



Are Film Festivals a Last Resort? Chinese Audiences' Attitudes towards Slow Cinema

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to examine Chinese audiences' perceptions and evaluations of the particular genre of slow cinema. The genre of slow cinema, which is outside the mainstream of commercial cinema, has been the subject of constant controversy regarding its aesthetic characteristics. However, the field of research on audience attitudes is relatively empty. Through the research in this essay, an attempt is made to summarise and discuss the attitudes of Chinese audiences towards slow cinema in some way. By using Chinese director Jia Zhangke's *The World* and *Mountains May Depart* from the Mountain River as examples, the study analyses why audiences' attitudes towards slow cinema vary greatly in relation to its aesthetic characteristics and its performance in film festivals. Through this study, it was found that slow films with their unique slow aesthetic characteristics bore audiences in a fast-paced society. This classical film aesthetic, despite its high value in terms of cinematic art, is not easily accepted by audiences who prefer mainstream commercial blockbusters.

Keywords

Slow Cinema, Jia Zhangke, Chinese Audience, Film Festival, Popular Culture

1. Introduction

This article discusses why slow cinema, a highly controversial and vaguely defined genre, is favoured at film festivals but not popular with Chinese audiences. It presents an analysis of the negative attitude of Chinese audiences towards slow cinema from the perspectives of audience psychology and marketing as well as by examining the slow cinema genre itself, and explores ways in which slow cinema can become more relevant to popular culture and aesthetics. Slow cinema has always wandered outside the commercial cinematic mainstream. Although the genre has no single, clear definition, the styles of directors such as Yasujiro Ozu, Tsai Mingliang and Jia Zhangke have led scholars to characterize slow cinema as an essential element of the East Asian film aesthetics (Chesney, 2013). However, relatively little research has been conducted into audience reception of slow cinema. Slow cinema has long been associated with art cinema, which often presents audiences with a slow and tedious viewing experience replete with its creators' very serious views and attitudes. Even though slow films have won many awards at international festivals, Chinese audiences are put off by slow cinema's unconventional style lacking typical features of entertainment. They rarely watch such films, preferring Hollywood blockbusters and the melodramatic films that have lately become so popular in China. At the same time, a minority group that is mainly interested in the art film experience are avid fans of slow cinema. This study will use Jia Zhangke's films *The World* (Jia Zhangke, 2004, CN/FR/JP) and *Mountains May Depart* (Jia Zhangke, 2015, CN/FR/JP) as examples to analyse Chinese audience attitudes towards slow cinema using box office figures, cinema reviews and accounts of the creation of the films themselves. It will also explore the development of slow cinema in terms of its popular cultural attributes by examining the slow cinema films that have won international awards in the last decade.

Most of Jia Zhangke's films are associated with art cinema, despite winning many international film festival awards, the director has been unsuccessful in his attempts to secure commercial theatrical distribution and a significant box office income in China. Jia Zhangke's style is typified by the use of long documentary-style takes and slow pacing to tell the story of the disorientation of the underclass in the context of Chinese urbanisation. This runs counter to the trend that followed Zhang Yimou's martial arts film *Hero* (Zhang Yimou, 2002, CN), which kicked off a string of Chinese commercial blockbusters. In addition, Jia Zhangke's films present subject matter that has often conflicted with the policies of the China Film Administration, which prevented several of his films from being released in Chinese commercial cinemas. This has resulted in Jia's films being labelled as 'niche' for Chinese audiences. The historical heritage of Chinese culture and the current social development have led Chinese audiences to prefer martial arts films, court-based costume drama, war films and melodrama. Additionally, slow films are seen as a rebellion against the fast pace of the information age (Çağlayan, 2014).

2. Slow cinema's departure from popular culture

As a product of popular entertainment, cinema has been endowed with popular cultural attributes from its inception. According to Meers (2001), sociologists believe that cinema-going is more of a social activity; therefore, the film's quality does not influence the audience's decision to go to the cinema. Most commercial cinema audiences are family-based, with couples and friends as the main social group, and most attend movies on weekends and holidays. Recent box office statistics from China reveal that China's national holidays (Spring Festival and National Day) produce a small peak in box office revenue and attendance. For example, the top four films at the Chinese box office in 2021, *The Battle at Lake Changjin* (Chen Kaige et al., 2021, CN), *Hi, Mom* (Jia Ling, 2021, CN), *Detective Chinatown 3* (Chen Sicheng, 2021, CN) and *My Country, My Parents* (Shen Teng et al., 2021, CN), all released during these two holidays, took in a total of 17.176 billion RMB, accounting for 36.54% of the Chinese box office for the whole of 2021 (Maoyan Pro, 2023). These films are mainly comedies and melodramas. Their grand narratives and tense scenes exemplify the commercial cinema that is popular with mainstream Chinese audiences. In addition, the production and narrative modes of recent high-earning Chinese commercial films are more oriented towards Hollywood style. *The Wandering Earth* (Frant Gwo, 2019, CN) opened the door to hard science fiction films in China, while the *Wolf Warrior* and the *Detective Chinatown* focus more on series concept. These films were all high-investment blockbusters.

These films adopt a very different style from that of the Chinese art film creators represented by Jia Zhangke. Elsaesser (2011) argues that slow cinema, through prolonged takes, minimal images and attention to detail, can highlight a hesitant gesture that counteracts physical movement to represent the narrative. As an aesthetic practice, slow cinema provides a contemplative or reflective viewing experience, emphasising the continuation of screen time to cultivate hardly to understand narrative mode (Çağlayan, 2014). This highly artistic and reflective notion of serious cinema is undesirable for Chinese audiences enjoying their holidays. This contemplation of life and society may not suit the cheerful mood of audiences who otherwise go to the cinema to socialise.

Jia Zhangke's realistic documentary style, with its simple scenes, unconventional narrative logic and non-professional actors, has been firmly established since *Xiao Wu* (Jia Zhangke, 1997, CN/HK). Adopting a neo-realist Italian cinematic style, Jia Zhangke incorporates a slow visual pace to encourage the audience to think about the problems of China's fast-developing market economy. In *The World*, Jia Zhangke explores the marginalised nature of women as commodities in a capitalised society. The so-called 'world' made up of the 'Eiffel Tower' and the 'Egyptian pyramids' in the World Park is a miserable shackle from which a host of people from the lower classes cannot escape. Instead, the prosperity of the metropolis and the flood of globalised development has made these people poorer. The numerous sexual references in the film also reveal the helplessness of these ordinary women in the face of capital. Szeto (2009) argues that the commercialised culture of these conformist times has seen the emergence of a predominantly male socio-economic force that consumes women's bodies through sexuality. In addition, the slow pace exposes the audience more harshly to a reality that they may not want to face, going against the mass entertainment attributes of cinema.

Mountains May Depart is another film that portrays the gap between rich and poor during China's transition from a planned economy to a market economy. Although the film spans three different eras in a story that involves friendship, love and affection, the style of the film and the cast confirm that it is still an anti-commercial product that encourages reflection and edification. *Mountains May Depart* took in 32.21 million RMB at the box office in 2015. Although this represented the highest earnings to date for a Jia Zhangke film, it ranked only 128th on the

Chinese box office chart that year, and was a far cry from the 2.434 billion taken by the 2015 Chinese box office champion, *Monster Hunt* (Raman Hui, 2015, CN/HK; Maoyan Pro, 2023). The film's opening long takes of the crowd dancing set the slow, nostalgic tone. Rather than making his films more artistic, Jia Zhangke's criticism of society and rebellion against entertainment make his films less approachable. However, beyond the potentially boring slow pace, audience bias also helps explain the relatively 'niche' status of films shot in the slow cinema style.

3. The slow film audience

Although Jia Zhangke's films have yet to be recognised by a broad audience, *The World*, and *Mountains May Depart* have still gained a loyal fan base. On Douban, China's most recognised review site (2023), *The World* received a rating of 7.5 (out of 10), which, although lower than the 8.8 earned by 2004's box office champion *Kung Fu Hustle* (Stephen Chow, 2004, HK/CN/US), was still higher than second-place *House of Flying Daggers* (Zhang Yimou, 2004, CN/HK), which earned only 6.4. However, *Mountains May Depart* gained an audience score of 8.1, better than both of 2015's top-grossing Chinese films *Monster Hunt* (6.7) and *Lost in Hong Kong* (5.7; Xu Zheng, 2015, CN/HK). This also demonstrates that although it is difficult for slow movies to achieve higher box office and viewership figures, the audience is more loyal. Unlike other film audiences, the audience segment that watches slow film does not come to cinemas for social purposes or because they are fans of the actors in those films, but because they love cinema. Because Jia Zhangke's films have never featured famous stars, audiences are more interested in Jia Zhangke's attitude towards society and art, or the exploration of the story itself. Cohen (1999, p. 138) argues that there is a distinction between 'high' and 'low' audiences. The former are the more educated elites who have a wider acceptance of the unique art form of slow cinema. Chuu (2009, p. 224) suggests that:

Art film audiences tend to believe that movies possess an essential value which can enrich both their minds and spirits. For this audience, movies are a form of art. To the contrary, commercial film audiences are more likely to perceive movies as a form of entertainment, which provides a good past-time to enjoy with one's friends.

The defining feature of slow cinema is the rejection of kinetic editing in favour of long takes (Jarvis, 2020). This slow and static presentation of mundane images of everyday life can be anxiety-provoking for the average audience. In China's 'fast food culture', the pursuit of sensory stimulation is more appealing than watching slow and edifying serious films. Those receptive to slow cinema culture usually have more patience and love for cinema than the average audience. They can focus their attention on slow images and try to understand the intentions of the creators.

Furthermore, according to box office data from Maoyan Pro (2023), audiences for Jia Zhangke's films are mainly concentrated in first-tier and second-tier cities in China. In the case of *Mountains May Depart*, for example, daily box office receipts in both Tier 1 and Tier 2 cities accounted for more than 75% of the day's total box office receipts, and were concentrated in China's four Tier 1 cities - Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen. By comparison, in the case of Chinese domestic commercial film box office champion *The Battle at Lake Changjin*, audiences were mainly concentrated in Tier 2 and Tier 4 cities, and daily box office receipts in Tier 1 and Tier 2 cities were only slightly higher than those in the lower tiers. Although these figures lack a longitudinal comparison of screen numbers, cinema scheduling and distribution strategies, it is clear from Chinese films with distinctive slow cinema characteristics, such as *Kaili Blues* (Bi Gan, 2015, CN), *Song of the Phoenix* (Wu Tianming, 2013, CN) and *The Summer Is Gone* (Zhang Dalei, 2016, CN) that more than 3/4 of the slow cinema audience is concentrated in China's larger cities and developed regions. Flanagan (2012) believes that slow cinema subverts the classic narrative logic and focuses more on depth of content. Although these more enthusiastic viewers of slow cinema do not necessarily have the emotional resonance of its narrative dimension, they are more eager to think.

In addition, avid fans of slow cinema are predominantly young, well-educated urbanites. Braester (2012) argues that in the face of an emerging consumerist society, young people are leading independent and distant lives, more open to exploring avant-garde art and pursuing their rights and sexual freedom. In the decades following China's reform and opening up, young people became increasingly rebellious as they were exposed to the more open-minded artistic influences of the West. Their rebelliousness has led them to deliberately avoid commercial blockbusters in favour of more daring and innovative films, and even to watch art films banned by the government through illegal channels. The large-scale sexual or violent scenes and dark satire on social problems in the films they prefer have earned these young people the title of 'literary youth'. This title has confused them even more in

this economically fast-moving online society and has shown a specific pathological expression. They watch slow films not out of love, but with a sense of vengeance against the dominant culture. Perhaps ironically, the settings of Jia Zhangke's films primarily take place in Tier 3 or Tier 4 cities, and the characters are mostly people from the lower strata of society, but they do not resonate with real-life people from the lower strata.

4. Festival preference for slow cinema

Despite the relatively negative attitude of the general public towards slow cinema as reflected by its unsatisfactory performance in commercial theatres, the artistic value of slow cinema is well recognised at film festivals, which are 'important sites for the consecration of art films' (De Valck, 2014, p. 41). According to Chesney (2013), cinema is about entertaining the public and changing lives by delivering realistic messages about the world. In terms of subject matter, realistic films that reflect on social issues and explore topics of human good and evil are more thought-provoking. Stylistically, festivals favour unique audio-visual language and new technologies that push the boundaries of cinema. Slow cinema's severe and profound attitude to both subject matter and style has led to many slow cinema films winning festival awards. Yasujiro Ozu's *Tokyo Story* (Yasujiro Ozu, 1953, JP) is one of the most iconic slow films. Although it did not win any significant European film festival awards at the time, in 2012, *Tokyo Story* was awarded the number one spot in *Sight & Sound* magazine's list of the ten greatest films of all time. Another representative of slow cinema, Ming-liang Tsai's *Vive L'Amour* (Ming-liang Tsai, 1994, TW), won the Golden Lion Award at the 51st Venice International Film Festival in 1994 and the Best Film at the 31st Golden Horse Awards in the same year.

Jia Zhangke has also won many film festival awards in his twenty years as a filmmaker (Jin Liu, 2006). *The World* was selected for the 61st Venice International Film Festival and was named one of the top ten films of 2005 by the French magazine *Cahiers du cinéma*. *Mountains May Depart* was nominated Best Film for the 68th Cannes International Film Festival and won the Best Original Screenplay at the 52nd Golden Horse Awards. Prestigious international film festivals like Cannes, Venice and Berlin bring prestige to their participants and winners, and this recognition fully reflects the cultural value of cinema (Baumann, 2001, De Valck, 2007). Unfortunately, however, slow films may rarely be screened outside of festivals, as their slow pace and long duration run counter to the expectations of mainstream cinema, resulting in no commercial value (De Luca, 2016).

If film festivals are the last 'sanctuary' for slow cinema, this single model makes the development of slow cinema look tough to survive. Art cinema first achieved film festival success in Europe, where many high-profile festivals are currently held. While some Chinese art film directors such as Jia Zhangke have won significant awards in Europe, they have faced the embarrassment of being banned, denied theatrical release and criticised by audiences in China. Some audiences even believe that these art film directors bring the ugly and dark side of China to Europe to please Western audiences and get awards to increase their popularity. This may explain why it is so difficult for these Chinese art film directors to win awards at official Chinese film festivals, such as the China Golden Rooster and Hundred Flowers Film Festival, organised by the China Federation of Literary and Art Circles (CFLAC) and the China Film Association. This geopolitical interference also dramatically affects the widespread recognition of art films, represented by slow cinema, among Chinese audiences. Therefore, when Chinese director Chloé Zhao won the Golden Lion Award at the 77th Venice International Film Festival and the Best Film and Best Director at the 93rd Academy Awards for *Nomadland* (Chloé Zhao, 2020, US), there was very little coverage in the Chinese mainstream media, and *Nomadland* has not yet been released in Chinese cinemas. Because the official media attitude largely determines the Chinese audience's perspective, except for a minority of viewers who are passionate about art cinema, the audience does not tend to care which director's film has won what award. The lack of attention means that Chinese art films struggle to receive commercial or government investment.

De Valck (2014) notes that cinema does not exist only in the cultural sphere. Commercial activities are indispensable for producing and distributing films, and many festivals currently offer commercial support opportunities. In China, the FIRST International Film Festival's Financing Forum provides financial support for young art film directors. Jia Zhangke's PYIFF Project Promotion, which supports art films, also actively seeks investors and promotional channels for these young, fledgling directors. Several young Chinese filmmakers who have embraced the slow cinema style have made films that have gone on to international fame, such as *Mirrors and Feathers* (Cai Chengjie, 2017, CN), *The Coffin in the Mountain* (Xin Yukun, 2014, CN) and *The Summer Is Gone*, but even after receiving funding from the festival, they have still not been able to reach mainstream audiences.

5. Conclusion

In summary, the attitude of Chinese film audiences towards slow cinema depends on the geopolitical and cultural climate. For various reasons, it is difficult for this art form, which is excluded from mainstream culture, to gain audience attention. From another perspective, this mainstream cultural environment cultivates an aesthetic sense that may make it difficult for slow films to attract and hold an audience. The slow cinema style itself is also at odds with the development of mainstream cinema. At this stage of rapid urbanisation in China where the pursuit of sensory stimulation, rich narratives and entertainment are paramount, slow contemplation and disclosure of reality are seen as more depressing by Chinese audiences. They need 'fast-food' cultural entertainment to relieve their mental stress, and slow cinema burdens them. Chinese art film creators, however, are exploring new forms of slow cinema. Jia Zhangke's *Ash Is Purest White* (Jia Zhangke, 2018, CN/FR/JP) adds genre elements, incorporating gangsters and their rivalries into the story's logic. Bi Gan's *Long Day's Journey into Night* (Bi Gan, 2018, CN/FR) starred Tang Wei in its leading role, and her fame helped it to earn RMB 282 million at the box office. Langkjær (2011) proposes a concept of serious cinema, situated between genre cinema and art cinema, which, like slow cinema, may not adhere to the genre standards of classic cinema, but can nonetheless engage the audience with a close narrative. Simplifying the subject matter and reducing the formal expression of the film without abandoning its profound meaning and complexity is perhaps the main endeavour of many art film directors (Stelmach, 2016).

In addition, China needs to establish a comprehensive system of cinematic art, including the entry of domestic films into international film festivals. The establishment of the Nationwide Alliance of Arthouse Cinemas (NAAC) also signalled the importance that China has attached to art cinema (Purzycki, 2022). This has allowed films of high artistic merit that would not have been released in commercial cinemas to be presented to wider audiences. The number of screens in art cinemas has spread rapidly to Tier 3 and Tier 4 cities, with greater audiences beginning to pay attention to the products of the slow film movement. Moreover, while the internet age presents new challenges to the traditional mode of cinema screening, this is a unique opportunity for slow cinema. The internet's low publicity costs and more comprehensive screening options, coupled with big data's accurate demographics targeting, may allow slow cinema to gain more attention. Film festivals need not be the only way for slow films to find their audiences. However, the stubbornly slow style has become a stumbling block for the entry of slow film into mainstream cinema.

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