambiguous and the incubator of "certain aspects of the outer world which may be called the 'special mode of the reality'" (Kracauer 1997, 46).

This intriguing interaction between animated objects and object-human leads me to the other side of the equation: human actors as object-humans. As I have emphasised above, this equality, both in terms of visual presence and degrees of vitality, between human actors and non-human actants, does not only "put the medium on its own feet by stressing the tremendous importance of objects" (Kracauer 1997) but also intriguingly creates this image of a disco ball-headed man – a human-object hybrid. When this mutation happens, when the human actors are looming in the periphery of the cinematic scene while the body is taken as "no more than a detail, a fragment of the matter of the world" (Kracauer 1997, 456), a liberation also happens: human actors are temporarily freed from their duties to deliver dialogues and push forward the plot. For once, they get to become as quiet as the old

umbrella, or a bucket full of water. They get to say nothing, and therefore become easier to observe: Chen Sheng's back goes up and down in rhythm, like a fish breathing on land (0:46:04–0:46:07); the light of the flashlight goes through the hairdresser's hand and illuminates a tiny bit of her skin. The power of this moment lies less in how it resonates with the lines in narrating poems, and more in how it amplifies a different texture which a human body can carry. The human body, which is normally perceived to be solid, and therefore substantial and dominating, suddenly becomes transparent and porous, thus becoming a transparent thing allowing the light to go through. The viscosity of the human-thing implants a visual cue which links the hairdresser's hand with Guanglian's hand.



Figure 34 *Close-up of Chen Sheng's back during cup therapy*



Figure 35 *Chen Sheng flirts with the hairdresser in Dang Mai by pressing her hand to a lit-up torch*

This interplay between human and non-human actants creates a liminal space in which human bodies are endorsed with thingness. For example, when Chen Sheng's

torchlight shines through the hairdresser's hand, the human body loses its fundamental quality of being solid and opaque and become instead a transparent vessel which allows light to pass through it. Just as the transfer of personal belongings between Chen Sheng and Guanglian creates a bond, the palpable thing-ness of the human body in *Kaili Blues* allows the audience to see these protagonists as indexical. Just as in machine learning, identical handwriting can be recognised through a convolutional neural network (CNN)¹³² which breaks each image into the most basic pixel units, examining human and non-human actants as forms directs the eyes to how identity is formed across different films. An example is the tribute Bi Gan pays to Tarkovsky's *Mirror* when Chen Sheng's torchlight shines through the hairdresser's hand.

¹³² Niklas Lang, "Using Convolutional Neural Network for Image Classification", last modified 4 December 2021, <https://towardsdatascience.com/using-convolutional-neural-network-for-image-classification-5997bfd0ede4> (accessed 14 August 2022)

5.4.3 Conclusion: Follow the Wild Things

From the close analysis of the placement of objects as non-human actants in *Kaili Blues*, this section provides a unique perspective on how formal reading provides an understanding of Chinese indie film. By emphasising the role of non-human actants, this approach unveils a deeper understanding of the cinematic language of contemporary Chinese filmmakers, offering a glimpse into the psyche of Chinese life. Instead of spotlighting a possibly censored narrative, my approach shifts to non-censorable, non-diegetic elements embodied by inanimate objects.

Clocks, a flowery printed shirt, and a glittering disco ball work as more than mere passive décor in the film. As demonstrated, ordinary objects in *Kaili Blues* play a transformative role as non-actants that mould the temporal and spatial dimensions of cinematic space. They carve a nuanced fissure, inviting both the collective and individual memories of the Chinese past to converge. In this carefully constructed cinematic realm, any average audience, as Bi Gan suggests in one of his interviews, are welcome to come in and walk around. Unlike Bian Zhongyun's relics in Hu Jie's documentary film, which are displayed as if they are in a museum environment, objects in *Kaili Blues* become quasi-human: they interact, challenge, and ultimately offer a sense of healing and reconciliation to the protagonist.

As one of China's most prominent upcoming filmmakers, Bi Gan has demonstrated his knowledge of the film history and his aspiration to be recognised alongside the feature filmmakers who have inspired him. Therefore, it might be too simplistic to say that Bi's choice of focusing on personal and individual memory is purely a strategic move, an attempt to be apolitical in order to mitigate the risk of touching upon political subjects. After all, one can only see what an actant does and follow the trace. What is clear is that, without the emerging indie network and the support from Black Fin, *Kaili Blues* might not have reached

international platforms like the Lugano International Film Festival. This film works as a good example of the importance of viewing indie cinema's aesthetics and industry practices as interconnected, as the unique indie networks pave the way for innovative artistic explorations.

5.5 Conclusion: Beyond Ideology

In this chapter, a comprehensive text analysis is undertaken of selected Chinese indie films. Delving into the industry infrastructure aims to trace the efforts and manoeuvres of actants, laying the groundwork for a meaningful discussion of the aesthetics of these films. Without this foundational exploration of the indie network, discourse on aesthetics would remain superficial. Conversely, without a deep understanding of aesthetics, the significance of the actants' manoeuvring and efforts would remain fragmented and underrepresented. The actor-network methodology is indispensable, offering a lens to connect the multifaceted components of the industry. By integrating industry infrastructure nuances with aesthetics, and with the actor-network approach as the guiding framework, the narrative becomes holistic, unveiling the depth and richness of Chinese indie cinema.

The significance of my focusing on negative affect in Chinese indie cinema can be understood in three primary dimensions. Firstly, in the socio-political domain, the state's increased regulatory grasp on visual content is evident. Developments range from AI-driven facial recognition systems for student performance monitoring¹³³ to severe repercussions and national backlash for comedians perceived as mocking the PRC army.¹³⁴ Moreover, there is now even a stand-up comedy shows that promotes communist ideology.¹³⁵ Given these signs of diminishing emotional expression and growing self-regulation in real life, academic

¹³³ The Paper 澎湃新闻, "Ketang renlian shibie rang haizi bian 'xijing'? AI+Jiaoyu lunli nanti daijie 课堂人脸识别让孩子变‘戏精’? ‘AI+教育’伦理难题待解[Will Facial Recognition System in Classroom Turn Children into ‘Actors?’ AI+Education = an eEthical Issue Awaits to be Solved.]." 1 May, https://m.thepaper.cn/kuaibao_detail.jsp?contid=3385223&from=kuaibao (accessed 4 Sep 2023)

¹³⁴ BBC News, "Xiaoguo wenhua: zhongguo tuokouxiu yanyuan weihe bei zhi wuru jiefangjun bing zao diaocha 笑果文化：中国脱口秀演员为何被指侮辱解放军并遭调查[Xiaoguo Culture: Why a Chinese Stand-up Comedian was Accused of Insulting the PLA and is being Investigated]." Last modified 16 May 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/chinese-news-65608207> (accessed 4 Sep 2023)

¹³⁵ Xinhua, "Shehui Zhuyi 'youdianchao'jiemu: chuangxin lilun xuanchuan de 'chao'lujing 社会主义‘有点潮’节目：创新理论宣传的‘潮’路径 [Socialist is ‘Swish’: A “Trendy” Path to New Propaganda Theory]." Last modified 9 Feb 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/zgix/2018-02/09/c_136961183.htm (accessed 4 Sep 2023)

research on Chinese cinema is becoming essential. Such research should give voice to emotions that diverge from the official party line and are not necessarily positive and harmonious.

This observation aligns with another relevant consideration, which is crucial to the positioning of this thesis as a piece of academic research. Unlike independent filmmakers, who elude to the eyes of the state censorship and whose works are only available to those who seek them, indie filmmakers and practitioners in this research are put in a unique “in-between” place. Their exposure to state regulation, the market and audience means that there are messages that may be left unspoken or subtly modified for various reasons ranging from mitigating state censorship to meeting audience expectations. The different endings of *Black Coal, Thin Ice* between its Berlinale premiere and its domestic version is only one of the many examples which validate this point. In this context, scholars, who are uninfluenced by financial or censorship constraints, bear the responsibility to conduct comprehensive studies, which should not only interpret the filmmaker’s explicit and implicit intentions but also delve into the film’s formal structure to elucidate the potential meanings it may convey.

Finally, examination of negative affect through the lens of actor-network theory put Chinese indie cinema in direct dialogue with a broader scholarship on contemporary indie and arthouse cinema. Although terminologies may shift – such as Geoff Kings’ notion of “cinema of discomfort” (2022) for American and European films or Anna Backman Rogers’s description of American indie cinema as a “medium of crisis” which expresses “being as change and irresolvable state of ambiguity” (2005, 2) – the primary aim is clear: delving into film studies to uncover and elaborate upon contemporary emotional intricacies that transcend mere ideological distinctions. By emphasizing affect in this research, especially in the context of contemporary China, the focus can shift from strictly contrasting ideologies to a more profound understanding of us as humans. This perspective allows for the recognitions of

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shared experiences, sorrows, and connections, offering a more holistic view of our shared humanity.

Chapter 6. Exhibition Sites

As previously mentioned in the chapter on indie production companies, accessibility is a key feature that distinguishes indie films from independent films. In Chapter 5, this accessibility is further explored and the full circuit of the indie cinema network in China is examined through the analysis of three exhibition sites: the Nationwide Alliance of Arthouse Cinema (quanguo yishu dianying fangying lianmeng 全国艺术电影放映联盟 NAAC), a trial collaboration involving a diverse range of actants including state-sponsored institutions and influential industry practitioners; iQIYI, a streaming platform that offers a selection of indie films and provides an exhibition platform for these films to reach a wider audience; and the FIRST International Film Festival (FIRST Guoji qingnian yingzhan First 国际青年影展), a non-official film festival known for its close ties to the government and its reputation for discovering indie talents. Through the examination of these emerging exhibition sites, it can be argued that despite tightening state policies and unpredictable censorship, the indie film exhibition network in China has rapidly grown in the past decade. Unlike the previous independent cinema scene, which was characterised by its semi-private, dispersed, and informal nature, the indie network is more visible and stable, with diverse, recognisable actants working closely together, including cinemas, film festivals, streaming platforms, and state-initiated institutions, among others.

6.1 The State: Winter is Coming

Before examining the three exhibition sites, it is first important to understand the political climate in which these sites operate by looking at the role of the state. As the actant that plays the most dominant part in assigning the layout of the general structure of Chinese film industry, the party state's resolution to fully regulate physical and online screening spaces is implemented through the promulgation of two laws and the change of administration structure.

6.1.1 Everything the Party Touches: The Promulgation of the Two Laws

Two laws – the Film Industry Promotion Law (Zhonghua renmin gongheguo dianying changye cujinfa 中华人民共和国电影产业促进法 2016)¹³⁶ promulgated by SARFT (State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television 国家广播电影电视总局 Guojia guangbo dianying dianshi zongju) and the General Rules of Internet Audio-visual Programme Content Censorship (Wangluo shiting jiemu neirong shenhe tongze 网络视听节目内容审核通则 2021)¹³⁷ promulgated by CNSA (China Net-casting Service Association 中国网络视听节目服务协会 Zhongguo wangluo shiting jiemu xiehui) – have legally set for the tone for how little “free” space is there for filmmakers and, more generally, for the visual content producers have at their disposal. Restrictions on what can be exhibited physically in theatres and on small screens have been highly regulated.

According to the new film law, for example, not only is it illegal to screen films in

¹³⁶ State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television, “Zhonghua renmin gongheguo dianying changye cujinfa 中华人民共和国电影产业促进法” [Film Industry Promotion Law], last modified 7 November 2016, http://www.npc.gov.cn/zgrdw/npc/xinwen/2016-11/07/content_2001625.htm (accessed 28 May 2021).

¹³⁷ China Netcasting Service Association, “Wangluo shiting jiemu neirong shenhe tongze 网络视听节目内容审核通则 [General Rules of Internet Audio Visual Program Content Censorship]”, last modified 1 July 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com/zgjjx/2017-07/01/c_136409024.htm (accessed 28 May 2021).

public without the dragon seal, but it has also become illegal to screen a film whose content is altered from the version which passed censorship. This “subtle change” further indicates that no domestic festival in China will be able to screen films without censorship. It also means that censorship has been extended to the international film circuit. International film festivals are no longer havens where Chinese filmmakers get to play with the ambiguity of the rules,¹³⁸ to screen films which have passed the script inspection and yet obtain the final seal or a longer “director cut”, which is much less bound by censorship.

In terms of online exhibition, streaming content, which used to be mainly self-supervised, and censored by online platforms respectively, no longer belong to a space

¹³⁸ The new law on the public screen permit affects more than domestic theatrical distribution. The changing regulations on film festivals further indicate the will to take complete control over the content of Chinese films participating in domestic and international film festivals. Although it is not new for the Film Bureau to punish directors who participate in international film festivals with penalties which are harsh enough to ruin their careers, the application process for a film to participate in an international film festival has never been stricter. According to the Film Promotion Law (2016), Article 21 states that only films that acquire an official “public screening permit” are allowed to participate in any film festival.

It has been a long-existing coping strategy for Chinese filmmakers to have, where possible, different versions of their film for international film festivals and domestic distribution. The most common strategy would be to keep two versions – the film festival edition and the domestic edition. The content, which might be controversial for the domestic edition, while still being able to present a much more wholesome version of the film with the filmmakers’ original creative intention in the film festival edition. A good example of this is Diao Yinan’s *Black Coal, Thin Ice*. The film was awarded the Gold Bear Prize at the 64th Berlin International Film Festival, while the leading actor Liao Fan was awarded the Best Actor prize. Domestically, the film grossed more than a hundred million RMB and created a pattern of mixing art-house cinema with the thriller. Even though, as the director stated in all the interviews, the cut-out clips are more for commercial consideration instead of resulting from the pressure of censorship, it is still true that seven to eight changes were made for domestic distribution. The difference in the ending of the film was so drastic that it engendered heated debate on the internet as to whether “it is still the same film”, due to the apparently altered nature of the ending and the intention behind it. Under current film law, it is almost impossible for filmmakers to “sneak in” any extra “controversial” message that they would like their films to convey. This is because the new law changes the procedure that a film needs to go through to be screened at a festival. Before the 2016 Film Promotion Law, filmmakers who wished to participate in any film festival would need to apply to the Film Bureau and be issued with a “travel passport” from Customs (Article 36, 1996; Article 35, 2001). However, the rule has changed in that films can only be screened at festivals, either domestic or international ones, with a public screening permit (Article 21, 2016). And here, acquiring a public screening permit means that unlike having a digital opening title, there can be zero change, even a single frame, to the approved version of the film. A filmmaker who risks making changes would either need to go through the content-censorship again or face severe penalty (Article 49.2, Article 52, 2016).

With this series of policy changes in mind, it is clear that the current situation spares no one. The Film Bureau, with the CCP backing it up, is sending the clear message that no matter how much a filmmaker has been favoured previously (e.g., Zhang Yimou), or how influential the production company is (e.g., the production company for *The Eight Hundred* is Hua Yi Brothers), no film in China escapes bureaucratic intervention now.

“outside the law”. Highly regulated content means that web series productions such as *The North-east Mafia during the Past 20 Years* (Dongbei wangshi zhi heidao 20 nian 东北往事之黑道二十年, dir. 李炎 Li Yan, 2012), which does not shy away from raw depictions of violence, corruption, and social unrest in North-east China since the late 1980s, has no place in this new mapping of online streaming, since it does not comply with the new guidelines’ requirement to “spread truth and beauty ... and reflect the moral guidance of goodness and virtue”. In practice, this “purification movement” initiated by the authorities has also completely rewired the mindset of online content producers, who have seen opportunities to make films that are specifically tailored for online streaming. According to Xinhua News, by 2016, the production of web films (*wangluo da dianying* 网络大电影), which implies lower budget, shorter production time, and less sophisticated equipment and crew, have exploded to approximately 2,500 films per year.¹³⁹ The increase in numbers provided hope to a significant number of film practitioners (or wannabe practitioners) who wanted to be involved in this industry. For some of these practitioners, however, the 2017 internet censorship meant that their brief hope of a more relaxed environment to explore storytelling with fewer constraints was dashed. One informant, who directed a web film that was successfully released on iQIYI in 2016, had to deal with the consequence of her film being taken down, as her story stumbled over the taboo of extramarital affairs:

The film is inspired by a friend and her love affair with a married man. The protagonist in that film does not plan to disrupt anyone’s marriage. It is a film about how they get together and break apart. There are intimate sex scenes, but no direct

¹³⁹ Xinhua. “China Online Film Industry: New Prospect on Smaller Screens” Last modified 31 March 2017, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/business/2017-03/31/content_28751766.htm (accessed 2 February 2022).

nudity. The film was fine and stayed on the streaming platform for a while until 2017. The censorship was suddenly tightened then. It [the platform] just re-censored all the [web] films around then and I was asked to take away some of the explicit sex scenes and, dialogue-wise, any lines which might cause a “moral crisis” would need to be taken down. My friends around me who are working in the industry have had very similar experiences during that period. The newly imposed censorship is not just for web filmmakers. It applies to larger film companies that make theatrically distributed films too. Dramas with historical and fantasy themes were all halted then. There were very few greenlit subjects. (anonymous informant#)

While the informant was not directly work as an indie filmmaker, interview provides an insight into the delicate nature of censorship in the film industry in China after 2018. While there seems to be a general trend towards inclusivity, allowing and even encouraging the participation of various social actants, this freedom is not guaranteed and can be easily retracted. As a result, individual talents must navigate within the boundaries of regulations. The promulgation of internet control regulations had a significant impact on the previously vibrant web-film scene, resulting in limitations on what is allowed to be shown and expressed within the online space. This resonates with the overall atmosphere following the changes within the film bureau in 2018. The subsequent section will delve into the transformations within the film administration department and explore their potential influence on the industry.

6.1.2 Going Back to the Department of Propaganda

While it is arguably the case that this new round of censorship on internet content could be seen as a timed bureaucratic decision,¹⁴⁰ it is beyond doubt that a long-term resolution of the party state is to tighten the ideological control of audio-visual products.¹⁴¹

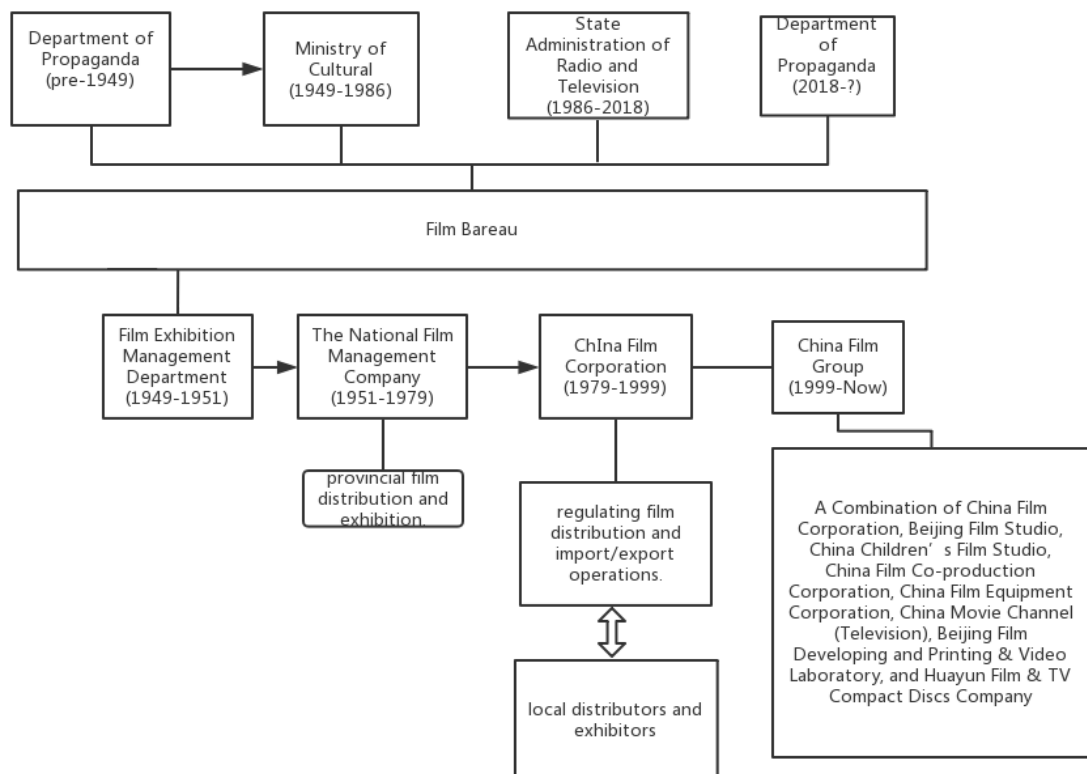


Figure 36 The changing administrative structure of Chinese film (Source: *The Evolution of Chinese Film as an Industry*, Zhu and Seio, 2010)

¹⁴⁰ given that this censorship regulation was promulgated in July 2017, only three months away from the celebration of the 69th National Day of People's Republic of China, as well as the making of historical dramas (which had been halted in 2017) being resumed shortly afterwards.

¹⁴¹ As Zhang Xianmin notes in his review on the beginning and the end of the independent cinema scene, digital visual product-making has, since 2003–4, had the clear purpose of “serving the legislation”. See “Zhang Xianmin – Zhongguo duli dianying de yingzhan jianshi 张献民-中国独立电影的影展简史” [Zhang Xianmin – a brief history of Chinese independent cinema], last modified 12 January 2020, <https://baike.baidu.com/tashuo/browse/content?id=1740794e03c275704de2f238> (accessed 4 July 2021).

This resolution is marked by the transition of film administration departments in 2017–2018. Figure 40 shows the changing administrations of the film industry and their relationship to the industry infrastructure in China since 1949. A key message is that even during the time that the film industry was heavily controlled and manipulated in the early days of the PRC regime, or even during the Cultural Revolution, the Film Bureau, which oversees film production and distribution, has always been under the control of the Ministry of Culture, which is a department affiliated to the State Council. In this regard, the takeover of the State Administration of Radio and Television (Guojia guangbo dianshi zongju 国家广播电视总局) in 2018 and its direct affiliation to the department of propaganda marks the end of one era and the beginning of a new one, as this transition of administrative power has marked, for the first time in the history of the PRC, film-related policy being directly decided not by the State Council but by the Communist Party.

It is difficult not to draw conclusions about the shift from a flourishing cinema scene in China and its decline after the transition from Hu Jintao to Xi Jinping in 2012. Hu Jintao, the then-president and party leader, had a relatively relaxed attitude towards film, as Zhang Xianmin notes in his personal account of the independent cinema movement in China,¹⁴² which could have set the tone for officials' tolerance towards informal DV filmmaking and exhibition during the period 2003–2012. And, in retrospect, space for informal exhibition in China had been dwindling long before the promulgation of the new film law in 2017. The total ban on independent film festivals in Beijing,¹⁴³ Nanjing, and Yunnan since 2012 indicates that the official attitude towards independent filmmaking and screenings has

¹⁴² See “张献民-中国独立电影的影展简史” [Zhang Xianmin: a brief history of Chinese independent cinema], last modified 12 January 2020, <https://baike.baidu.com/tashuo/browse/content?id=1740794e03c275704de2f238> (accessed 4 November 2021).

¹⁴³ Zhang Xianmin 张献民, “中国独立影像‘强拆年’” [The demolition year of Chinese independent cinema], last modified 16 May 2013, <https://cn.nytimes.com/film-tv/20130516/cc16filmfestival/> (accessed 3 November 2018).

changed from tolerance to hostility.¹⁴⁴ If the shutdown of the independent film festival in Beijing was due to the fact that the activist message this film festival sent challenged the Party's bottom line, then the slow death of the independent film festival in Nanjing, a film festival which had close collaborations with universities, art institutions, and other public spaces in Nanjing, suggests that it resembles the fable of the slowly boiled frog. An informant recalled that, after 2014, the Nanjing local government attitude changed after the shutdown of the independent film festival:

The local propaganda department feels that film is a dangerous, dangerous thing. And even if [they] know nothing about film, [they] would still rather do nothing than do anything. Because as soon as they approve anything film-related, then it might become a potential ticking time bomb if anything goes wrong, and their superiors might not be happy. So it's not difficult to be cautious. (anonymous informant#)

This tension between local governments and film exhibitors resembles what Jessica C. Teets' description of how local NGOs and social groups establish semi-collaborative relationships with local governments and how the latter deploy strategic incentives for these social groups to "meet the development goals and maintain the social order" (Teets 2014, 74). In this sense, Jia Zhangke's Pingyao International Film Festival (Pingyao guoji dianying zhan 平遥国际电影展) and the FIRST International Film Festival, and their intricate relationship with the local governments of Xining and Shanxi, are good examples of how

¹⁴⁴ "Jia Zhangkemen zourutizhi, Lixiantingmen xiaoshi, Zhongguo dianying hequhecong 贾樟柯们走入体制, 栗宪庭们消失, 中国电影何去何从" [Jia Zhangke and others have joined the system, Li Xianting and others have disappeared – where is Chinese cinema going?], last modified 8 October 2015, <https://www.jiemian.com/article/396857.html> (accessed 12 October 2017).

local government can be taken as one of the major actants that participates actively in the maintenance of the space for indie exhibition within tightly controlled boundaries. For example, PIFF was advertised by Jia Zhangke as “a tiny engine for the film and tourism industry of Shanxi”,¹⁴⁵ and the FIRST International Film Festival was presented as a cultural event which promotes a unique city image of Xining that is comparable to Venice or Cannes, as “no doubt, the quality of a film festival becomes a cultural label of the region”.¹⁴⁶

Several publications on the development of NGOs in China have already noted these layers of interaction between social workers, organisations, and local governments (Schwartz et al. 2009, Teets 2014, Shiel and Deng 2011, Giley 2012), and how these interactions shape social development in contemporary China at a micro level. And to translate these micro-level interactions into an ANT-inspired approach, all the examples mentioned above, positive or negative, can be taken as evidence of how important it is to patiently zoom in to observe each mediator’s move. This way, we can gain a more complex view on the film exhibition scenes which enfold the central and local, and which exist between the law and its implementation.

While it is crucial to recognise this flexibility, which exists due to mediators’/actants’ ability to translate the message/information, and in this case, the regulations from the party state, it would be unrealistic to assume that any local government or state-affiliated institution would go against the will of the party state and support events or exhibitions that violate the current law. This also means that while the space for negotiation and manoeuvre exists, it is

¹⁴⁵ “Jia Zhangke: ‘xiaotiliang’de Pingyao guoji dianyingzhan yao baochi shushigan 贾樟柯: ‘小体量’的平遥国际电影展要保持舒适感” [Jia Zhangke: as a “small volume” international film festival, Pingyao should stay cosy], last modified n.d. 2019, <http://www.sx.xinhuanet.com/2019xhft/pyjzky.htm> (accessed 18 July 2021).

¹⁴⁶ “Zhongguo Xining First qingnian dianying jie jiangyu benyue 21hao kaimu 中国西宁 FIRST 青年电影节将于本月 21 日开幕” [FIRST International Film Festival will be held on 21st of this month in Xining, China], last modified 13 July 2015, <http://www.qinghai.gov.cn/zwgk/system/2015/07/13/010171049.shtml> (accessed 14 June 2019).

an extremely unstable one. The change of attitude of the Nanjing local government is a good example of this instability of local governments as actants. Once its core interest, which is to mitigate the possibility of being held accountable for any social unrest, is put at risk, the existing safe space for indie exhibition and alternative film culture in general can quickly disappear. Given the current instability in the indie exhibition circuit due to stricter laws and regulations imposed by the state, I will investigate the impact of the National Alliance of Arthouse Cinema and the First International Film Festival as actant that work to maintain stability of the indie circuit.

6.2 Nationwide Alliances of Arthouse Cinema

Another influential actant that plays a crucial role in building the exhibition node of the current indie scene is the Nationwide Alliance of Arthouse Cinemas (NAAC). Founded in 2016, the NAAC is the most recent official effort to build up a larger exhibition network for arthouse cinema in China.

Before the founding of the NAAC, the Chinese Film Archive (Zhongguo dianying ziliaoguan 中国电影资料馆), the official institution that initiated the NAAC project, had two affiliated cinemas, located in Beijing. The two arthouse cinemas – Xiao Xitian Cinema (Xiaoxitian yishuyingyuan 小西天艺术影院), founded in 1995 and the newer one, Bai Ziwan Cinema (Baiziwan yishuyingyuan 百子湾艺术影院), brought into service in 2014 – are among the few cinemas (aside from the Broadway Cinematheque Bailaohui dianying zhongxin 百老汇电影中心) in China that have regular screenings of a wider range of films including Chinese and non-Chinese classics and newly released arthouse films, which are either difficult to get access to at all or are accessible only during selected film festivals or special film exhibitions scattered throughout the year.¹⁴⁷ The screenings are popular, and the tickets are so difficult to secure that “one has to book in advance, especially for the films that are scheduled for the smaller screening rooms. It is almost impossible to secure spare tickets.”¹⁴⁸

One of the main forms of leverage the newly formed NAAC has, is the exclusive right

¹⁴⁷ The most recent films that were screened at these two cinemas include *Woman Basketball Player No. 5* (Nvluan wuhao 女篮五号, dir. Xie Jin 谢晋, 1958), *Black Coal, Thin Ice* (2014), and *Leningrad Cowboys Go America* (dir. Aki Kaurismäki, 1989). See “Zhongguo dianying ziliaoguan xueshu fangying piandan (meiyue gengxin) 中国电影资料馆学术放映片单 (每月更新)” [Lists of CFA academic screenings (monthly)], last modified 15 November 2022, <https://www.douban.com/doulist/111299960/> (accessed 15 November 2022).

¹⁴⁸ “Qixi hai yue meizi qu dianyingyuan niji out le, kan zhexie 360 du huashi guanying jiqiao 七夕还约妹子去电影院你就 out 了, 看这些 360 度花式观影技巧” [If you are still asking a girl out to a normal cinema on Chinese Valentine’s Day, you are already out. Here goes the hippiest cinema experience], last modified 24 August 2017, http://news.cyol.com/co/2017-08/24/content_16429566.htm (accessed 15 November 2022).

to screen a selective number of foreign buyout films.¹⁴⁹ Up to 2019, the image of buyout films in mainland China was not limited to low-to-medium budget action films such as *The Expendables* (dir. Sylvester Stallone, 2010)¹⁵⁰ that were successful at the box office. Films such as *Bohemian Rhapsody* (dir. Bryan Singer and Dexter Fletcher, 2018) and *La La Land* (dir. Damien Chazelle, 2016) were imported to China as buyout films and have been very successful too. Partnering with the only two state-owned entities – China Film Group Corporation (Zhongguo dianying jituan gongsi 中国电影集团公司) and Huaxia Distribution Company (Huaxia dianying youxian gongsi 华夏电影有限公司) – that have the right to distribute quotas for buyout films to be exhibited, the NAAC has exclusive exhibition rights of foreign films that no other film distribution company in mainland China has. Take the national screenings of *Manchester by the Sea* (dir. Kenneth L 2016) as a good example: in August 2017, the film was exclusively released in 66 cities across China. As members of the NAAC, 190 cinemas, with 270 screens, screened the film.¹⁵¹ Only cinemas that have become a part of the NAAC are distributed with the encrypted key needed to screen the film. After successfully recruiting more member cinemas, Ying Qi 英琦, head of NAAC programming, announced that the NAAC is considering balancing the numbers in a specific area in Beijing:

¹⁴⁹ Unlike conventional Hollywood blockbusters, which are imported to mainland China with the famous revenue-sharing release (Zhu 2022, 158–66), buyout film (*pipian* 批片) refers to films that do not go through the process of profit-sharing at the box office. Such films are bought directly from the distribution companies as a package. This means the buyer bears the outcome at the box office, whether it is a profit or a loss.

¹⁵⁰ “Cong lanhai dao honghai dianying ‘pipian’ shi men shenme shengyi 从蓝海到红海 电影‘批片’是门什么生意” [From Blue Ocean to Red Sea, what kind of business is Buyout Films], last modified 22 February 2018, <http://media.people.com.cn/n1/2018/0222/c40606-29827654.html> (accessed 12 February 2021).

¹⁵¹ “Haibiande manchesite xianliang shangying beihou: quanguo yilian shishui fenxian faxing 《海边的曼彻斯特》限量上映背后：全国艺联试水分线发行” [Behind the limited screenings of *Manchester by the Sea*: a trial of exclusive theatre release for NAAC], last modified 27 August 2017, http://k.sina.com.cn/article_1623886424_60ca8a58034001h0a.html#/ (accessed 12 February 2021).

Considering the demography and demands of the audience that go for arthouse cinema, we feel that we have now reached the maximum number of host cinemas. Recruiting more cinemas may create unnecessary competition. Priority should be given to cinemas which have already joined. If anyone can just jump in once a good film comes out, then it would be unfair to those cinemas that have actively participated from the very beginning and that have supported the development of the NAAC.¹⁵²

Since 2020, 3,083 cinemas with 3,684 screens across the country have joined the NAAC.¹⁵³ As a prerequisite to joining the NAAC, member cinemas need to guarantee to show three NAAC screenings per day, and ten of these designated slots need to be prime time slots (18:30–22:00 on weekdays and weekends). In exchange, these cinemas have access to exhibition rights for films that are exclusively distributed by the NAAC.

The NAAC is not the first official attempt to establish a national theatre exhibition chain which is designated to arthouse cinema and the like. Researching arthouse cinema in contemporary China, Wang Mengzhao (2007) notes that there have been two efforts to establish an arthouse theatre chain in mainland China, in the late 1980s and early 2000s respectively. The first wave was marked by cinemas such as Pingan 平安 and Shengli 胜利, which were named “arthouse cinemas” in Shanghai in the late 1980s, and the initiation of the A-G Cultural Theatre Chain (A-G Wenhua dianying yuanxian 文化电影院线) in the early 2000s also had a close resemblance to the NAAC. Inspired by the French “avant-garde”, the

¹⁵² “Jiemi zhuanfang yishu dianying de quanguo yilian 揭秘专放艺术电影的全国艺联” [Revealing the NAAC: a new hub for art-house cinema screenings], last modified 5 March 2021, http://k.sina.com.cn/article_3133440825_bac4833901900stbp.html#/ (accessed 12 January 2022).

¹⁵³ “Quanguo Yishu dianying fangying lianmeng yuanxian jiameng 全国艺术电影放映联盟影院加盟” [Joining NAAC], last modified n.d. 2020, <https://www.cfa.org.cn/cfa/fy/qgysdyfylv/jm/index.html> (accessed 14 February 2021).

A-G Cultural Theatre Chain was initiated by Beijing Forbidden City & Trinity Pictures (Beijing Zijincheng Sanlian yingshi faxing youxiangongsi 北京紫禁城三联影视发行有限公司) in 2001. As a small trial of alternative exhibition modes in China, A-G signed contracts with ten cinemas in five cities: Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Wuhan, and Nanjing.¹⁵⁴

The launch of A-G was an ephemeral effort to create a platform for films with alternative aesthetics. As Wang (2007) points out, the lack of a proper understanding of “arthouse cinema” and the inability to organise a functioning theatre chain with solid ownership of copyright of films led to the inevitable failure of A-G.

In fact, before the launch of the project, Zhuo Guoshun 周国顺, the then manager of Beijing Forbidden City & Trinity Pictures, had already mentioned that it was not only difficult to secure enough film copyrights but that there were also difficulties with promotion.¹⁵⁵ And in this regard, the launch of the NAAC has been promising. This is firstly because, initiated by the Chinese Film Archive (CFA) and backed up by the CFC, it has a strong leverage in terms of access to exclusive copyrights of films; and secondly because, unlike the last two trials, it is a joint effort between the state and the industry – influential industry insiders include Jia Zhangke’s Fabula Entertainment and the Wanda Film group.

Following NAAC as a mediator between the state and private sectors, a unique perspective can be gained on how the indie media network in China operates. The in-between-ness of this network is activated through ongoing negotiation and collaboration among various actants with both state and private-sector backgrounds and their own agendas.

¹⁵⁴ “5di shijia yingyuan tongying 《yueshi》 A-G 文化电影院线 10 月开张 5 地 10 家影院同映《月蚀》 A-G 文化电影院线 10 月开张” [Screenings of Lunar Eclipse in ten cinemas across five cities. A-G Cultural Art-house Theatre Chain will launch in October], last modified 30 September 2001, <http://ent.sina.com.cn/m/c/2001-09-30/59000.html> (accessed 20 November 2021).

¹⁵⁵ “Zhongguo ‘yishu yingyuan’ cehuazhe: maide jiushi pinwei 中国‘艺术影院’策划者：卖的就是品味” [Curator of Chinese “arthouse cinema”: taste is what we sell], last modified 14 September 2001, <http://ent.sina.com.cn/m/c/2001-09-14/57265.html> (accessed 10 November 2021).

The State-affiliated nature of NAAC has two implications. First, structure-wise, while film production and distribution have been going through a process of decentralisation in China, the NAAC's exclusive right to distribute certain buyout films works as a reminder of how the state monopoly of access to resources, albeit less apparent, stays strong. Second, in a country where filmmaking, distribution and exhibition have always been heavily utilised for ideological campaigns and propaganda promulgation (Zhu and Rosen 2010, 17), the NAAC, while playing a key role in promoting arthouse cinema in China, does not shy away from the type of film that the state wants to be made. Sun Xianghui 孙向辉, the initiator of the NAAC and the chief curator of the China Film Archive, gave advice to Chinese filmmakers to make films with "heart-warming, uplifting spirit" (*dadong renxin, geiren wennuan* 打动人心, 给人温暖):

It is important and honest for arthouse films to reflect the hardships and difficulties of life, but if it is too difficult, many audiences would ask: I have been working all day and why do I need to have a hopeless and miserable experience in the cinema?¹⁵⁶

Sun's ambivalent comment resonates with the nature of the NAAC, which is, at its core, an extension of the Chinese Film Archive and the Party-state's overall resolution to regulate the quality of films and promote films that are made in China. As Sun states elsewhere of the mission of the Chinese Film Archive, only four months after her speech on

¹⁵⁶ "Zhuanfang quanguo yishu dianying lianmeng qiantouren Sun Xianghui: 《Sankuai guanggaopai》 huole, dan yishu dianying yuanxian hai yuanwei dadao jiankang xunhuan 专访全国艺术电影联盟牵头人孙向辉: 《三块广告牌》火了, 但艺术电影院线还远未达到健康循环" [Exclusive with Sun Xianghui, the initiator of NAAC: *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* (dir. Martin McDonagh 2018) was a hit, but the arthouse theatre chain in China is far from a healthy circuit], last modified 17 April 2018, <http://www.nbd.com.cn/articles/2018-04-17/1209027.html> (accessed 27 April 2021).

the NAAC in response to Xi Jinping's new guideline of "Nine Insist" (Jiuge Jianchi 九个坚持) during the CCP's National Conference on Propaganda and Ideological Work in 2018 157:

The CFA shall have a firm grip on the correct political direction; via (enhancing) the film evaluation system and affiliated media, we will focus on the innovation of communication media and discourses and make real efforts to affect guidance on the value of Chinese filmmaking, the promotion of outstanding Chinese films, and the enhancement of mainstream thoughts and discourses.¹⁵⁸

The two excerpts above lay out the most intricate issue when it comes to the exhibition of indie film – whether it is possible for films which do not conform to mainstream ideology to find a place within the system. To find the answer to this question requires seeing the NAAC not just in relation to the state but as an assemblage of spaces in which various actants participate. First, the participation of industry actants such as Wanda Films directly affects the demography of the audience that can access a film. A list of NAAC member cinemas includes not only first tier cities such as Shanghai, Beijing, and Hangzhou, but also

¹⁵⁷ The "nine insists" in Xi Jinping's speech are: 1) insist on the Party's leadership of ideological work; 2) adhere to the fundamental task of "two consolidation" of ideological work; 3) insist on arming the Party and educating the people with the thought of socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era; 4) insist on cultivating and practicing core socialist values; 5) insist on cultural self-confidence as a more fundamental, broader and deeper self-confidence, and as a more basic, deeper and lasting power; 6) insist on improving the power of communication, guidance, influence and credibility of the press and public opinion; 7) insist on the people-centred creative orientation; 8) insist on creating a clear and upright cyberspace; 9) insist on telling a good Chinese story and projecting a good Chinese voice. See "Xi Jinping chuxi kuangguo xuanchuan sixiang gongzuo huiyi bing fabiao jianghua 习近平出席全国宣传思想工作会议并发表讲话" [Xi Jinping attends and speak at the National Conference on Propaganda and Ideological Work], last modified 23 August 2018, https://baike.baidu.com/reference/22854437/1c44Ejhr8JoI477c5J6_1TUnP8T_NL6RQEZKlb3mnLbrJYLfzzFcufyu19d87VkyM3J2O6pd-sRfpQ6x_3CBH_KBQGiM_x4YNHemUW6mU (accessed 15 June 2021)

¹⁵⁸ "Sun Xianghui: Mingque dianying gongzuode zhengzhi diwei, zijue chengdan xin shidai shiming renwu 孙向辉：明确电影工作的政治地位，自觉承担新时代使命任务" [Sun Xianghui: affirm the political status of film, acknowledge the mission of the new era that shall be undertaken], last modified 27 September 2018, https://www.sohu.com/a/256496656_388075 (accessed 27 April 2021).

cities such as Suqian 宿迁, Hefei 合肥, Mianyang 绵阳, Lanzhou 兰州, Haikou 海口 and Lhasa 拉萨.¹⁵⁹ The expansion of theatres means that films that can be considered as indie stand a better chance of being seen in theatres because of the pact that the cinemas have made with the NAAC. For example, after winning the Golden Horse Award in 2016, *The Summer is Gone* had its national premiere in NAAC cinemas. With 7,474 screenings scheduled for its first day, the film's 3.5% daily row piece rate (日排片量) was recorded to be higher than that of 1.6% for Wang Xiaoshuai's *Red Amnesia* (Chuangruzhe 闯入者, 2014) and 2% for Wu Tianming 吴天明's *Song of the Phoenix*.¹⁶⁰ For a film with a budget of less than ¥2 million,¹⁶¹ *The Summer is Gone* grossed ¥4.37 million in total at the box office during its month-long theatre window.¹⁶²

As a vital non-human actant, the row piece rate (排片量) is taken as an important statistic measurement for the final box office takings. As a terminology, row piece rate refers to the number of screenings a film can get compared to other films which are screened at the same time. The higher the row piece rate is, the more screenings a film has. It is, however, notable that the de facto row piece rate is not a set thing that is solely decided by the potential popularity of the film. It can also be an outcome of persuasion, communication, negotiation,

¹⁵⁹ “Quanguo yishu dianying fangying lianmeng buju 100jia yishu yingyuan 全国艺术电影放映联盟布局 100 家艺术影院” [NAAC establishes partnerships with 100 arthouse cinemas], last modified 8 November 2016, <http://ent.sina.com.cn/m/c/2016-11-08/doc-ifxxneua4473590.shtml> (accessed 1 March 2020).

¹⁶⁰ “《Bayue》shouri paipian chaoguo 7000chang, dan wei weiyipian zhengqu shichang kongjian yiran jiannan 《八月》首日排片超过 7000 场，但为文艺片争取市场空间依然艰难” [*The Summer Has Gone* secures more than 7,000 screenings on its premiere day, but there is still a long way to go before arthouse cinema finds its place in the market], last modified 25 March 2017, <https://m.jiemian.com/article/1198670.html> (accessed 14 November 2022).

¹⁶¹ “Jinmajiang zuijia yingpian 《Bayue》quanyong qunzhong yanyuan de xiao chengben yingpian, zai shangye hongliuzhong zhanfang shuguang 金马奖最佳影片《八月》全用群众演员的小成本影片，在商业洪流中绽放曙光” [The Golden Horse Award film *The Summer Has Gone*, a low budget film which stars non-professional actors, shines in the swirling current of the market], last modified 28 November 2016, <http://www.nbd.com.cn/articles/2016-11-28/1056869.html> (accessed 14 November 2022).

¹⁶² “《Bayue》neidipiaofangtongji 《八月》内地票房统计” [Domestic box office of *The Summer Has Gone*], last modified n.d., <https://www.endata.com.cn/BoxOffice/MovieStock/movieShow.html?id=655812> (accessed 14 November 2022).

or even bribery between the human actants who promote the film and the potential exhibitors. “It is real grass-roots work (*jiceng gongzuo* 基层工作)”, describes one informant who used to work as a promoter of one of the then-indie feature films:

You would be assigned to a couple of cinemas, and you need to really be there, to observe and investigate, to establish relationships with cinema managers who curate the screening timetables and tell them about our film so that it might be possible to get more screenings. (anonymous informant#)

Similarly, another informant, who works as an indie film exhibitor and event organiser, emphasises the importance of establishing direct relationships with the local cinemas

What happened then [around 2013] was that there were cinema managers and owners who were interested, who wanted to use this diversity to make their cinema chain more competitive. But they did not understand film, could not find any, and did not know where to look. There could be someone showing up out of nowhere and introducing their film as art-house, and the film would turn out to be bad, and the audience would disapprove (anonymous informant#).

In this sense, the real impact of the NAAC goes further than its provision of a larger numbers of cinemas, longer screening windows, and potentially larger audiences, as a bigger network also indicates a significant increase in the number of industry participants that are involved in the operation of the NAAC. To illustrate, as the main institution, the CFA, which is based in Beijing, does not have the capacity to oversee the operation of an organisation that

has expanded nationally;¹⁶³ it then becomes a necessity for the cinemas and film communities to grow at a local level. This includes establishing real contact with local cinemas and managers and working out a way that works best in one specific micro-environment. Observing the emerging independent exhibitors in China, Fan Xiang notes how informal exhibitors successfully seek collaboration with formal institutions not only by utilising the public space, which is affiliated to them but also, with 101 Film Studio (101 guanyingshi 观影室) as an example, by incorporating some of these then-informal exhibitors into the system where they play their roles as official exhibitors (Fan 2021, 137–40). The NAAC plays a similar role as an assembled space where local cinemas can theoretically access formal training on film management;¹⁶⁴ local film critics and informal exhibitors are also invited to participate because they are needed.¹⁶⁵ For example, one of the informants, who works as an informal exhibitor, describes his organisation as the “cat’s paw of the NAAC”:

We were involved in the curation of early NAAC [screenings]. It was the restored 2k edition of *Red Sorghum* (Hong Gaoliang 红高粱, dir. Zhang Yimou 张艺谋, 1988).¹⁶⁶ [The NAAC] had no idea how to promote the project and sought us out to discuss how to do the promotion. They [the NAAC] soon established their own way

¹⁶³ “《Haibian de manchesite》xianliang shangying beihou: Quanguo yilian shishui fenxian faxing 《海边的曼彻斯特》限量上映背后：全国艺联试水分线发行” [Behind the limited screenings of *Manchester by the Sea*: a trial of exclusive theatre release for NAAC], last modified 27 August 2017, http://k.sina.com.cn/article_1623886424_60ca8a58034001h0a.html#/ (accessed 12 February 2021).

¹⁶⁴ “Shouqi quanguo yilian yingyuan peixun yuanman jieshu 首期全国艺联影院培训圆满结束” [The inaugural national NAAC training of cinema management has successfully taken place], last modified 21 March 2019, https://www.sohu.com/a/302917724_287936 (accessed 3 March 2021).

¹⁶⁵ “Jiemi zhuanfang yishudianying de quanguo yilian 揭秘专放艺术电影的全国艺联” [Revealing the NAAC: a new hub for arthouse cinema screenings], last modified 5 March 2021, http://k.sina.com.cn/article_3133440825_bac4833901900stbp.html (accessed 1 March 2021).

¹⁶⁶ “Chule ‘miaokong’ de dianyingjie, ni haiyinggai zhidao yishudianying de zhengque dakai fangshi 除了‘秒空’的电影节，你还应该知道艺术电影的正确打开方式” [Aside from “immediate sell-out” film festivals, there are other correct ways to get to arthouse cinema], last modified 21 October 2018, https://www.sohu.com/a/270360198_100111246 (accessed 1 March 2021).

of working through the screenings of a restored version of *A Chinese Odyssey II: Cinderella* (Dahua xiyou zhi dasheng quqin 大话西游之大圣娶亲, dir. Jeffrey Lau 刘镇伟, 1994). To be fair, that film is an easy sale (anonymous informant#).

While it is questionable whether all the member cinemas can keep the promise to assign three screenings per day for NAAC films – since prioritising films that attract significantly smaller audiences means less income for cinemas, especially the ones that have a smaller audience base, and since “for the most part audiences watching brainless popcorn film can more easily strike up a social conversation”¹⁶⁷ – the NAAC does provide a comparatively stable micro-environment for indie films that do not always get the opportunity to take off within the first round of the exhibition window in the way that conventional commercial films would. This means that films such as *All About ING* (Xiaowei 小伟, dir. Huang Zi 黄梓, 2019),¹⁶⁸ would not stand a good chance in theatre distribution,¹⁶⁹ due to their limited promotion budget. According to Wang Lei, an indie film producer, who is involved in projects including *Balloon* and *Damp Season*, “A box office of roughly ¥ 1 million is the norm for a film like *Xiaowei*; this is already quite an achievement with almost

¹⁶⁷ “Jinmajiang zujiayingpian zaoyu huatielu, dianying yishu lianmengshouxu yezhengjiu buliao 《Bayue》金马奖最佳影片遭遇滑铁卢，电影艺术联盟首秀也拯救不了《八月》” [The Golden Horse Award for best film suffered from Waterloo, and the debut of the Film Art Alliance could not save *August*], last modified 29 March 2017, <https://baike.baidu.com/tashuo/browse/content?id=3401e8c26620e0b3b7e8fa4d> (accessed 14 March 2021).

¹⁶⁸ “《Xiaowei》neidi piaofang tongji 《小伟》内地票房统计” [domestic box office of *All About ING*], last modified n.d., <https://www.endata.com.cn/BoxOffice/MovieStock/movieShow.html?id=643146> (accessed 13 March 2022).

¹⁶⁹ *All About ING* (2021) grossed as little as ¥ 40k in its first-week exhibition window, with the result that the director posted on Weibo saying, “The test result is much worse than I expected.” He then offered one hundred free tickets to the film so that “everyone can get a bit closer to cinema”. See “Daoyan song baizhang piao wanjiu piaofang, shengsimitushang yu 《Xiaowei》duihua 导演送百张票挽救票房，生死迷途上与《小伟》对话” [The director sent 100 tickets to save the box office, and had a dialogue with *Xiaowei* on the road of life and death], last modified 30 January 2021, <https://movie.douban.com/review/13175337/> (accessed 1 February 2022).

no budget in promotion.”¹⁷⁰ And for such a film, the NAAC, or at least the CFA, does provide a space for it to be screened beyond the theatre window – it was screened on 23 November 2022, a Wednesday night at Xiaoxitian Cinema; the other film screened that day was Ling Zifeng 凌子风’s *Keep the Red Flag Flying* (Hongqipu 红旗谱, 1960).¹⁷¹

¹⁷⁰ “Yishupian weihe zongzai ‘Qiupaipian’ 艺术片为何总在‘求排片’” [Why is arthouse cinema always “begging for theatrical distribution?”], last modified 10 February 2021, http://www.xinhuanet.com/ent/2021-02/10/c_1127088024.htm (accessed 1 February 2022).

¹⁷¹ “Ying Xun | 11yue 20ri fangying 影讯|11月20日放映” [Screening information: screening on 20 November], last modified 19 November 2022, <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/ShO9KOZluPNKXGONJjxm8g> (accessed 21 November 2022).

6.3 Online Space

6.3.1 Online Streaming Platforms

The online streaming industry in China has undergone significant changes in recent years, with major platforms emerging as key actants in the industry. The early development of the industry was characterised by a lack of state supervision and a blurry boundary between legal and pirated visual products. However, as the industry has matured and come under increased state oversight, streaming websites have begun to take on more responsibility as content producers and providers. Despite this shift, the industry continues to be shaped by a range of human and non-human actors, including internet companies, content producers, and state regulatory bodies.

If, as Paola Voci points out, the small screen reality in China at the beginning of the twenty-first century can specifically refer to a relatively less supervised, vibrating virtual space that accommodates an assemblage of visual practices including not only independent documentaries and experiment art videos but also amateurish online visual practices such as “Cellflix, web spoofs, Egao (parody) movies, and Internet Flash animations” (Voci 2010, 3), then the tightening of state supervision of the internet, along with the rise of online streaming platforms since the 2010s, complicates what small screen reality entails in a Chinese context. As one of the key actants that shapes the outlook of small screen reality in China, online streaming websites that focus on in-length content production and exhibition arrived rather late to the game. In fact, none of the five leading streaming platforms – Tencent (Tengxun 腾讯), iQIYI (Ai qiyi 爱奇艺), Youku 优酷, Mango TV (mangguo TV) 芒果 TV, and Bilibili 哔哩哔哩 – which now share 88.3% of the online streaming market,¹⁷² made it to the early

¹⁷² “Shuining tiaozhan Aiqiyi he tengxun shipin 谁能挑战爱奇艺和腾讯视频” [Who can challenge iQIYI and Tencent Video], last modified 1 September 2021, <https://m.jiemian.com/article/6548403.html> (accessed 25 June 2022).

territory of online streaming until the late 2000s.¹⁷³

According to a recent report on research conducted in 2019 by iResearch, a UK-based marketing agency, “most of the internet content in China before 2008 was uploaded directly by the internet users...and the boundary between legal visual products and piracy were extremely blurry.”¹⁷⁴ This P2P (peer-to-peer) mode of content circulation in the earlier development stage of online streaming in China, which was marked by the triumph and fall of Qvodplayer (Kuaibo 快播),¹⁷⁵ has demonstrated that the content which was circulating on the then-active platforms such as Youku, Tudou (土豆), and Baidu was more controversial than films “which were originally produced for theatre release or TV broadcast” (Voci 2010, 83), not only because of the lack of meddling and supervision from the key state apparatus but simply because so-called illegal streaming was in line with the interests of other actants – the internet companies in this case, which was to build up their user bases by deliberately “allowing users to upload, watch, share and download [short] films”.¹⁷⁶ Instead of playing the role of content producers and providers, streaming websites were mainly functioning as hosts

¹⁷³ While the concept of “cellflix” was still budding (Voci 2010, 88–1), and Chinese netizens were spending their online time on websites such as Tudou 土豆 and Sina 新浪, flash animations of the remake of “The Northeasterners Are All Living Lei Fengs” (Women dongbeiren doushi huoleifeng 我们东北人都是活雷锋, 2001) were going viral on the internet (Xu 2013, 148), followed by Hu Ge 胡戈’s *A Murder Caused by a Steamed Bun* (Yige mantou yinfade xuean 一个馒头引发的血案), a re-edit of clips from Chen Kaige 陈凯歌’s *The Promise* (Wuji 无极, 2005), which, on one hand, ignited a huge drama at that time as the furious filmmaker claimed to take the remake to the court as “one must not be shameless to such a degree” and, on the other hand, set the initial context for the academic research on concept of Egao 恶搞 (Voci 2010, 105–128).

¹⁷⁴ “Zhongguo daobanshipinwangzhan liuliang bianxian yanjiu baogao 中国盗版视频网站流量变现研究报告 2019” [2019 report on the traffic monetisation on the Chinese pirated video websites], last modified April 2019, <https://report.iresearch.cn/report/201904/img3053/2019%E5%B9%B4%E4%B8%AD%E5%9B%BD%E7%9B%97%E7%89%88%E8%A7%86%E9%A2%91%E7%BD%91%E7%AB%99%E6%B5%81%E9%87%8F%E5%8F%98%E7%8E%B0%E7%A0%94%E7%A9%B6%E6%8A%A5%E5%91%8A.pdf> (accessed 4 October 2021).

¹⁷⁵ “Kuaibo -womende quanneng bofangqi 快播 – 我们的全能播放器” [Qvod – our all-purpose video player], last modified n.d., <https://web.archive.org/web/20120301061413/http://www.kuaibo.com/> (accessed 20 November 2022).

¹⁷⁶ “Shinianguoqu, xiride shipinwangzhan dalaomen, rujinque nali 十年过去，昔日的视频网站大佬们，如今去了哪里？” [Ten years on, where are the past giants on video websites now], last modified 19 September 2016, <https://www.huxiu.com/article/164234.html> (accessed 17 October 2022).

who created space and directed traffic of the users. Parallel to the flourishing Taodie 淘碟 Era, during which at Daduhe Road electronic market in Shanghai, “(pirate) VCDs were scattered all over the table and everyone had a pile of disks held in their hands.” (Fan 2021, 99) there was a time when a regular Chinese internet user would own several folders of films on their own personal computer. It could be a whole collection of Yasujirō Ozu’s film, or the latest work of Sola Aio, or video games. Because of the layout of the network, all kinds of resources were there on the internet to access. And because P2P is a decentralised circulation network, the more users who use it, the more active the network could be. the more active the network becomes. Unlike the work of Nakajima (2006) and Fan on the exclusiveness of the Taodie experience, which relies on different sets of human and non-human actants (dependent on introductions by friends or connections who know where to find certain sites and who have access to the resources), the accessibility of internet resources is comparatively easier, and the resources can quickly be downloaded from the internet and stored on one’s hard drive.

“It was the time when everyone watched film at home,” recalls one of my informants, referring to the change which happened in 2005–6. They mentioned how the upgrading of non-human actants has affected viewing habits as “personal computers became much more affordable, the internet got faster and so it got cheaper [to] download, share, and watch film. There were many more resources online as well.”

As a good indicator, by 2012, Qvod, a video player that allows virtually free access to online resources in all types of formats, had been installed more than 300 million times and “at least one out of two netizens then” were using the software.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁷ “Anjian zuiquan zhengli! Kuaibo de baofa yu yunluo meitimen zenme kan wangyoumen zhemewan 案件最全整理！快播的爆发与陨落 媒体们怎么看 网友们这么玩” [Archived: what the media think of Qvod’s rise and fall, perspective on the medias and netizens], last modified 11 January 2016, <https://m.admin5.com/article/20160111/642140.shtml> (accessed 17 October 2022).

The siege of Qvod, which happened in the winter of 2013, marked a new chapter in the territory of online streaming. It started with a declaration titled “Joint Action against Piracy of Chinese Online Video” (Zhongguo wangluoshipin fandaoban lianhe xuanyan 中国网络视频反盗版联合宣言).¹⁷⁸ The actants involved in drafting the declaration had various backgrounds. Aside from China Overseas Development Association (Zhongguo haiwai fazhan xiehui 中国海外发展协会), which clearly had an official status, the list of initiators included internet companies such as Youku 优酷, Tudou 土豆, Sohu Video 搜狐视频, Tencent Video (Tengxun shipin 腾讯视频), LeTV (Leshi TV 乐视 TV), and other parties including the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), Wanda Films (万达电影), Enlight Media (Guangxian Chuanmei 光线传媒), and Letv Film (乐视电影), whose interests in China were impacted by this P2P mode of film viewing.

In a very short time, the inquiry into Qvod’s liability over network piracy escalated from a couple of police investigations on pornography distribution to further prosecutions from online platforms for copyright infringement before it peaked with the open trial of Wang Xin 王欣, the then-CEO of Qvod, and three other senior managers of the company, in early 2016. In many different respects, the trial of Qvod is a milestone in the legalisation of the internet. Larger platforms such as Sina Weibo and Bilibili streamed the two-day trial, which accumulated more than one million viewings.¹⁷⁹ It has generated waves of discussion

¹⁷⁸ “Joint Action Against Online Video Piracy in China Lawsuits – Seeking RMB300 Million in Damages Filed Against Baidu and QVOD on Claims of Spreading Pirated Videos and Engaging in Hotlinking”, last modified 13 November 2013, <https://investors.sohu.com/static-files/1fe6a3ff-1e6d-499c-9de3-7ac57b15b2f> (accessed 20 October 2022).

¹⁷⁹ However, it ended on a slightly ironic note, since if the final debate on whether Qvod is guilty or not depends on whether Qvod had been intentionally ignoring the pornographic content which had been circulating via its servers, then it had not been the only internet company to do so. Showing strong support to Qvod during the open trial, a Chinese citizen left an interesting question on the trial screen: “I got perks (pornography) from the Baidu drive every day. I am baffled as why it is not Li Yanhong 李彦宏 who got caught?” Indeed, winding back to the joint action on online piracy video, Qvod was not the only target. In the official statement, the requisition was initially made towards towards Baidu too.

on the legal liability of P2P technology in China,¹⁸⁰ and the outcome of this lawsuit marked the end of an era of ruthless growth in the early stage of online streaming platforms, during which “almost all the streaming platforms were swarmed with a large amount of unauthorised content”.¹⁸¹ Interestingly, it is an event that contests the assertion that the state, as the major actant, regulates the market on its own. Rather, regarding the issue of copyright, different online streaming platforms were in this war and spared no effort in taking their competitors down to serve their own interests and growth. And compared to Baidu, which later largely transferred its streaming business to iQIYI, Qvod was the black sheep that was stubborn enough not to see the change that was coming.

¹⁸⁰ “Meiti shuli kuaiboan tingshen jilu: Gongsufang yingdui buzu 媒体梳理快播案庭审记录：公诉方应对不足” [An analysis of court records of the Qvod Player case: the prosecution’s response was inadequate], last modified 12 January 2016, <http://news.sohu.com/20160112/n434209744.shtml> (accessed 11 February 2022).

¹⁸¹ “Weishenme kuaibo bixusi, er Wang Xin bixu gai 为什么快播必须死，而王欣必须改” [Why Qvod must die and Wang Xin must change], last modified 29 February 2018, <https://www.huxiu.com/article/233329.html> (accessed 25 March 2022).

6.3.2 iQIYI: Opportunities for Indie?

In May 2019, Yang Lina's latest film, *Spring Tide* was streamed on iQIYI. This digital premiere of the second film of Yang's Spring Trilogy¹⁸² was later described as an effort to explore alternative exhibition in mainland China. As Yang Xianghua, the senior vice president of iQIYI, who oversees the company's motion picture and overseas business states, "The criteria of a good film are not limited to how it is distributed, or whether you see it on the big screen or small screen."¹⁸³

Compared to the industry's drastic collective protest over the decision by the director of *Lost in Russia* (Jiongma 囧妈, dir. Xu Zheng 徐铮, 2020) to choose a digital premiere on Tiktok-owned online platforms over theatrical exhibition early in 2020,¹⁸⁴ Yang Lina's *Spring* and its digital premiere on iQIYI generated a very different discourse around how online streaming could potentially provide more opportunities for the exhibition of indie films. Li Yaping 李亚平, the producer of the film, expressed her mixed feelings in going for PVID (Premium Video on Demand) exhibition and described it as a risky, but necessary, trial:

¹⁸² As the first film of the Spring Trilogy, *Longing for the Rain* (Chunmeng 春梦, dir. Yang Lina 杨荔钠 2013) is a story of how awakening sexual desire turned the life of a middle-class, married woman in Beijing upside-down. Due to the bold depiction of female desire, the film was not publicly screened in mainland China. For more on this provocative film about female sexuality, see "CinemaTalk: Interview with Yang Lina, director of *Longing for the Rain*", last modified 24 May 2013, <https://www.dgeneratefilms.com/post/cinemataalk-interview-with-yang-lina-director-of-i-longing-for-the-rain--i> (accessed 12 November 2022).

¹⁸³ "《Chunchao》 ruwei Jinji: haodianying de xiaoyuanwawng, dianyingye de daqushi 《春潮》入围金鸡: 好电影的小愿望, 电影业的大趋势" [*Spring Tide* gets Golden Rooster Awards nomination: a small wish for a good movie, a big trend in the movie industry], last modified 19 November 2020, <https://finance.sina.com.cn/tech/2020-11-19/doc-iiznctke2242336.shtml> (accessed 5 June 2021).

¹⁸⁴ "Quanxian buman 全院线不满《囧妈》网络免费播: 给全国影院带来损失, 呼吁电影局叫停在线播放" [The Chinese film industry is not satisfied with *Lost in Russia*'s free online stream: it is causing damage to cinemas across the country, calling on the China Film Administration to halt online broadcast], last modified 24 January 2020, <https://web.archive.org/web/20200125164045/http://news.mtime.com/2020/01/24/1600861.html> (accessed 2 December 2022).

Once the film is exhibited online, if it does not get the ideal number of clicks and if the guaranteed payment from the streaming platform is low, then the film, citing our finance department, is “gifted to the platform for nothing”. It puts immense pressure on the company finances ... Now, I would think that (in our case) this has been a good choice. There are not enough opportunities for arthouse cinema in theatre exhibition. In terms of the interactions between the films and audiences, theatrical exhibition might not be as effective now.¹⁸⁵

Online streaming data about *Spring Tide* reflects a perfect long tail shape: after its premiere on 17 May 2020, the content popularity peaked at 4,937 on 19 May 2020, dropped abruptly from 3688 on 19 July 2020, and slowly stabilised at 600–900 after that.¹⁸⁶ Unlike Yang’s first feature film, *Longing for the Rain* (Chunmeng 春梦, 2013) the reception of *Spring Tide*, the second of Yang Lina’s Spring Trilogy, tells a very different story by dint of being her first feature film widely exhibited in mainland China. In this sense, Li Yaping’s comment on the wider accessibility to the potential domestic audience works as a perfect footnote for what “indie” entails in today’s China – films that otherwise can only circulate via exclusive networks such as pirating or P2P downloading are now available to stream online.

In 2022, two years after the online premiere of *Spring Tide*, iQIYI announced its new profit-sharing scheme for online streaming. Compared to previous profit-sharing schemes,¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁵ “《Chunchao》 yuanxian zhuanwang beihou de jingtaohailang 《春潮》院线转网背后的惊涛骇浪-专访制片人李亚平” [The hidden stories behind *Spring Tide*’s online release – an interview with the producer Li Yaping], last modified 5 June 2020, <https://cinehello.com/stream/126961> (accessed 4 April 2022).

¹⁸⁶ “Content popularity” (neirong redu 内容热度) was introduced by iQIYI as a general indicator which covers different aspects of audience data including watching behaviour and the interaction frequency between the audience and the video. See “《Chunchao》-电影完整版在线观看 《春潮》-电影-完整版视频在线观看” [*Spring Tide* – movie – watch the full video online], last modified n.d., https://www.iqiyi.com/v_19rcuwotc.html (accessed 2 December 2022).

¹⁸⁷ “Aiqiyi fabu quanxin wangluodianying fen Zhang guize, S ji dianying keshangxian PVODmoshi 爱奇艺发布全新网络电影分账规则, S 级影片可上线 PVOD 模式” [iQIYI releases new rules for online films shared

in which viewings were valid only after passing a six-minute threshold, the new sharing scheme cancels this six-minute rule and online box office is instead calculated according to the actual time of viewing.¹⁸⁸ This means, hypothetically, that for a 95-minute film which is non-exclusively exhibited on iQIYI, one million viewers who get halfway through the whole film over the agreed 180-day streaming window would provide an income of ¥ 8.3125 million. While the future of this new development is unclear, this new scheme does mean that for indie films such as *Spring Tide*, which lacks both splashy opening scenes to grab the audiences' attention and a big promotion budget for theatrical distribution, streaming platforms such as iQIYI can be a calculable partner to show their films. Indie films such as Pema Tseden's *Balloon*¹⁸⁹ and Gao Ming's *Damp* can also be found online.¹⁹⁰

Not everyone welcomes the transformation of online platforms with open arms. Once the focus has shifted from a pool that gathers as many users as possible to streaming legal content and even producing original content with quality, the scale of the threat posed by online streaming platforms to older actants, including the traditional film and state TV industries, has become obvious. The stakeholders whom I encountered during my fieldwork furiously referred to the online streaming platforms, and the IT companies behind them, as “sneaky bastards”. One informant, who owns a medium-sized film production company, described iQIYI's move to promote the production of web-film (wei dianying 微电影) as

revenue, movies rated S can be released through the PVOD model], last modified 7 January 2021, <http://www.dvbcn.com/p/119931.html> (accessed 4 April 2022).

¹⁸⁸ “Ai qiyi fen zhang chu xingui, yingpian zhiliang cheng wangdao 爱奇艺分账出新规，影片质量成王道” [iQIYI releases new rules for shared revenue, quality of films trumps], last modified 12 April 2022, <https://www.163.com/dy/article/H4OQAEM505532VL9.html> (accessed 10 October 2022).

¹⁸⁹ “《Qiqiu》-Dianying-wanzhengban zaixianguankan 《气球》-电影-完整版视频在线观看” [*Balloon* – movie – watch the full video online], last modified n.d., https://www.iqiyi.com/v_17hhafkspp8.html (accessed 10 December 2022).

¹⁹⁰ “《Huinantian》-dianying-wanzhengban zaixian guankan 《回南天》-电影-完整版视频在线观看” [*Damp Season* – movie – watch the full video online], last modified n.d., https://www.iqiyi.com/v_12xx2svk3c8.html?vfrm=pcw_playpage&vfrmblk=G&vfrmrst=80521_like_title1&style=2&r_source=77 (accessed 10 December 2022).

follows:

They [the streaming platforms] just got it started. There was not enough content to fill the hole. That is how iQIYI created this concept called web-film.

Monetary rewards were set as a bait; most of the content providers were just cannon fodder in this game, as very few would get paid in the end. 500 million is not a lot of money for an internet company. And look what they have achieved with it – hordes of people were trying to make a web-film at that time in Beijing. Most of these wannabe filmmakers would never make it to a larger investment, so what they wanted was to use low budget as a steppingstone, with the hope of getting attention from serious investors. (anonymous informant#)

From another perspective, the informant's dissatisfaction can be seen as a sign of iQIYI's growing impact on the Chinese film industry over time. Funded by Baidu from 2010, iQIYI (then known as QIYI 奇艺) quickly secured its place as one of the major streaming platforms in China. According to the company's fourth quarter financial results for 2018, there was a 52% increase in revenue compared to 2017, and the number of members subscribing to the streaming platform had reached 87 million.¹⁹¹ One year earlier, Gong Yu 龚宇, CEO of iQIYI, stated in a press interview that as a main trend for the development of the streaming platform, their long tail would mean that digital platforms and online streaming could provide niche arthouse cinema with new opportunities. Unlike theatre screens, which are limited by numbers and constrained by rate of return,

¹⁹¹ "iQIYI announces fourth quarter and fiscal year 2018 financial results", last modified 21 February 2019, <https://iqiyiinc.gcs-web.com/static-files/5e932963-7b53-48ee-a87c-c845759c3f7e> (accessed 4 September 2022).

it is rather low cost to find screenings online. On-demand services means he [the audience] can watch [a film] anywhere, anytime. This means that as long as there exists a scientific, mature monetization mechanism, no matter how niche a film is, as long as it knows who its audience is, it can recuperate (its costs) and keep its niche content sustainable.¹⁹²

On a separate note, despite the success online platforms achieved in producing high quality TV shows including Youku's *Day and Night* (Baiye zhuixiong 百夜追凶, dir. Wang Wei 王伟 2017) and iQIYI's *The Bad Kid* (Yinmi de jiaoluo 隐秘的角落, dir. Xinshuang 辛爽, 2020), the attempts of online platforms to expand their reach into the traditional film industry did not end as splendidly. According to iQIYI's annual first quarter financial report in 2019,¹⁹³ the net loss for the year had risen to 29% from 22% in the 2018 seasonal report. The bubble of the web-film market was beginning to burst¹⁹⁴ and iQIYI's effort to expand its reach to the market of bigger budget films did not prevail. "They have really messed it up," disclosed one of the informants, who is engaged in film production and investments, commenting that iQIYI had failed in a series of investments on films such as *The Knight of Shadows: Between Yin and Yang* (Shentan pusongling 神探蒲松龄, dir. Yan Jia 严嘉, 2019):

¹⁹² "Gongyu: Aiqiyi fufeishouru he guanggaoshouru yi dadao yibiyi 龚宇: 爱奇艺会员付费收入和广告收入已达到 1 比 1" [Gong Yu: advertising sponsorship fee is becoming an equal revenue to membership fee for iQIYI], last modified 8 June 2017, <http://tech.sina.com.cn/i/2017-06-08/doc-ifyfzfyz2338164.shtml> (accessed 4 March 2021).

¹⁹³ "iQIYI Announces First Quarter 2019 Financial Results", last modified 16 May 2019, <https://ir.iqiyi.com/news-releases/news-release-details/iqiyi-announces-first-quarter-2019-financial-results> (accessed 4 March 2021).

¹⁹⁴ "Aiqiyi CEO Gongyu tanchen hangyenanguan: guodujingzheng dao zhi chengben jugaobuda 爱奇艺 CEO 龚宇坦陈行业难关: 过度竞争导致成本居高不下" [Gong Yu, CEO of iQIYI, says of the industry's difficulties: excessive competition leads to high costs], last modified 28 May 2019, <https://static.cdsb.com/micropub/Articles/201905/7f574f897a23c8889335ebde314d35a2.html> (accessed 4 March 2021).

After a couple of failed co-investments in blockbusters, they [iQIYI] realised that it is hard to earn money as follow-up investors. Follow-up investments (Gentou 跟投) are rarely a good deal because project initiators like us to add our share of profit into the budget. After realising that the best way to get the money is to be the one in control of the whole project, iQIYI started to look for films with extremely low budgets of a million or two. Its plan was to get these films distributed in cinemas and if that plan failed, then at least digest them by streaming them on its platform. (anonymous informant#)

This informant further gave his views on how iQIYI had mishandled the distribution of a series of low-budget indie films, including Zhang Dalei's *The Summer Is Gone*:

With the promise of theatrical distribution, it basically bluffed some directors by buying off their full-length, finished feature films, all festival-awarded. *The Summer Is Gone* was one of them, and the total domestic box office takings for that film are around 800k. Once it [iQIYI] realised that this was still not profitable, all the promised theatrical distribution for other films was immediately halted. All the directors involved in this deal are very bitter about what iQIYI has done. (anonymous informant#)

Aside from this, another informant, who works closely with the production and distribution of several indie films, has expressed his general concern that streaming platforms did not really respect indie filmmakers who look for serious collaboration:

I went to show them this film that I am working on. At that time, the film had not yet won an international film award. This streaming platform summoned a group of staff to watch the film; I will leave the name of the platform out of it. It is one of the largest in China, and fuck, they basically found a storage room to screen the film, and since the film is quite a slow film, many [of the staff] fell asleep in the middle of the screening. After that, they woke up, and started to order food and basically ate the delivery while watching the film. After the screening, I asked whether they would like me to do a short presentation on the production of the film, which they did not appear to be interested in at all. Not long after that, this film won an award at a well-recognised film festival and the attitude [of the platform] completely changed. My feeling is that this change of attitude has zero to do with film itself anymore. It is just so promotion focused. I am not judging anyone to be shallow; however, if you lack the basic respect [for a film], and if the collaboration is based on pure pragmatism, then that collaboration does not appeal to me that much in the first place. (anonymous informant#)

To conclude, the online streaming platform iQIYI has played a significant role in the creation of exhibition space for indie cinema in China. Via its digital premiere of Yang Lina's *Spring Tide*, iQIYI demonstrated the potential for online streaming to provide alternative exhibition opportunities for indie films that may not have been widely available through traditional theatrical distribution. The new profit-sharing scheme announced by iQIYI in 2022, which calculates box office according to the actual time of viewing, further solidifies the platform's agency in shaping the exhibition of independent cinema in the country. However, iQIYI's transformation into a provider of legal content and producer of

original content has also led to conflicts with traditional film and state TV industries, as well as independent filmmakers who prefer a theatrical release. These competing actors and interests will continue to shape the role of iQIYI and other online streaming platforms in the exhibition of indie cinema in China.

6.4 The First International Film Festival (FIFF)

Found in Beijing, 2006 and relocated to Xining, Qinghai province in 2001, the First International Film Festival (FIFF) plays a key role in the current exhibition of indie film in China. This section of the chapter, complementing a series of academic works on FIFF's role as a rising market to promote indie film (Huang 2018, Pu and Fu 2017, Liu and Zang 2021, Meng, Xiong and Yan 2015), aims to understand how FIFF successfully stabilises itself as an exhibition site of indie through two key actants: the organisers and the local government.

As a collection of scholarship on Chinese film festivals, *Chinese Film Festivals, Sites of Translation* (2017) highlights the importance of understanding these festivals in their unique local contexts. In his research on the Shanghai International Film Festival (SIFF), Chris Berry suggests using an approach that analyses the stakeholder configuration, or the actors involved in adapting the festival to the local context, and the context in which they operate (Berry and Robinson 2017, 16).

My analysis of FIFF through the lens of ANT joins this string of scholarship by locating my analysis of FIFF in dialogue with the three paradigms proposed by Dina Iordavora for Western-based international festivals: the cultural diplomacy festival, the corrective festival, and the business card exchange festival (Berry and Robinson 2017, 16, 219). My finding is that FIFF does not fully conform to these paradigms as it is not organised by the government but does have a close relationship with it; it is also not purely commercial or corporate, though it has attracted corporate sponsors. It emphasises creativity and originality in filmmaking while trying to maintain a functional market.

A question that may arise is, "Is FIFF truly a non-official film festival, given its connection with the Xining municipal government?" This question gains significance when we refer to research on the Shanghai International Film Festival, where Chris Berry

highlights SIFF's officially controlled nature, operating within a unique one-party socialist system that combines an ideologically led command economy with a thriving market economy (Berry 2017, 24). On the other hand, Yu and Wu's article on independent film festivals in China challenges the conventional depiction of these events as solely "dissidents" fighting for freedom of expression in a politically restrictive environment. Instead, they view these festivals as cultural institutions with broader implications for the artistic and creative landscape (Yu and Wu 2017, 170). In this context, ANT offers a unique perspective to examine FIFF and establish a dialogue with existing literature. By focusing on the actants involved in shaping the festival, we can better understand FIFF's distinct characteristics and its place within the broader field of film festivals. ANT allows us to productively explore FIFF's role as a host for the exhibition of Chinese indie cinema.

This section of the chapter aims to explore the following questions: 1) Who are the actants that make up the network of the First International Film Festival? 2) Where can we find these actants? 3) How do the actants talk about themselves?

6.4.1 Actant 1: The Organisers

Li Ziwei 李子为 and Yang Wei 杨巍 are instrumental actants in organising the film festival, each contributing unique qualities to its success. As the CEO of FIFF, Li Ziwei utilises her personality and charisma to position the festival as a distinctive event driven by a genuine love for Chinese cinema. Her ability to mobilise renowned actors further strengthens the FIFF network. On the other hand, Yang Wei, a co-founder, plays a key role in the festival's relocation to Xining, utilising her connections with the provincial party committee in Qinghai, which significantly contributes to the festival's sustainability. Alongside Song Wen, another co-founder, these individuals bring diverse backgrounds and interests to the organisation of the festival.

Luke Robinson's work delves into the impact of "sole traders", emphasising how their backgrounds, personal tastes, and connections play a pivotal role in shaping the "temperament" of film festivals (Robinson 2017, 195). Robinson contends that focusing on the roles of these key actants provides a better understanding of how they mould a festival in conjunction with broader structural dynamics, offering complementary insights to institutional analysis (Robinson 2017, 197).

In the context of FIFF, Robinson's perspective sheds light on the significant influence of Li Ziwei and Yang Wei as "sole traders", whose distinct qualities and connections play vital roles in shaping the festival's character and overall success. Their contributions exemplify the active manoeuvres of actants within the indie festival landscape, leaving behind traces of their agency in shaping the festival's direction.

6.4.1.1 Li Ziwei and sentiment

Li Ziwei, the CEO of FIFF, has received significant media attention for her role in branding the film festival as a place driven by a cinephilia. As someone who can "light up the audience with highly infectious enthusiasm",¹⁹⁵ and who succeeded in convincing 姜文 Jiang Wen to be one of the juries for FIFF, she has also persuaded well-known guest actors and actresses to bring fewer PAs to reduce the hosting budget and can thus cover the travel expenses for upcoming filmmakers whose films are selected by the festival.¹⁹⁶ Media coverage has also included very detailed accounts of the precarious state FIFF found itself

¹⁹⁵ "Zhuanfang: Chuangshiren Song Wen liao FIRST qingnianyingzhan de hengzhang he weilai 专访：创始人宋文聊 FIRST 青年影展的成长和未来" [Interview: founder Song Wen talks about the growth and future of the FIRST International Film Festival], last modified 20 August 2016, <https://www.jiemian.com/article/804919.html> (accessed 14 December 2021).

¹⁹⁶ "Zhijin qianzhai 1632wanyuan, zhege yingzhande yingxiaingli que dao le jinma 至今欠债 1632 万元，这个影展的影响力却到了'金马'" [With debts of 16.32 million RMB so far, the influence of this film festival has reached the Golden Horse Awards], last modified 27 July 2019, https://www.sohu.com/a/329788930_613537 (accessed 14 December 2021).

during its early years of operation, including the fact that usurious loans were a necessary means of funding.¹⁹⁷ Interviews with Li even revealed the turnover and deficits incurred by the film festival, information not conventionally shared with the public.¹⁹⁸ In these interviews, Li Ziwei does not shy away from her passion for FIFF as the place to discover new talents in China, and for this reason the narrative around it can become romantic and idealistic:

In Li Ziwei's heart, FIFF belongs to the country and society. She has no desire to control it. She has gradually distributed her shares (in the enterprise) to the team and has already been planning her successor. One thing she always says is: "My greatest dream is to die suddenly backstage at the festival's award ceremony when I am grey-haired."¹⁹⁹

Li Ziwei's image as a devoted, altruistic, passionate goal-getter accents the image of FIFF as an upcoming film festival in mainland China. But missing in the English translation is the term "Youth" (Qingnian 青年), which conveys a key piece of the message of the festival. This core value and image that FIFF is consistently building presents the festival as a site full of opportunities for upcoming films and filmmakers who hold a genuine love of film. This cinephilic sentiment, which echoes throughout the previous chapters, dominates the

¹⁹⁷ "Zheli yexu hui zaojiu zhongguo dianying de weilai 这里也许会造就中国电影的未来" [This place may be the future of Chinese cinema], last modified n.d., <https://new.qq.com/omn/20190723/20190723A0WGNA00.html> (accessed 14 December 2021).

¹⁹⁸ "Liziwei: FIRST yingzhan shinian quankao sike 李子为: FIRST 影展十年全靠'死磕'" [It is simply willpower for FIRST Film Festival to make it to a decade, last modified 3 August 2016, <http://ent.sina.com.cn/m/c/2016-08-03/doc-ifyxunya3179245.shtml> (accessed 14 December 2021).

¹⁹⁹ Zhijin qianzhai 1632wanyuan, zhege yingzhande yingxiaingli que dao le jinma 至今欠债 1632 万元, 这个影展的影响力却到了'金马'" [With debts of 16.32 million RMB so far, the influence of this film festival has reached the Golden Horse Awards], last modified 27 July 2019, https://www.sohu.com/a/329788930_613537 (accessed 14 December 2021).

branding of FIFF. Unlike the love for film explored in the previous chapters, which is comparatively contained and circulates among individual actants, cinephilia here is exuberant, almost tilting towards hyperactive. Following Li Ziwei as an active actant, one can observe how this passion becomes a brand, and how the tie between FIFF and an unconditional love of film have been repeatedly affirmed and amplified through festival slogans and media coverage, and in the ways that the actants deliver such messages. Indeed, this is a deliberate and self-aware tactic on the part of the FIFF co-founders.

6.4.1.2 Yang Wei and the Corporate

While online interviews have painted a utopian picture of FIFF as a place for film enthusiasts to gather and connect, there has been a hovering question mark over how FIFF, a film festival founded by university students, managed to secure acceptance from the Xining government in 2011 after it had been halted as recently as 2009 due to the screening of Cao Baoping 曹保平's *Trouble Makers* (Guangrong de fennu 光荣的愤怒, 2006).

Yang Wei, one of the co-founders of FIFF, provides an answer to this pressing question. As one of the co-founders of FIFF, Yang Wei, who has connections to the provincial party committee in Qinghai, introduced her fellow co-founders to the Xining government.²⁰⁰ Shortly afterwards, “(and) very coincidentally, the film festival (was) brought to Qinghai Province”.²⁰¹ As a finance professional, Yang has had a clear vision of FIFF's relationship with the industry right from its earliest days. In 2013, two years after the

²⁰⁰ “Zhuzha Xining de ‘FIRST’ heyi ling Jiang Wen, Wang Jiawei qingxin 驻扎西宁的‘FIRST’何以令姜文王家卫倾心？” [How does Xining-based FIFF win the trust of Wang Jiawei and Jiangwen?], last modified 1 September 2016, <http://ent.sina.com.cn/m/c/2016-09-01/doc-ixvqcts9139620.shtml> (accessed 20 September 2021).

²⁰¹ “Yang Wei: chengwei haodianying de huhangzhe 杨巍：成为好电影的护航者” [Yangwei: be the guardian of good films], last modified 2 November 2020, https://www.sohu.com/a/428864577_105446 (accessed 20 September 2021).

relocation of FIFF to Xining, Minmetals International Trust (Wukuang Xintuo 五矿信托),²⁰² a trust fund affiliated to the state-owned China Minmetals Corporation, launched a ¥ 600 million trust fund with the aim of raising proposals specialising in film and TV investment.²⁰³ And in the press meeting, Yang, the then vice president of Minmetals International Trust, verified the validity of the project by introducing FIFF as a crucial event at which the market and indie film could be brought together. She stated:

Throughout this process, we have communicated with many veteran industry insiders and practitioners and accumulated important insights and professional information on the industry outlook and overall operation mechanism. Taking such events as opportunities, we have gradually connected with a cluster of clients with high net worth, and even professional investment institutions, who have shown strong interest in investing and participating in the culture industry.²⁰⁴

In the summer of 2013, a couple of months earlier than the launch of the trust fund, Hehe Pictures 禾和影业 was registered in Shanghai, with Yang Wei as the company's chairperson and CEO.²⁰⁵ As stated on the company's official website, it has a strategic partnership with FIFF, which "has become the most influential platform for discovering

²⁰² "Guanyu Wukuangxintuo 关于五矿信托" [About Minmetals International Trust], last modified n.d., <https://www.mintrust.com/aboutUs/company/info> (accessed 20 September 2021).

²⁰³ "Xintuo touzi yingshi duiwu kuorong wukuang ni 'rulie' 信托投资影视队伍扩容 五矿拟'入列'" [Trust investment in film and television expands, MMR is about to join], last modified 26 November 2013, http://www.p5w.net/money/xtzx/201311/t20131130_398841.htm (accessed 20 September 2021).

²⁰⁴ "Wukuangxintuo yingshi touzi jinjin jihe zijin xintuo jihua da jizhewen 五矿信托影视投资基金集合资金信托计划答记者问" [Q&A on the launch of MMR Film and TV investment trust fund project], last modified 26 November 2013, <http://money.sohu.com/20131126/n390797920.shtml> (accessed 20 September 2021).

²⁰⁵ "Hehe Pictures: About us", modified n.d., <https://www.hehefilm.com/static/hehe/about.html> (accessed 10 December 2021).

emerging Chinese filmmakers and creating co-production opportunities”. Meanwhile, Hehe Pictures has become one of the largest donors to the film festival. Furthermore, in addition to donating funds, Hehe Pictures has also been involved in the pre-production and production of a handful of debuts which were spotted at FIFF. These include Zhai Yixiang’s *Mosaic Portrait*, Xin Yukun’s *Wrath of Silence* and Wang Yichun’s *What’s in the Darkness* (Heichu you shenme 黑处有什么, dir. Wang Yichun 王一淳, 2015).

In short, Yang Wei, as a co-founder of FIFF and an actant with connections to the provincial party committee in Qinghai, played a crucial role in introducing the film festival to the Xining government and facilitating its successful relocation to the city. Through her financial background, connections with local government, and the resources of her company, Hehe Pictures, Yang Wei has established herself as a powerful mediator with multiple roles in the network of FIFF. As an actant with agency, Yang Wei has contributed to the success and influence of FIFF as a brand for alternative filmmaking in the past decade, creating a different narrative about how the festival has become established in Xining. It is revealing that Yang Wei’s role in securing the relocation of FIFF is often not mentioned in interviews about the decision to choose Xining as the location for the film festival.

6.4.2 Actant 2: Xining Government (Xining shizhengfu 西宁市政府)

As a unique film festival, FIFF not only offers an in-depth look at how the film organisers, as active actants, use their resources and performances to keep the festival running, but it also provides a valuable perspective on how the local government, contrary to its typical portrayal as a passive placeholder of central government policy, actively engages in this process with its own agendas and interests.

By examining the specific actants that make up the network of FIFF, it becomes clear that the Xining government, as an unconventional actant in the formation of an indie network in China, takes a calculated and cautious approach to the film festival. The government frames FIFF as a local cultural event that promotes the city's international image as an open and tourist-friendly place. However, unlike a diplomatic film festival such as the Shanghai International Film Festival (Shanghai guoji dianyingjie 上海国际电影节), FIFF's status as officially ratified but not officially organised means that the government does not feel the need or desire to provide unconditional support, leading to FIFF's financial independence from the local government. This financial independence demonstrates the potential for such actors to achieve success with minimal support or interference from the authorities. Yet despite this financial independence, the local government must maintain an awkward balance between the potential benefits in allowing FIFF to continue and the potential social unrest that the festival's subjects may stir up. This delicate balance is influenced by various variables including the presence or absence of key contact actors like Yang, the actual impact FIFF might have on the ground, and unpredictable political dynamics in the future.

6.4.2.1 The Conditions

Sealed by a contract for 20 years²⁰⁶ starting from 2011, the collaboration between FIFF and Xining government is based on three criteria: first, FIFF had to promise to base itself in Xining permanently; second, the film festival had to guarantee that it would eventually run without any government support; third, it would need to bring cultural influences to the city.²⁰⁷ In 2020, Xining government released its annual official briefing, entitled “Measures to Further Promote Cultural and Consumption Potential in Xining”. In this briefing, FIRST International Film Festival, along with other events such as the Xining Food Festival, were described as events which were expected to elevate the “consumption environment for inbound tourism”. As the document describes, the promotion aims to:

Increase the publicity of culture and tourism for overseas tourists, incorporate more travel information into the official promotion platform for inbound tourism, encourage cultural and tourism enterprises to enhance their collaborations and communications with abroad, focus on inter-provincial, high-end travel, strategically develop a number of tourist products and tailored itineraries for overseas tourists, provide support to enhance the quality of multilingual services at sightseeing spots, catering and accommodation, shopping and entertainment, airport and train station, etc., and increase the training of minor language skills.²⁰⁸

²⁰⁶ “Xining, Datong Pingyao de dianyingjie (Zhou), juyou ‘daihuotizhi’ma? 西宁‘大同’平遥的电影节(周), 具有‘带货体质’吗?” [Is the Pingyao Film Festival/Week a Good Match for “Influencer Marketing”], last modified 13 August 2018, https://www.sohu.com/a/246974409_182272 (accessed 14 July 2022)?

²⁰⁷ “First yingzhanshinian| xiaozhongyingzhan de tuibian yu jianchi FIRST 影展十年|小众影展的蜕变与坚持” [The Ten Years of FIRST Film Festival: The transformation and persistence of a niche film festival], last modified 28 July 2016, https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1505161 (accessed 14 July 2022)

²⁰⁸ Xining Shizhengfu 西宁市政府 Xining Government, “西宁进一步激发文化和旅游消费潜力若干措施” [Measures to Further Promote Cultural and Consumption Potentials in Xining], last modified 23 July 2020, https://www.xining.gov.cn/zwgk/fdzdgknr/zcwj/szfbgswj/202012/t20201217_141931.html (accessed 15 Oct 2022)

Xining government's support of FIFF as a cultural event which serves the purpose of developing city tourism resonates with scholarship that investigates the intricate relationship between local government and social enterprise, especially on how the latter attempts to build semi-personal relationships with local officials and establish trust. Channelling Scott Kennedy's research on cooperate-government relationship and Zhang Jianjun's work on the bottom-up approach in economic development in China's provincial regions, Elena Meyer-Clement applies the concept of "political embeddedness" (Meyer-Clement 2016, 14) to the private film sector. Her analysis suggests that bearing the increasing self-censorship in the private sector in mind (Meyer-Clement 2016, 233), collaboration between film companies and local governments emerges as a feasible strategy benefiting both parties. Private actors in the film industry actively engage in establishing personal relationships and connections with the authorities (Meyer-Clement 2016, 240) as a means to explore and push the boundaries of existing regulations.

6.4.2.2 The Balance

In the context of non-official film festival in China, Li's statement about FIFF's relationship with the Xining government echoes Meyer-Clement's observation about the lobbying efforts of private film producers:

It is crucial to find the right balance. Briefing documents have been sent from us to the Qinghai provincial government and the Xining local government over the years, just so that the government can understand what we are doing.”²⁰⁹

Frequent briefings are only one part of the balance in Li's account. To make the relationship work, festival organisers also need to minimise the conflicts between its positioning as a film festival which is young and dares to “act wild” with the red tape that certain selected films might cross. Replying to questions about whether the film festival's selections are conflicted because of its official endorsement, Li commented:

This (the vetoing of a film because its subject matter) does happen from time to time, but so-called pressure is simply an illusion. A good film is a good film. A good film stands by itself. Be authentic. It is not a big deal.”²¹⁰

Li's comment downplays the consequences of censorship. It does, however,

²⁰⁹ “Zhijin qianzhai 1632wanyuan, zhege yingzhande yingxiaingli que dao le jinma 至今欠债 1632 万元，这个影展的影响力却到了‘金马’” [With debts of 16.32 million RMB so far, the influence of this film festival has reached the Golden Horse Awards], last modified 27 July 2019, https://www.sohu.com/a/329788930_613537 (accessed 14 December 2021).

²¹⁰ “Woshi FIRSTqingnianyingzhan de CEO Li Ziwei, lixiang qingnian ruhe tachu dianyingdiyibu, wenwoba! 我是 FIRST 青年影展 CEO 李子为，理想青年如何踏出电影第一步，问我吧！” [I'm Li Ziwei, CEO of FIRST International Film Festival: Ask me how a promising young person should take the first step in film industry], last modified 28 July 2016, https://www.thepaper.cn/asktopic_detail_10005462 (accessed 25 Nov 2021)

demonstrate the clear message that FIFF does not intend to try the patience of the authorities in terms of film content. In addition to offering this gesture of good will, as well as frequent updates to the local government, FIFF also emphasised its financial independence as an actant to prove its value to the local government. As one of the conditions for FIFF to establish its base in Xining, the government only provided one million each year for the first three years of its operation. By 2014, FIFF had become fully market based.²¹¹ By 2018, FIFF had managed to break even. This means that the income of FIFF,²¹² which mainly comes from sponsorship, could theoretically cover the operations of the festival while maintaining its limited access to public spaces for screenings as well as to marketing provided by the government.²¹³

Interestingly, FIFF is not the only actant which claims to be self-sufficient. One can also observe this mode of collaboration between PIFF and the Shanxi government. In 2020, when Jia Zhangke held a press conference for Pingyao Film Festival to announce his resignation from the directorship of PIFF, he also emphasised that the operations of the film festival have successfully become self-sufficient: “we have made this brand, we did not spend a penny from the government. All investment comes from society.”²¹⁴

And just as Li stated, the existence of FIFF does test the boundaries of what can be

²¹¹ “FIRST Gaizaoxing:ziben taojin, yingmi chaosheng FIRST 改造西宁：资本淘金，影迷朝圣”[FIRST Transforms Xining: Capital rush for gold, film fans pilgrimage], last modified 2 Aug 2018, <https://www.jiemian.com/article/2355307.html> (accessed 2 May 2022)

²¹² “Yige duldianyingzhan de zhengtuo yu shufu 一个独立电影展的挣脱与束缚”[The struggles and shackles of an Independent Film Festival], last modified 8 Sep 2021, <https://m.yicai.com/vip/news/101166850.html> (accessed 7 Nov 2022)

²¹³ “Dishinian, ting Li Ziwei 亲自告诉你一个真实的 FIRST 第十年，听李子为亲自告诉你一个真实的 FIRST”[In the 10th Year, Listen to Li Ziwei Himself Tell You a True FIRST], last modified 10 July 2016, https://www.douban.com/note/569369676/?_i=1193801U9gUIqX (accessed 1 Nov 2022)

²¹⁴ “Jia Zhangke xuanbu tuichu Pingyao dianyingjie: jinnia meiyouhua zhengfu yifengqian 贾樟柯宣布退出平遥国际电影节：今年没有花政府一分钱”[Jia Zhangke Announced His Withdrawal from the Pingyao International Film Festival: It did not cost the government any money this year], last modified 19 Oct 2020, https://k.sina.com.cn/article_1887344341_707e96d502000yrt1.html?from=ent&subch=oent#/ (accessed 13 June 2022)

accessible to the public. It provides access to films which are critically acclaimed, including *Plastic China* (Suliao Zhongguo 塑料王国, Dir. Wang Jiuliang 王久良, 2016) and Hu Bo's *An Elephant Sitting Still*. It is, however, noteworthy that a series of incidents from the cancelled screening of Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite* (2019) due to "technical reasons"²¹⁵ to the failure to award the Best Documentary Prize in 2021²¹⁶ have suggested that the relatively relaxed space earlier enjoyed by boundary-challenging films is now being contested.

With these admitted constraints, the participation of the Xining government as an actant does not only mean that FIFF can enlist cinemas in the city centre to screen their films (Meng et al. 2015). It also means that FIFF can host events, such as outdoor screenings, which provide a sense of connection with the larger city. As one of the informants put it:

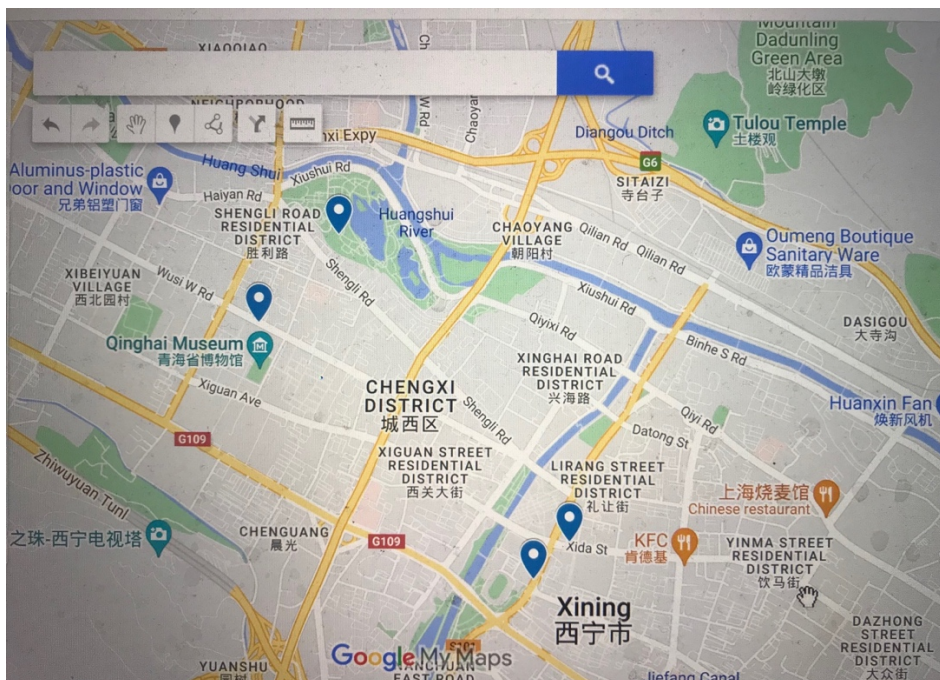


Figure 37 cinemas which were enrolled as venues for FIFF in 2016 are located at the Xining city centre (source:

²¹⁵ "FIRST guancha| bimupian 《Jishengchong》 quxiaofangying, shisansui de FIRST que zouchu 'Qingchunqi' FIRST 观察|闭幕片《寄生虫》取消放映, 十三岁的'FIRST'却走出'青春期'?"[], last modified 28 July 2019, https://www.sohu.com/a/329918009_549401 (accessed 15 April 2022)

²¹⁶ "FIRST di shiwanian, jiangxiangkongque, dianying zaichang FIRST 第十五年, 奖项空缺, 电影在场"[], last modified 4 Aug 2021, https://www.sohu.com/a/481365261_120157873 (accessed 15 April 2022)

google map)

... (the screening location) is a square in a very busy part of Xining. It is (impressive) that they were given such a space. Outdoor screenings are free if you have a reservation, and you can sit on the stairs if the main venue is booked out. It feels like a good bridge with the local citizens in Xining too... and they invite bands to perform. For example, I think it is good that they (FIFF) have invited indie bands like Wild Child, Chinese Football, and Low Wormwood to perform before each screening, so that local residents who didn't know about it can find out that there is a film festival.” (anonymous informant#)

6.4.2.3 Conclusion

To conclude, the role of the Xining government as an actant participating in the stabilisation of FIFF as a functioning site for indie demonstrates how smaller, provincial governments such as those in Ningxia, which does not have the kind of access to state resources enjoyed by tier-1 cities such as Shanghai and Beijing, can develop strategies to promote their own interests. As illustrated in the official government briefing, FIFF was promoted along with Xining Food Festival, as a means of enhancing the city's inbound tourism. This balance between the film festival and the local government is also maintained by FIFF's status as a financially independent entity. That said, this fragile collaboration between the local government and FIFF may well be tested by changing political dynamics in the future.

7. Conclusion: Tracing the Making of Chinese Indie

In conclusion, this thesis examines the intricate network of individuals and organisations that comprise China's burgeoning indie cinema scene from 2010 to 2019. I argue that its close links with China's evolving industry practice since the early 2000s and legacy of independent cinema as a movement at that time make my conceptualisation of Chinese indie cinema a valuable lens to understand indie cinema as a with-in-system practice from late 2000s to 2020 in contemporary China. During this brief period, the state was relatively tolerant, the market was interested and confident, and the filmmakers were ready.

This thesis proposes that the definition of "indie" cinema in China is not fixed and is constantly evolving in response to a diverse range of actants and influences. To study this evolving concept, I use Actor-Network Theory (ANT) which allows us to travel from sites to sites to observe different actants, including but not limited to state regulations, local cinemas, industry professionals, filmmakers, online communities, volunteer translators, technology, aesthetics, personal interests, cinephilia, and equipment, all interact and shape the meaning of "indie" in the Chinese context. ANT approach enables us to access to the indie film scene in china as an active network where different actants with various interests, resources, and abilities come together to produce, distribute and consume independent films. This network is complex, dynamic, and constantly changing, which means that the concept of "indie" is always in flux, shaped by a variety of factors in the Chinese context.

In Chapter 2, We have seen how small indie production companies act as hubs, facilitating the collaboration of indie film companies and filmmakers driven by their shared passions and sentiments. We examined how Heaven Pictures drawing on philanthropical support and its accumulated influence in the previous independent scene, Heaven Pictures functions as an incubator for industry practitioners by being the first indie production

company facilitating filmmakers and management in low-budget, aesthetically interesting film production; we then observe how as an active actant, Black Fin proactively branding itself as an indie film company which produces film with alternative aesthetics qualities. With a clear idea of the niche position it has, Black Fin develops a producer-oriented mode and find cases based collaborations with filmmakers with the aim of maintaining a balance between artistic pursuit and commercial considerations. We saw how Factory Gate has positioned itself as a hub for indie film production while also embracing a more professional and mainstream approach to film making. The company has established a streamlined operation for script development, production, branding and distribution, making it a one-stop-shop for indie filmmakers. They have also implemented a systemic way of organising the film talents they collaborate with, working closely with debut filmmakers and maintaining a more flexible approach with established filmmakers. While this approach has allowed Factory Gate to secure a place within the film industry, it comes at the cost of distancing themselves from the edgier and less stable aspects of indie film. However, by doing so, Factory Gate has been able to enhance the visibility of indie film as a substantial mode of film making in mainland China.

Chapter 3 examines the complex and unpredictable nature of the distribution network for Chinese indie film. It argues by acquiring better knowledge of the international film circuit, newly emerged distribution companies are becoming an important part of the industry practice. This focus on proactively targeting the international market, as I highlighted in this chapter, is a key characteristic of the contemporary Chinese indie film network. This chapter firstly examined how as an indie film distribution company, Redience develops strategy to secure its place in the international circuit with the collaboration of the indie production company Black Fin as a hub to further exert its influence in the international circuit; In the case of *Midnight Blur*, I point out the important role social media has played as a non-human

actant, which facilitates the transformation from Deep Focus as a non-profit, cinephile community to Midnight Blur, an international sale and distribution company which provides service to a wide spectrum of filmmakers who have the need to present their films abroad. In the last case, this chapter observes Blow-up, the only actant in this chapter who targets the domestic market. Unlike Redience, and Midnight Blur who targets primary to international film circuit, I find that drawing from very similar logic from Midnight Blurs' transformation from we-media to indie distribution company, Blow-up as a film company is also drawn on its previous influence and connections gather from the operation of Rear Window, a local cinephile community. Interviews with founders of the company also suggest that by using the connections with cinemas, local film screening organisers and film enthusiastic, Blow-up develops "salon distribution" as a company branding to locate potential audience who are interested in indie film; That said, the heavy reliance on theatrical distribution for domestic market means as a small scale indie distribution company, Blow-up cannot stand on its own and will have to be affiliated to larger corporations and also find means to keep the ends meet.

As a valuable trial of actor-network theory's emphasis on non-human actants and its contribution as a tool that tracks the flow of the network and identify the moves of the actants, Chapter 4 links Chinese indie cinema as a unique network for industry practice with them as distinctive cinematic space which hosts negative affect which is not welcome by the state propaganda. Focusing on nonhuman actants' performance in indie cinematic space as cinematic elements including chromatic patterns, camera movements and deployment of object in three Chinese indie film, I argue that these non-human actants roaming through the cinematic space are impossible to be censored as they do not directly belong to the plot of the film. Moreover, I argue that Chapter 4's focus on non-human actant compliments the whole research (particularly chapter 1 on indie production companies) by inviting human actants,

such as actors, cinematographers as well as non-human actants, including cameras, neon-lights, props, who are normally override and hide behind the scene of filmmaking process into the focus light. For example, my analysis on *An Elephant Sitting Still* locates a tragic fallout between the filmmaker Hu Bo and Dongchun Films, an indie film company who also claims to discover upcoming talents. Going through non-human actants including online archives, I investigate the dark side of indie production company and sentiment driven collaboration.

After going through who are making indie film, who are distributing them, what are indie films are, Chapter 5 answers questions of where to find these indie films. It traces actants who make the circulation of Chinese indie film a whole by making them accessible to a wider audience. In this chapter, I examined the founding of Nationwide Alliance of Arthouse Cinemas (NAAC). I argue that by having the leverage of state-background and access to films which are exclusive to state-Affiliated actants as well as collaborating with powerful and resourceful actants in the industry, NAAC is able to activate a network across the country to screen art-house cinemas of its choice. This level of coverage provides a more stable environment for the exhibition of Chinese indie films. That said, it is still of concern of how NAAC's official background impedes it from providing true, sustainable exhibition space for indie films who do not fit into the larger picture of state propaganda; I then examined the online space, which have been going through drastic change after 2012, when illegal streaming started to slowly be replaced by licensed online streaming. I argue in this new stage of the development of online streaming platforms in China, online streaming platforms like iQIYI can be a potential ally to the exhibition of Chinese indie film. Moreover, different from traditional film industry's hostile attitude towards online platform, as the latter have been posing threat towards the profit which used to only be held and shared within the traditional industry, online streaming of indie cinema are facing much less counterforce, as

their default disadvantage of often poor performance in theatre distribution served as an advantage here as the ally between indie films and online platform does not inflict threat to the traditional film industry in China. That said, interviews with industry insiders have suggested that whether the collaboration between iQIYI as an online platform and indie films is an equal one still await to be tested. The last section examined First International Film Festival, the most influential platform for the exhibition of upcoming indie film. Among the many actants which activate FIFF as a multi-faceted sites which aims to connect creative talent and the market, this section focuses on two main actants - the organisers of the FIFF and Xining government as the host of the festival. Inspired by Robinson's research on film festival organisers as "sole traders", I first follows Li Ziwei, the CEO of FIFF as the charismatic actant who passionately devote herself to making FIFF an film festival which gathers other actants who love film; but then following the second, less interviewed cofounder, Yang Wei, clarifies that FIFF is not just fuelled by passion and love for film, but also by Yang Wei's corporal background, which draw the interest from the market and her connection to the local government. The second part of my research on FIFF focuses on Xining government as an unconventional actant which participates in the making of the indie scene. By resorting government documents and conducting interviews, I argue that an examination of the collaboration between FIFF and local government can be seen as a case which not only contribute to study of film festivals in China, but also to the larger literature of the state-society relation in a micro level.

In late November 2022, unprecedented protests swept Chinese cities right across the country. People gathered on the street, remembered the victims who passed away in the fire in Urumqi, and vented their frustration towards the Zero-Covid policy imposed by the Chinese government for the past three years. Among the videos and photos circulating online, one slogan shouted out by the people on the street really stood out for me: “I WANT TO WATCH A FILM!” (Wo xiang kan dianying 我想看电影).²¹⁷ This is a thesis dedicated to the type of films people might want to watch in mainland China, as well as to the whole network of human and non-human actants which make these films accessible to the people who want to watch them.

The in-between-ness of this cluster of indie films also means that in terms of style and aesthetic qualities, they are somewhere in between mega-propaganda films like *Wolf Warrior* and the independent films such as *Disorder* (Xianshi shi guoqu de weilai 现实是过去的未来, dir. Huang Weikai 黄伟凯 2009) without any attachment to the market. Furthermore, in contrast to independent or art-house films, or activist films that are without a national distribution network, indie films are more accessible for a larger audience. It is simple fact that in order to have influence, films must be watched, and then discussed. Therefore, compared to the independent film audience — which is a quite exclusive group of academic scholars, audiences overseas, specific film practitioners and a very limited number of film buffs — these indie films are much more accessible for a larger audience, both via national theatre distribution as well as legal or illegal online streaming.

Here, I would like to further propose the potential political significance of my research subject by borrowing Jacques Rancière’s term “distribution of sensible”. In *the*

²¹⁷ “‘Wo xiang kan dianying’ yin baizhi geming kangyizhe gongming ‘我想看电影’ 引白纸革命抗议者共鸣”[“I want to watch a film” generate connections among A4 Revolution protesters], last modified 30 November 2022 <https://www.epochtimes.com/gb/22/11/30/n13875742.htm> (accessed 6 January 2023)

Politics of Aesthetics (2004), Rancière pointed out that it is possible for an artwork to generate political significance without being committed to any particular political engagement. As for Rancière, being political does not necessarily mean shouting aloud. In fact, as further elaborated in his later work *Emancipated Spectator* (2008), the political significance of an artwork might even have a negative correlation with how explicit it is. Analysing contemporary photography, Rancière has made an interesting argument that the more ambiguous, fragile, weak the images are, the better they are as the unanchored images leave the interpretation to the audience and thus break the hierarchy of knowledge to the spectator rather than forcing them to accept what is out there.

It might not be the worst of times yet, but it is definitely not the best of times. Grim political events are happening way beyond the realm of government-censored films can reach, narrate, or influence. However, looking at this cluster of indie films and its micro-habitat provides a “minimalistic version” of what we can see and how eventually, the visual language of films can subtly reconvert audiences’ perception from the most basic cinematic elements such as form, chromatic patterns, tempo, and framing to the understanding of characters, disjunctions between protagonists’ consensus social image and who they could/tend to be in the story.

To conclude, I quote what Wittgenstein has put in *Culture and Value*, “You cannot lead people to what is good; you can only lead them to some place or other. The good is out of the space of fact” (Wittgenstein 2003, 7). Indie films bring the political significance back to the table exactly by providing an alternative, accessible space; an approach and understanding to daily life as a Chinese here and now. And the clusters of feelings, be they of anger, confusion, fear, or longing, often undecipherable and consequently under-discussed in scholarships, lit themselves up when brought into being by film practitioners, and then acknowledged and perceived by the audiences.

Xiaochu WU

Change can be made within. Change can be made not by speaking directly against it,
but by claiming a space.

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Long Day's Journey into Night (Diqiushang Zuihou de Yewan 地球上最后的夜晚).

Directed by Bi Gan 毕赣, 2018.

Longing for the Rain (Chunmeng 春梦). Directed by Yang Lina 杨荔钠, 2013.

Lost in Russia (Jiongma 囧妈). Directed by Xu Zheng 徐铮, 2020.

Love After Love (Diyi Lu Xiang 第一炉香). Directed by Ann Hui 许鞍华, 2020.

Madame (Gunainai 姑奶奶). Directed by Qiu Jiongiong 邱炯炯, 2012.

Mama (Mama 妈妈). Directed by Zhang Yuan 张元, 1990.

Manchester by the Sea. Directed by Kenneth Lonergan, 2016.

Meili (Meili 美丽). Directed by Zhou Zhou 周洲, 2020.

Memoria. Directed by Apichatpong Weerasethaku, 2021.

Monkey King: Hero Is Back (Dasheng Guilai 大圣归来).

Directed by Tian Xiaopeng 田晓鹏, 2015.

Moonrise Kingdom. Directed by Wes Anderson, 2012.

Mosaic Portrait (Masaike Nvhai 马赛克女孩). Directed by Zhai Yixiang 翟义祥, 2019.

Mr. No Problem (不成问题的问题). Directed by Mei Feng 梅峰, 2016.

My Big Fat Greek Wedding. Directed by Joel Zwick.

My Original Dream (Wode Qingchunqi 我的青春期).

Directed by Hao Jie 郝杰, Wanda Film Group, 2015.

My People, My Country (Wohe wode zuguo我和我的祖国). Directed by. Ning Hao 宁浩, Xu

Zheng 徐峥, Wen Muye 文牧野, Xue Xiaolu 薛晓路, Guanhu 管虎, Zhang Yibai 张

一白, Chen kaige 陈凯歌, 2019.

Negative Space. Directed by Ru Kuwahata and Max Porter, 2017.

Night Train (Yeche 夜车). Directed by Diao Yinan 刁亦男, 2007.

Oculus. Directed by Mike Flanagan, 2013.

Open Water. Directed by Chris Kentis, 2003.

Operation Mekong (Meigonghe xingdong 湄公河行动). Directed by Dante Lam 林超贤,

2016

Pai Gu (Paigu 排骨). Directed by Gao Ming 高鸣, 2006.

Parasite (Gisaengchung 기생충). Directed by Bong Joon-ho 봉준호, 2019.

Paths of the Soul (Kang Rinpoche 冈仁波齐). Directed by Zhang Yang 张扬, 2015.

Peppermint Candy. Directed by Lee Changdong, 1999.

PHILOMIRRORPHOBIA II (Feiluonuoruofubiya II 翡罗弥诺浮彼亚II).

Directed by Yu Ke 钰柯, 2012.

Pickpocket (Xiaowu 小武). Dir. Jia Zhangke 贾樟柯, 1996.

Plastic China (Suliao Wangguo 塑料王国). Directed by Wang Jiuliang 王久良, 2016.

Platform (Zhàntái 站台). Directed by Jia Zhangke 贾樟柯, 2000.

Poet on a Business Trip (Shiren Chuchai Le 诗人出差了). Directed by Ju Anqi, 2015.

Red Amnesia (Chuangruzhe 闯入者). Directed by Wang Xiaoshuai 吴晓帅, 2014.

Red Sorghum (Hong Gaoliang 红高粱). Directed by Zhang Yimou 张艺谋, 1988.

Ringu. Directed by Hideo Nakata, 1998.

River Road (Jia zai shuicaofengmao de defang 家在水草丰茂的地方).

Directed by Li Ruijun 李睿珺, 2014.

See You Tomorrow (Biduren 摆渡人). Directed by Zhang Jiajia 张佳嘉, 2016.

Single Man (Guanggun 光棍). Directed by Hao Jie 郝杰, 2010.

Solaris. Directed by Andrei Tarkovsky, 1972.

Song of the Phoenix (Bainiaochaofeng 百鸟朝凤). Directed by Wu Tianming 吴天明, 2013.

Spring Tide (Chunchao 春潮). Directed by Yang Lina 杨荔钠, 2019.

Still Life (Sanxia Haoren 三峡好人). Directed by Jia Zhangke 贾樟柯, 2006.

STRATUM 2: ASTHENOSPHERE (STRATUM 2: TONGZHOU 地层2: 软流层).

Directed by Cong Feng 丛峰, 2021.

Summer Palace (Yíhé Yuán 颐和园). Directed by Lou Ye 娄烨.

Suspiria. Directed by Dario Argento, 1977.

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Out of the Shadows. Directed by Dave Green, 2016.

Tharlo (Talu 塔洛). Directed by Pema Tseden 万玛才旦, 2015.

The Bad Kid (Yinmi de Jiaoluo 隐秘的角落). Directed by Zijin Chen, 2020.

The Captain (Zhōngguó Jīzhǎng 中国机长). Directed by Andrew Lau 刘伟强, 2019.

The Curse of the Golden Flower (Mancheng jindai huangjinjia满城尽带黄金甲). Directed by Zhang Yimou张艺谋, 2006.

The Climbers (攀登者). Directed by Daniel Lee Yan-Kong 李仁港, 2019.

The Days (Dongchun de rizi 冬春的日子). Dir. Wang Xiaoshuai 王小帅. 1993.

The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie. Directed by Luis Buñuel, 1972.

The Equation of Love and Death (Limi de Caixiang 李米的猜想).

Directed by Cao Baoping 曹宝平, 2008.

The Expendables. Directed by Sylvester Stallone, 2010.

The Founding of An Army (Jianjun Daye 建军大业). Directed by Andrew Lau 刘伟强, 2017.

The Founding of the Country (Jianguo daye建国大业). Directed by Han Sanping 韩三平

Huang Jianxin 黄建新, 2009.

The Lost Bladesman (Guan yuchang 关云长). Dir. Flexi Cong 麦兆辉 and Alan Mak 庄文强, 2011.

The Knight of Shadows: Between Yin and Yang (Shentan Pusongling 神探蒲松龄).

Directed by Yan Jia 严嘉, 2019.

The Love Songs of Tiedan (Meijie 美姐). Directed by Hao Jie 郝杰, 2012.

The Mermaid (Meirenyu 美人鱼). Directed by Stephen Chou 周星驰, 2016.

The Missing Gun (Xun qiang 寻枪). Directed by Lu Chuan 陆川

The North-East of the Past 20 Years of the Mafia (Dongbeiwangshi Zhi Heidao Fengyun 20

Nian 东北往事之黑道二十年). Directed by Li Yan 李炎, 2012.

The Northerners Are All Living Lei Fengs (Women Dongbeiren Doushi Huoleifeng 我们东北人都是活雷锋). Directed by Xue Cun, 2001.

The Passenger. Directed by Michelangelo Antonioni, 1975.

The Promise (Wuji 无极). Directed by Chen Kaige 陈凯歌, 2005.

The Summer Is Gone (Bayue 八月). Directed by Zhang Dalei 张大磊, 2017.

The World (Shijie 世界). Directed by Jia Zhangke 贾樟柯, 2004.

There's a Strong Wind in Beijing (Beijing de Feng Henda 北京的风很大).

Directed by Ju Anqi, 2000.

Though I Am Gone. Directed by Wo sui siqu 我虽死去, 2006.

Transformers: The Last Knight. Directed by Michael Bay, 2017.

Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri. Directed by Martin McDonagh, 2018.

Trouble Makers (Guangrong de Fennu 光荣的愤怒).

Directed by Cao Baoping 曹保平, 2006.

Uniform (Zhifu 制服). Directed by Diao Yinan 刁亦男, 2003.

Warriors of Honor (我为你牺牲). Directed by An Zhanjun 安战军, 2019.

Wet Season (Redaiyu 热带雨). Directed by Chen Zheyi 陈哲艺, 2019.

What's in the Darkness (Heichu Youshenme 黑处有什么).

Directed by Wang Yichun 王一淳, 2016.

Why the Flowers are so Red (Huaer weishenme zheyang hong 花儿为什么这样红). Directed
by Ai Xiaoming 艾晓明, 2010.

Widowed Witch (Beifang Yipian Cangmang 北方一片苍茫).

Directed by Cai Wenjie 蔡文杰, 2017.

Wolf Warrior (Zhan lang 战狼). Dir. Wu Jing 吴京, 2015.

Wonder Boy (Pili Beibei 霹雳贝贝).

Directed by Song Chong 宋崇 and Wen Luming 翁路明, 1988.

World (Shijie 世界). Directed by Jia Zhangke 贾樟柯, 2004.

Xiaochu WU

Wrath of Silence (Baolie Wusheng 爆裂无声). Directed by Xin Yukun 忻钰坤, 2017

Appendix 1: Sample Interview Questions

1. Could you briefly introduce yourself please?
2. When did you start to get involved in the film industry?
3. How long have you been working for your current company?
4. Have you worked for a State-owned film company or institute before? If yes, could you describe a little bit about the change of your role compared to your previous working experience?
5. Could you briefly introduce your role in the current company?
6. What attracts you to work for your current company?
7. What challenge(s) you the most as an industry insider?
8. On a spectrum of “play-by-rules-and-regulation” and “play-by-connections”, how would you describe the spot your work could be located?
9. How would you describe your impressions of the changing State culture policy in the past 5 years or so?
10. With which governmental departments do you have the most frequent interaction?
11. Which aspects do you think make it more difficult or easier to make/distribute a film?
12. Does your company focus on a certain genre/type of film?
13. What is your relationship with the filmmakers in your professional role? Are they in-house or do they work more on a contract basis?
14. What criteria do you think keeps the current company competitive in the market?
15. (For film production companies) Has it become easier or more difficult to successfully pitch your idea to the investors?
16. (For film production companies) What is the most satisfying part of your work?
17. (For film distribution companies) Have the landscape of distribution changed in the past few years? Do you have business collaborations with online platforms?
18. (For film distribution companies) How would the promotion strategy normally pan out? Are there certain audience groups you would like to focus on? If so, could you describe them briefly?
19. How would you perceive your company to be in another 5 years? What changes career-wise would you anticipate happening?

Appendix 2: Events in An Elephant Sitting Still

Attempt to make a difference	To whom	Response from the outside world	Response to the outside world	Event
Having a normal conversation	His father	Insulted	Silence	1
Making a suggestion	His school friend	Rejected	Indifference	2
Paying for the broken desk	School vice dean	Rejected and insulted	Indifference	3
Defending his school friend	School bully	Insulted	Self-defence	4
Asking for his own money back	His father	Rejected, Insulted	Indifference	5
Borrowing money	Wang Jin	Rejected, then agreed	Sincere (it's borrowed, not taken)	6
Defending Wang Jin	The dog owner	Repeated violence	Beaten up	7
Asking for companion for a trip to Manzhouli	Huang Lin	Rejected	Indifference	8
Helping his friend stand up the bully	His friend	Unappreciated	Anger	9
Nobody	Stranger on the street	Complete hostility	Complete hostility	10
Himself	Himself	Failed	Crying	11
Getting the money back for a fake ticket	Man who sells fake ticket at the train station	Robbed	Defeated	12

Persuading Wang Jin to come to Manzhouli	Wang Jin	Rejected*	Insistence	13