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Movies born online: The formalisation and industrialisation of Chinese internet movies

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Abstract

In 2014, an iQiyi representative defined the term ‘big internet movies’ and formalised a burgeoning category of streaming content. This article examines the history of these movies, from their beginnings as micro-movies or cellflix to cinema comparable to its theatrical equivalent, through an overview of the form’s shifting commercial infrastructure and regulation. The career of Zhang Hao, a comedian from Northeastern China, serves as a throughline across three periods of development. As an actor, director, and sometimes screenwriter of over a dozen features, Zhang’s films can be read as metaphorical commentary on the industry itself.

Keywords: wangluo dianying, PRC, Netflix, streaming platforms

How has the internet changed cinema? The model provided by Netflix suggests that what the internet has primarily transformed is the exhibition context, rather than film form and content. In clashes with the Cannes Film Festival, Netflix has positioned itself as a defender of ‘the art of cinema’, with at least one European critic agreeing that the streaming platform might be ‘the saviour of highbrow cinema’.

¹ The streaming service places great emphasis on the quality of its original productions, which means that Netflix’s challenge to Hollywood studios and European cinematic institutions is, in many respects, a competition among similar kinds of filmmaking.² Christopher Meir’s analysis of SVOD original productions highlights two potential models of film commissioning: working with established film auteurs or with early career talents.³ Both

models are built around films made by professionals, whether acclaimed and established or breaking into the industry, and the central assumption is that the resulting cinema differs from theatrical cinema primarily in the way it is exhibited. Chinese internet movies, however, were first made by amateurs or semi-professionals who developed their own industry. These films were dependent on streaming platforms for distribution but produced outside of established studios. An analysis of the distinctions between Chinese internet movies and films produced for streaming platforms in the rest of the world allow us to better understand the encounter between cinema and the new forms of production and distribution that are facilitated, and even defined, by the rise of streaming platforms.

The Chinese internet film was defined explicitly as a category by Chinese streaming platforms. In March 2014, an iQiyi representative defined the term *wangluo dadianying*, or 'big internet movies' (*wangda* for short) as films made quickly, without large sets, with budgets ranging from about 500,000 RMB to 4 million RMB (-\$80,000 to \$600,000 USD) and that run over an hour in length.⁴ With this announcement, iQiyi provided a precise definition of the production practices that internet movies should follow, using the insertion of the word 'da' (large) to differentiate internet movies from their *weidianying* (micro-film) predecessors. In the following article, I examine how Chinese internet movies can be understood as a form that reflects and engages with the aesthetic, cultural, and political specificities of streaming media, from around 2010 to the present. In this relatively short period, *wangda* have shifted from no- to low-budget grassroots productions to professional productions meant to complement and mimic their theatrical counterparts. Changes in both the industrial and regulatory environments, unique to the PRC, prompted these transformations, as *wangda* became subject to increasing regulation and censorship by the streaming platforms that hosted them and eventually were placed under direct government oversight in 2019.⁵ What began as amateur and semi-professional creators drawing from user-generated content and internet culture to make what they understood to be cinema became a formalised, professionalised industry closely resembling theatrical cinema. To illuminate each period, this paper will examine the career of actor/comedian Zhang Hao, who has made internet films since 2012, as his career neatly tracks the development of the industry. Chinese internet movies follow a path trod by other media forms before it, of relative freedom to strict regulation; they also demon-

strate an alternative to the global dominance of Netflix – another vision of how streaming culture might remake cinema.⁶

Methodology and central questions

The importance of cinema to streaming platforms is a relatively neglected topic, as much scholarship on streaming media focuses instead on its relationship to television.⁷ Given YouTube's own 'rhetorical positioning', like the directive to 'broadcast yourself' and calling users' collections of videos 'channels', this focus is merited.⁸ Furthermore, Netflix deemed itself 'internet television' in the early years of its transition from DVD-delivery service to streaming media distributor and ultimately producer.⁹ Notable Anglophone scholarship on Chinese streaming services and media also demonstrates the importance of televisual, rather than cinematic, models and precedents. Wilfred Yang Wang and Ramon Lobato analyse iQiyi's infrastructure, particularly its emphasis on news and lack of personalisation to conclude that 'iQiyi is strongly "TV-like" in its emphasis on capturing the national mood, agenda-setting, and providing a shared set of cultural materials to all viewers'.¹⁰ Concretely, in terms of the creators involved, Luzhou Li notes that early online video served as 'an alternative to television for industry professionals'.¹¹ On the other end of the professional spectrum, Elaine Jing Zhao describes the professionalisation of amateur creators and content that imitates televisual forms, web series, and talk shows.¹² Yet, streaming media is not solely televisual, and in this context iQiyi's 'internet movie' label warrants further exploration, both in terms of how the platform understood such films and in how creators and viewers engaged with the form.

The problematisation of cinema on the iQiyi platform is a product of PRC's distinct ecology of streaming media platforms which, unlike many streaming platforms in the rest of the world, places user-generated content (UGC) and professionally-generated content side by side (PGC). In Digital China's informal circuits – platforms, labour, and governance – Zhao explains how during the early 'wild west' days of streaming platforms, 'users actively shared professional productions' which 'allowed video sharing platforms to exploit a regulatory loophole and host professional produc-

tions without assuming legal liabilities'.¹³ Once the platforms were sufficiently stable, rights holders and greater government oversight eliminated pirated content.¹⁴ Thus, the division between YouTube for user-generated content and Netflix, Hulu, Disney+ and others for professional content does not exist in the Chinese context. Platforms like Youku originally hosted both, and as the focus shifted instead to legitimate professional content, whether from legacy media producers or commissioned by the platforms, little space was left for UGC producers if they did not formalise their content.¹⁵ Chunmeizi Su highlights the alternative strategy of some producers who instead migrated to livestreaming and short-form platforms like Douyin (known as TikTok in its international version) and Kuaishou.¹⁶ They lament the lack of distinction between UGC and PGC platforms in the PRC, meaning they must 'fight for a single audience'.¹⁷ Yet, I would argue this overlap, which placed early internet movies alongside their theatrical counterparts, was essential to the form's popularity and development.

This blurring of the lines between UGC and PGC and the resulting problematisation of cinema parallels other moments of technological transition. Unlike streamers that produce and distribute Hollywood-quality content, iQiyi's internet movies function more as exploitation movies, or what I would term 'direct-to-the-internet features'. Looking primarily at North American horror movies during the advent and spread of VHS technology, Caitlin Benson-Allott shows that 'low' cultural texts often demonstrate most clearly how technology and its use impact spectatorial engagement.¹⁸ Benson-Allott explains that 'movies made in periods of technological change offer a deep well of material for new theories of motion picture spectatorship in an age of multiplatform distribution'.¹⁹ Like exploitation cinema and direct to VHS or DVD productions before it, internet movies have also been subject to critical and public disdain as vulgar or low quality cultural products, yet they offer similar opportunities to understand the specific forms of spectatorship offered in a form defined by its internet exhibition. While a thorough examination of internet movie spectatorship is beyond the scope of this article, producers and critics' understandings of who watches internet movies, as well as how Zhang Hao's internet movies presume an internet-savvy viewer, offer a starting point for further consideration of internet movie spectatorship.

In addition to contributing to understandings of the industry and aesthetics of cinema on the internet, the analysis of popular and academic writing about internet movies furthers the project of understanding the PRC's 'digital nationalism', to use Florian Schneider's term. PRC government control of the internet – often described as the Great Firewall – has blocked many popular sites like Facebook and YouTube.²⁰ Netflix and any other foreign platforms were explicitly restricted from directly distributing content in the PRC in February 2016.²¹ These regulations ensure the censorship of content but also have protected domestic internet companies from international competition to further the goals of internet sovereignty.²² The big three Chinese internet companies Baidu, Alibaba, and Tencent also control the major streaming media platforms: iQiyi, Youku, and Tencent Video respectively.²³ Given the government's pursuit of 'internet sovereignty', PRC academics and critics tend to understand internet movies as a kind of national cinema. While Schneider attends to how explicitly nationalist content is taken up by users in various and potentially uncontrollable directions, internet movies are understood as a nationalist project even as the text of the films themselves are not necessarily concerned with the nation.²⁴ Thus, an important contribution of this research is to survey, translate, and build upon PRC scholarship from a different perspective that does not privilege the goal of improving and strengthening the internet movie industry as a form of Chinese national cinema.

Methodologically, this article echoes the work of J.D. Connor and Malte Hagener in treating particular films as reflections of industrial conditions. Connor describes this project as 'casting individual readings of motion pictures against the most conceptual aspects of their production'.²⁵ Hagener applies this method to an analysis of *Bird Box* (Susanne Bier, 2018) as a Netflix original film that reflects the platform's own preoccupations with algorithmic decision making and digital unknowability.²⁶ Thus, my analysis of Zhang Hao's internet movies is periodised according to shifts in the regulation of internet movie content and the platforms' monetisation structures. iQiyi will be central in this analysis, though the three principal PRC streaming services have tended to operate similarly. In contrast to Netflix's caginess about its own data, internet movies' viewing and revenue data is easily available, and this data was central to attracting creators, both amateur and professional, to the form.²⁷ In this way, analysing Chinese streaming services' approach to online cinema points to the productivity of 'China as

method', as a way to put into question aspects of streaming culture that may be taken for granted when analysis is limited to global services of US origin like Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Disney+.²⁸ Unlike Netflix's prestige productions, Chinese internet movies demonstrate the potential for a kind of exploitation or 'badfilm' form unique to the streaming environment.²⁹ Zhang Hao's films are particularly generative for this analysis, because Zhang has maintained a relatively consistent onscreen persona and managed to continue making internet movies from 2012 to the present, despite significant changes to the form's production and circulation circumstances. Zhang's career captures the entire arc of the wangda, from amateur film offering a potential new model for Chinese cinema to polished and professionalised films made in the image of theatrical cinema.

Early internet movies and micro-films (2010-2014): Siping Qingnian's local origins

Before iQiyi defined wangda, various labels for online video articulated a connection to cinema: micro-movie, cellflix (shouji dianying), and internet movies (wangluo dianying). Each label emphasises different aspects of online cinema, with different understandings of online cinema's appropriate length, structure, commercial orientation (or lack thereof), and circulation methods. This section will begin by examining these various labels and conceptions of online cinema and will then explain how Zhang Hao's first internet movie *Siping Qingnian* (2012) offers an alternative idea of what internet movies could be through its connection to local, popular entertainment.

Elaine Jing Zhao and PRC academic Chen Yu use the terms weidianying (micro-movie) and wangluo dianying respectively, to describe a kind of short film that became popular around 2010, funded through production placement and corporate sponsorship and promoted by streaming services like Youku. Zhao and Chen differ, however, in what aspects of these films they emphasise. Zhao links the term 'micro movie' explicitly to its funding model, arguing 'it was not until professional stakeholders and commercial interests became involved that the term "micro-movie" came into being in 2010'.³⁰ In her analysis, these short productions are significant not for their

aesthetics, but for how they signify the development of a new segment of a commercialised industry and a professional turn for online video away from user-generated content. These funding structures allowed Chen Yu to make a six-minute internet movie titled *Ai-Zaixian* (Always Online, 2011) that serves as his primary example in an oft-cited academic article about internet movies.³¹ Lenovo sponsored the film, and it received an ‘international advertising’ Crystal Award as best ‘internet movie’.³² Chen, however, wants to separate internet movies from advertising and home movies and uses the label ‘internet movies’ to emphasise the artistic thought and structure behind the work.³³ The distinctions Chen is invested in function to legitimatise his own work as something other than advertising.

Chen’s early definition is nevertheless a useful complement to Zhao’s focus on the formalisation of the internet movie industry, because it offers an early taxonomy of how internet movies differ from theatrical films that are merely made available through the internet. Chen describes internet movies as engaging with the youth culture of the internet and incorporating digital effects, like animation and on-screen text, that mirror the internet environment to which they contribute. Chen summarises the aesthetic choices of internet movies, like using close up shots and montage instead of long shots, as both a way to accommodate technical restrictions and, more meaningfully, as a way to simplify reality to suit the reduced resolution and smaller screens on which these films are viewed.³⁴ If online cinema for Zhao and Chen is ultimately a commercial form, the cellflix (shouji dian-ying) analysed by Paola Voci operate outside of mainstream media culture as videos which are circulated freely without monetisation.³⁵ Voci argues that cellflix’s short length, as well as their ‘exhibitionist pleasures, rather than narrative absorption’, connect them to the attractions of cinema’s early years.³⁶

Siping Qingnian reflects both this new context for film production and the internet movie aesthetics described by Chen. The film draws from an internet culture marked by user-generated content in its amateur, handheld camera style and use of on-screen text, and in how the movie circulated. It spread outside of the increasingly professionalised and formalised media sector that Zhao examines, and was shared more like the earlier egao (parody videos) that both Voci and Li situate outside of and in tension with mainstream media.³⁷ In an interview with *Vice China*, Zhang talks about making

the film as a kind of bet, predicting he could get 300,000 views in a month.³⁸ The actors and crew promoted the film in chat groups on the internet messaging service QQ, and it was freely shared online. In only four days *Siping Qingnian* had accumulated over ten million views. The film's popularity spread far beyond its local origins, yet this connection was also an important part of how it was made and promoted.

Zhang Hao produced *Siping Qingnian* in 2012 with a group of his colleagues from a local *errenzhuan* theatre. *Errenzhuan* is a folk art originating from Northeastern China. It literally translates to 'two people taking turns', as many *errenzhuan* acts involve two people alternating in singsong. Haili Ma defines the form as singing, dancing, and recitation focused on 'folk love stories' and traces the form's rise in popularity with the national fame of *errenzhuan* performer and comedian Zhao Benshan, as well as the later denunciation for its vulgar, sexual content.³⁹ The film's opening credits describe it as a production of the Siping Municipal People's Theatre Folk Performing Arts Stage. Siping is a prefecture-level city, spanning both a central urban area and surrounding rural areas, with a total population of 1.8 million. The urban centre is only the fourth largest in the province of Jilin, so it is not a place that would be well-known beyond its local region. A review at the time notes that the film was heavily promoted before every evening's *errenzhuan* performance and that it became a topic of conversation around town, even among middle-aged people not particularly connected to internet culture.⁴⁰

The film itself, however, does not include any *errenzhuan* performances and only makes a brief reference to the theatre. In the opening scene, real estate heir Lan Baiwan spots a pretty actress onstage, Lin Lin, and gifts her 20,000 RMB (~\$2750 USD) as an incentive to call him for a date. The romantic pursuit of Lin Lin motivates much of the following action, as the plot alternates between Hao Ge (Zhang Hao)'s group of rural small-time ruffians who travel to the city of Siping to follow her, as well a group of serious gangsters and Lan Baiwan, who are also pursuing her. As Voci notes with the 'cellflix' she analyses, the plot of *Siping Qingnian* is not really the point. Instead, it serves as a framework to knit together various forms of attractions: comedy sketches as the young rural men get into trouble around the city, fight scenes, cursing, and vulgar jokes. This structure also lends itself to an aesthetic of fragmentation which many industry profes-

sionals and academics have argued suit the different viewing conditions of internet movies and the wider internet culture to which internet movies must adapt. Yin Chao, founder and CEO of Taomeng Yingye (Tmeng Pictures), an early and successful distributor and producer of internet movies, including some of Zhang Hao's, suggests that these films are made to pass fragmented moments of time and produces them with the expectation that viewers will watch them on mobile devices.⁴¹ Leng Yixuan, in an academic overview of the development of internet movies, argues that internet films also rely on copying intellectual property (ceng IP) to overcome the fragmented environment of the internet by connecting to an already established narrative and style.⁴²

While *Siping Qingnian* does not reference any specific, established intellectual property, the film does engage with stock characters and rural stereotypes that might serve a similar purpose. Hao Ge is the clear leader of his group of friends and expects their loyalty in imitation of mafia or triad organisational structures (these friends are known as lao'er and lao san, denoting their second or third ranking within the group), which are more thoroughly expressed in the group led by Li Laoba, labeled as the head of Siping's heishili, or underworld forces, in on-screen text when first introduced. Zhang's inherently lower status is continually reinforced through comparison to the two other suitors vying for Lin Lin's affections – he lacks the power of violence Li Laoba has and the wealth Lan Baiwan has. Similarly, the three groups are spatially marked; Hao Ge is introduced exiting a cornfield with a woman who demands payment, presumably for sexual services that have just been provided. Hao Ge and his friends then travel by motorcycle through the cornfields, while the other two groups, those of Lan and Li, drive fancy cars and are introduced in Siping city, instead of the surrounding rural areas.

Reactions to the film may have pushed Zhang's work further online. The municipal government condemned the film as reflecting badly on Siping's image and asked the theatre to fire everyone involved.⁴³ Some internet commentators suggest that Zhang was then fired, forcing him into a career as an internet content creator, continuing to make internet movies as well as short comedy videos for Kuaishou and Douyin.⁴⁴ Recognising the film's episodic narrative structure that strings together a series of fight scenes and comedic sketches reveals an important aspect of Zhang's overall internet movie production – the openness and fluidity between the films and short form video content. The sequels to *Siping Qingnian* do not, for the most part, advance a larger overall narrative but instead offer new adventures for the familiar characters. Zhang almost always plays a character named Hao Ge, blurring lines between his real and fictional personas, in the

internet movies and short form videos alike.⁴⁵ At least one internet user was confused enough by this fluidity to ask if Zhang is really part of the criminal underworld.⁴⁶

Despite the movie's amateur origins and emphasis on attractions, *Siping Qingnian* more closely resembles a theatrical film in its length and overall structure than any of the short videos described by the authorities on early online video cited above. Hao Ge and his friends travel into the city of Siping from their rural hometown, and this classic setup of rural people navigating an unfamiliar urban environment offers a clear beginning, middle, and end to the story. Zhang's self-conscious embrace of the lower social status associated with rural people is ironised in the film's conclusion, which in turn comments on the status of *Siping Qingnian* in the hierarchy of cinema. At the end of the movie, Lao'er, who Hao Ge and Lao San thought got lost as soon as they reached the 'big' city of Siping, comes back to reveal he intentionally left the group to pursue Lin Lin himself and jokes: 'How could I get lost in a shitty place like Siping?' This twist subverts the trope of the rural bumpkin to poke fun at the pretensions of the Lan Baiwan and Li Laoba, dominant figures merely in a city of regional, let alone provincial or national, importance. Thus, the movie ultimately offers a certain ironic self-consciousness that acknowledges the status of both the characters and the internet movie itself. The internet as distributor and exhibitor poses a new kind of crisis for Chinese theatrical cinema. This crisis is not the competition provided by Hollywood's capital-rich resources and high production values, but instead the challenge posed by a localised, down-to-earth vernacular culture that understands its own inferior position, yet also strives to recognise and ridicule the forces that maintain that social position.

Big internet movies: Platform definition and regulation (2014-2019)

As described in the article's opening, in March 2014, iQiyi defined the production parameters for wangda to distinguish the form from earlier micro-films and encourage the development of content that more closely resembled theatrical releases. In 2018, Dou Lili, then general manager of iQiyi's internet movie development centre, described two motivations for

creating the wangda category: first, the platform noticed that hundreds of movies that pass theatrical censorship every year do not receive theatrical distribution; second, Dou characterises internet movies as a chance for young talent, like recent film school grads, to break into the film industry, given internet movies' smaller budgets and lower barriers to entry.⁴⁷ Both of these explanations connect the internet movie industry to the mainstream theatrical market, whether as a supplementary distribution and exhibition channel or as a training ground for future theatrical filmmakers.

Dou's suggestion that internet movies borrow legitimacy from the theatrical market should be understood within the context of negative cultural attitudes towards internet movies. From 2014 to 2016, internet movie output on iQiyi alone increased from 400 movies to over 2,000.⁴⁸ This expansion coincided with iQiyi's development of profit-sharing models that remunerated and incentivised internet movie production. The details of this model came to define the distinct characteristics of the form. During this period, internet movies submitted to iQiyi were graded based on quality, ranging from A-E, with compensation per 'effective view' ranging from 2.5 RMB to 50 cents RMB (from ~36 cents to ~6 cents USD).⁴⁹ An 'effective view' meant that a user continued watching past the six-minute mark. Thus, internet movies emphasised elements that kept viewers hooked past the six-minute mark – namely, the title, poster, and the opening scenes. The grading mechanism was meant to encourage consistent quality, and iQiyi made the data gathered on viewers, such as when they stopped watching, available to producers in order to allow them to improve their films' appeal.⁵⁰

This period of rapid growth coincided with Chinese critics deriding the form as parasitical on its theatrical counterpart. These critics lambasted internet movies for tricking unsuspecting streaming viewers with titles and poster images that closely resembled popular theatrical releases.⁵¹ What Leng saw as an adaptation to internet culture, i.e. the practice of internet movies piggybacking on blockbuster promotional campaigns and reminding viewers of a film they are already eager to see, was now understood as exploitative. Scholars Cao Juan and Zhang Peng connect this practice directly to the 'mockbusters' produced by US studios, like *The Asylum* during the Redbox rental era, which took advantage of confused customers.⁵² Very quickly, wangda became associated with low production values, low overall quality, and exploitation of the streaming distribution system to use violent and mildly sexual content that would not pass the censorship system for theatrical film to appeal to viewers. A successful internet movie director from the early period known as Professor Qin (Qin jiaoshou) describes making

internet movies during this period as wan bianqiu ('playing edge ball') – pushing limits without going too far.⁵³

Wangda's freedom to engage with mildly sexual content, violence, and the supernatural did not last for long. In the same November 2017 interview, Professor Qin claims to support the recent restrictions imposed by the platform, at the behest of the government, that required him to take the word 'zombie' (jiangshi) out of the title of the five-film internet movie series he began producing in 2015. Qin joked that of course he was unhappy to adhere to the new regulations, but he understood the necessity, as bad and immoral internet movies are being produced by less scrupulous filmmakers.⁵⁴

As Qin suggests, critical narratives about wangda emphasise the rapid expansion of production companies devoted to this category and the need to control this expansion. After particularly successful examples like *Daotu Chushan* (The Monk Who Comes out of the Mountain, 2015), which made ten times its budget, many other creators were attracted to wangda, hoping to make a quick buck. *Daotu Chushan* was itself a clear example of the theatrical imitation described above, since it was released a month before Chen Kaige's very similarly named *Daotu Xiashan* (Monk Who Comes Down the Mountain, 2015), adapted from a novel with the same title.⁵⁵ Critics and producers criticised not only the carelessness and parasitism of internet movie producers but also the lack of discernment of internet movie viewers, whom they felt were primarily poor, uneducated young men.⁵⁶

Perhaps in response to the increasingly negative view of wangda, Zhang gradually increased the production values of entries in the *Siping Qingnian* series and brought his films within the gamut of mainstream filmmaking. In 2015, an article published in official news outlets, including *People's Daily Online*, celebrated the success of *Erlonghaoge zhi Baokuang zhi Lu* (Second Dragon Lake Hao Ge's Fury Road), noting that its 150,000+ online views on the day of its release surpassed cinema attendance for any single film in the same period.⁵⁷ The article goes on to quote iQiyi and Tmeng professionals who worked on the movie. These professionals state that the improved production values of this film are a sign of internet movies' quality and their increasing proximity to theatrical releases.

This trend toward theatrical cinema style and production values continued when Zhang began a collaboration with Chen Weiqiang, an established screenwriter and first assistant director in the Hong Kong film industry. As co-directors, Zhang and Chen produced 2016's *Siping Qingniang zhi Haoge Dazhan Guhuozai* (Siping Youth's Hao Ge Versus Hong Kong Gangsters). The film repeats some familiar elements of the previous movies' narratives, for example centering on Hao Ge's encounters with an unfamiliar urban environment and criminal underworld. Hao Ge travels to Hong Kong and mistakenly acquires a totem of triad power, and the film opens with him positioned between the two triad bosses vying for the object. These bosses are played by well-known Hong Kong actors Kenneth Lo and Danny Lee, who appeared in the very triad films that Zhang's internet movie references – even its title, *guhuozai*, meaning hooligan or problem youth, is the Chinese title of the *Young and Dangerous* film series from the 1990s.

From an opening scene in Hong Kong, the film cuts to five days earlier, with Hao Ge in the familiar cornfields of his Northeastern rural hometown. The opening confrontation, serving as a hook or preview of the action to come to encourage internet users to commit to watching past the six-minute mark, returns in the conclusion of the film, in its correct chronological place in the narrative. The marked contrast between the dark, foggy urban streets of Hong Kong and the bright blue sky and green cornstalks of Second Lake Village metaphorically represents the transition the film itself is also making from the *Siping Qingnian* series' local origins and rural associations to the grand cinematic stage of the Hong Kong genre film. The film's success was short-lived, however. Less than a year after its release in June 2017, the entire *Siping Qingnian* film series was removed from streaming sites due to their depictions of crime.⁵⁸ Thus, this symbolic striving for a status equivalent to popular Hong Kong genre cinema and the overall potential of an internet movie industry with more creative freedom than theatrical cinema abruptly came to an end. Zhang continued making internet movies, but within the bounds of the new, stricter regulations imposed on the industry.

Internet movies as formalised, monopoly industry (2019-present)

In 2020, the China Film Association declared that the label ‘big internet movies’ should be shortened to simply ‘internet movies’ – a symbolic gesture that moves away from iQiyi’s industrial definition to one agreed upon by an official, non-commercial entity.⁵⁹ This semantic transition reflected an earlier shift away from platforms being in control of censorship to one in which state authorities are directly involved in censoring internet films. In 2019, the National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA, formerly known as SARFT) instituted a government-controlled permit system for internet content in place of the former two-step registry system (*liangci bei’an*) instituted in 2017, in which internet filmmakers submitted plans to a streaming service prior to production and submitted the film itself for approval.⁶⁰ In June 2022, the regulations were further tightened, placing all internet content under the same system and requiring the display of the permit at the beginning of the movie, series, or animation.⁶¹

The changes in state regulation were paralleled by a consolidation of production.

In a recent analysis, Wang Weijun, a vice bureau chief of marketing and management for Jiangsu’s broadcasting authorities, highlights eight production companies that together were responsible for 55-65% of the top twenty internet movies, in terms of profit-sharing earnings between 2020 and 2022.⁶² The most successful company Xin Pianchang earned about 291 million RMB or about \$40 million USD over that three-year period. On their website, the company highlighted the success of Zhang’s 2018 thirteen-episode series *Erlonghu Aiqing Gushi* (Second Dragon Lake Love Story) as the first internet series on Youku distributed under a profit-sharing model, as well as Zhang’s 2018 internet movie *Siping Qingnian zhi Diexue Mangu* (Siping Youth: Bloody Bangkok).⁶³ In Wang’s chart, two of Zhang Hao’s other films from that period contributed to the overall earnings of two other companies, Qi Shu You Yu and his longtime collaborator TMeng. Wang argues that these statistics reveal the beginning of a new oligopolistic industry that concentrates resources in a few companies. While the production quality of internet movies has undoubtedly increased, the barriers to enter the industry have also risen. The low barrier to entry was an important advantage of internet movies in its earlier periods, allowing young

filmmakers and those without access to large amounts of capital to participate in the industry and profit from their work. Young filmmakers are now channelled into development opportunities in which they produce work for the few production/distribution companies that dominate the industry.

Internet movies' relationships to established intellectual property have also changed. If *Siping Qingniang zhi Haoge Dazhan Guhuozai* offered a compelling contrast between Zhang Hao's comedic style and rural associations and the flashier world of Hong Kong genre cinema, recent years have witnessed an even closer relationship between the two worlds. Peng Kan and Chen Nannan cite internet movie production companies' acquisition of remake rights for classic Hong Kong genre films like *A Chinese Ghost Story* (Siu-Tung Ching, 1987), *Miracle Fighters* (Yuen Woo Ping, 1982), and *God of Gamblers* (Wong Jing, 1989) among others as a step forward in internet movie quality: 'By adapting movies from mature IP, the overall production standards, content quality, and box office returns of internet movies have all improved, and viewers' impression of internet movies as coarse is also changing.'⁶⁴ Zhang Hao participated in this trend in 2021 as director and star of *Xin Taoxue Weilong* (New Fight Back to School), a remake of Gordon Chan's 1991 film starring Stephen Chow. Internet commentators have compared Zhang's movies to Stephen Chow's from the beginning, but this remake formalises that connection.⁶⁵ Zhang's adaptation makes some significant changes to the original; the original, for example, takes place in Hong Kong, while Zhang's remake takes place in an unnamed part of Southeast Asia. Many important scenes are recreated, however, and the overall narrative structure remains. Unlike Zhang's 2016 Hong Kong collaboration, *New Fight Back to School* is currently available on iQiyi and does not suffer from similar censorship. Moving the film's action abroad within the narrative serves an institutional need to suggest such violence is not taking place in Mainland China, and the above-board recognition of the Hong Kong film studio's intellectual property seems to authorise a different relationship to the depiction of violence. This direct remake connection makes *New Fight Back to School* a legitimate genre movie and distances the movie from any reflection of Zhang's local, rural origins in the PRC.

Yet even in their most polished form, Zhang's internet movies maintain their playful, self-reflexive attitude towards filmmaking and the online culture in which they participate. In a scene from a 2020 internet movie

directed by Zhang Hao, *Siping Qingnian zhi Sanshazuitu* (Siping Youngsters: The Criminal Three), two robbers try to hold up a live streamer but find that he does not have any cash to steal. They then force him to livestream, as they have heard that live streamers can make a lot of money. Being at knife point impairs the streamer's performance ability, and eventually the robbers join in on the stream, singing, dancing, and chugging beer to encourage viewers to send virtual gifts. They get caught up in the performance, and one of the robbers carelessly allows the knife in his hand to appear on screen. In China, livestreaming is strictly regulated, and any display of a weapon or violence will result in the stream being cut off and the profits wiped out, as it is in the scene. Beyond being a relatively accurate depiction of livestreaming culture, this scene may also be read as metaphorical commentary on the internet movie industry and the positions in which creators find themselves. They are pushed by the profit-driven robbers, who stand in for the production and distribution companies that were quick to cash in on early internet movie success, and the nameless internet users also demand entertainment, like internet movie viewers. The scene's punchline – when the account is abruptly closed, and all the profits they danced, drank and begged for are lost – represents the forces of censorship and regulation that can suddenly change the rules and wipe out creators' hard work. The robbers reflect on the humiliating experience of begging for gifts, conclude that it is better that their friends did not witness it, and leave as the camera pans down to the streamer, who is left bloody, bruised, and bereft of his profitable streaming account. The comedy of the scene is rooted in its dark reflection on the futility of the efforts of the streamer, the robbers, and the viewers alike, who are all ultimately subject to strict rules to be enforced without warning, in the same way that Zhang and other creators must adapt to the rapidly changing rules of internet movie production.

Conclusion

Chinese academics and critics tend to narrate the history of internet movies as one of triumph, of a successful fostering of a new, profitable industry, and one that as Peng and Chan argue will work in harmony with theatrical cinema to make China a 'dianying qianguo' or a 'strong cinemat-

ic nation'.⁶⁶ Certainly, the production values of internet movies have improved and a few talented creators, like Zhang Hao, have been able to continue working in the field despite a lack of formal cinematic training. Yet, much has also been lost in the process of formalising and institutionalising the internet movie industry. What Luzhou Li describes as 'cultural zoning' contributed to the Chinese internet's particular characteristics during its early development. Rampant piracy on early video sharing websites meant full-length professionally-produced content from around the world shared space with user-generated content to a greater extent than was possible on YouTube. Internet movies, in their early no-to-low budget phase, represented a kind of continuation of that connection, opening up space for a form of cinema native to the internet and taking on a position vis-à-vis theatrical cinema not unlike classic exploitation films.⁶⁷ Like classic exploitation films, internet movies filled in the gaps left by the mainstream industry and provided a different kind of creative outlet.

As commercial and government forces worked to 'improve' the internet movie industry, the potential of internet movies as an outlet for vernacular creativity was lost. Like the low cultural texts they enjoyed, internet movie viewers were presumed to be of low social status, and the capitalist logic of production companies and streaming platforms demanded that filmmakers appeal to a more affluent market segment through improved production values. Furthermore, government oversight means that few early internet movies are still available legally in Mainland China. The disparagement and elimination of low cultural texts damages the potential for historical reappraisal and appreciation of these movies as cultural documents. As Jeffrey Sconce argues about paracinematic approaches to all kinds of 'bad movies', the 'attention to excess, an excess that often manifests itself in a film's failure to conform to historically delimited codes of verisimilitude, calls attention to the text as a cultural and sociological document and thus dissolves the boundaries of the diegesis into profilmic and extratextual realms'.⁶⁸ It is this redirection to the profilmic and the conditions of production that early internet movies invite, because of their technical faults, reliance on location shooting, and lack of elaborate staging. And it is this window into profilmic reality that internet movies no longer provide.

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Notes

¹ Gaudreault & Marion 2020, pp. 77, 79.

² Cuelenaere 2024, pp. 2-3.

³ Meir 2023.

⁴ iQiyi chairman Li Yansong, as quoted in Jiang 2016, p. 7.

⁵ Wang 2023, p. 75.

⁶ Lobato 2019, p. 130. Lobato notes that China was the most significant country missing from Netflix's global reach as of 2016.

⁷ Lobato 2019; Lotz 2017.

⁸ Uricchio 2009, p. 26.

⁹ Burroughs 2018, pp. 3, 5.

¹⁰ Wang & Lobato 2019, p. 366.

¹¹ Li 2019, p. 175.

¹² Zhao 2016, pp. 5450-5453.

¹³ Zhao 2019, p. 67.

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 70-71.

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 74-79.

¹⁶ Su 2023, p. 174.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 182.

¹⁸ Benson-Allott 2013, p. 16.

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 6-7.

²⁰ For an analysis of the effectiveness of the Great Firewall, see Zhang 2020.

²¹ Kokas 2018, p. 409.

²² Ibid.

²³ Zhao 2016, p. 5447.

²⁴ Schneider 2022.

- ²⁵ Connor 2018, p. 7.
- ²⁶ Hagener 2020, pp. 183-185.
- ²⁷ Ibid., pp. 177-179. Maoyan provides data specifically on Chinese internet movies as a separate category.
- ²⁸ de Kloet & Poell & Zeng & Chow 2019, p. 250.
- ²⁹ Bartlett 2020; Sconce 1995.
- ³⁰ Zhao 2014, p. 454.
- ³¹ Chen 2011.
- ³² <https://www.art.pku.edu.cn/szdw/qzjs/ysglx/cy/index.htm> (accessed on 12 July 2024)
- ³³ Chen 2011, p. 140.
- ³⁴ Ibid., pp. 140-142.
- ³⁵ Voci 2010, pp. 77-104.
- ³⁶ Ibid., p. 102.
- ³⁷ Gong & Yang 2010, p. 4.
- ³⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hww2Z5cGirU> (accessed on 12 July 2024)
- ³⁹ Ma 2019, pp. 83-84.
- ⁴⁰ Yang 2012.
- ⁴¹ Yang 2018, p. 24.
- ⁴² Leng 2023, p. 66.
- ⁴³ Nanfengchuang (South Reviews Magazine) Weibo post, as reprinted in A View of Labour Unions, No. 12, 2012: 49.
- ⁴⁴ <https://zhidao.baidu.com/question/1963177086025697300.html> (accessed on 12 July 2024)
- ⁴⁵ To avoid confusion, I will use Zhang when referring to Zhang Hao as a filmmaker and Hao Ge when discussing his performances in the movies.
- ⁴⁶ <https://zhidao.baidu.com/question/1963177086025697300.html> (accessed on 12 July 2024)
- ⁴⁷ Wu 2018, p. 23.
- ⁴⁸ Cao & Zhang 2017, p. 132.
- ⁴⁹ Hersey & Shen 2018.
- ⁵⁰ Ibid.
- ⁵¹ Xu 2016.
- ⁵² Cao & Zhang 2017, p. 132; Fritz 2012.
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⁵⁷ People's Daily Online.

⁵⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hwy2Z5cGirU> (accessed on 12 July 2024)

⁵⁹ Wang 2023, p. 70.

⁶⁰ Yang 2019, p. 117.

⁶¹ Wang 2023, p. 75.

⁶² Ibid., pp. 72-73.

⁶³ <https://film.xinpianchang.com/> (accessed 15 October 2024)

⁶⁴ Peng & Chen 2022, p. 7. Translation is my own.

⁶⁵ Yang 2012.

⁶⁶ Peng & Chen 2022, p. 6.

⁶⁷ Schaefer 1999, pp. 3-4.

⁶⁸ Sconce 1995, p. 387.