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Cinema: Diversity gives vibrancy to industry

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Despite the decline, construction of cinema facilities surged ahead. A total of 4,658 new screens were installed in 2024, catapulting the country's total to 90,968, the highest amount in the world. Domestic films maintained their market dominance, earning 33.4 billion yuan and accounting for 78.68 percent of total box office revenue for the year.

"China has remained one of the most active film markets in the world, but the domestic film industry is at a turning point," said Yin Hong, deputy chairman of the China Film Association, while emphasizing the need for local filmmakers to step up their efforts, be persistent in innovation, and pursue breakthroughs when facing challenges.

The primary factors influencing the film industry include the limited output of captivating films and young people's growing preference for short videos, industry insiders said.

Last year, the market size of micro dramas, short low-budget productions, surged to 50.44 billion yuan, marking a 34.9 percent year-on-year increase and surpassing the annual box office revenue of the film industry for the first time, according to the China Netcasting Services Association.

Yin said regaining audiences, especially the younger generation, and reigniting their enthusiasm for big screen films, is an urgent goal for cinema operators and filmmakers.

Domestic blockbusters

Chinese filmmakers produced 873 films last year, with the vast majority, 612 of them, dramas.

Seventy-nine Chinese and foreign movies each achieved box office earnings exceeding 100 million yuan, the bench mark for blockbusters. The figure was six more than in 2023.

Comedian Jia Ling's tale of boxing redemption *YOLO* was the highest-grossing film, amassing 3.4 billion yuan. Starring in and directed by Jia, the film follows an overweight woman's journey to regain self-confidence through boxing after being looked down on by her employer, boyfriend, and relatives.

As one of the country's most sought-after comedians, Shen Teng saw his two films *Pegasus 2* and *Successor*, secure the second and third spots in box office takings.

Pegasus 2, which tells the story of struggling rally driver's underdog victory, earned 3.36 billion yuan, while *Successor,* an unconventional parenting journey of a wealthy man, netted 3.33 billion yuan.

Renowned director Zhang Yimou's *Article 20*, which raised public awareness about justifiable defense, was the fourth highest-grossing film. The 10th installment of the beloved animated franchise, *Boonie Bears: Time Twist*, grabbed fifth position with earnings of 1.98 billion yuan.

They were followed by three Chinese films: the crime thriller *A Place Called Silence*, the war epic *The Volunteers: The Battle of Life and Death*, and the workplace comedy *Johnny Keep Walking!*.

Unlike 2023, where all 10 of the highest-earning films were Chinese titles, two imported blockbusters secured spots in the top 10 list. *Godzilla × Kong: The New Empire* took ninth position, while Japanese animation legend Hayao Miyazaki's *The Boy and the Heron*, which won an Oscar winner for Best Animated Feature Film, claimed the 10th spot.

Overall, imported films experienced a resurgence in China. Their box office revenue accounted for 21.3 percent of total earnings, and was the highest share by foreign films in five years. Hollywood scored commercial success with space thriller *Alien: Romulus*, superhero film *Venom: The Last Dance*, the Marvel action-comedy *Deadpool & Wolverine*, and the sci-fi epic *Dune: Part Two*.

Rao Shuguang, president of the China Film Critics Association, said the resurgence of interest in imported films was a good sign. A potential future increase of foreign films' revenue share to 30 to 40 percent of takings will enhance the diversity and dynamics of the local movie market, he added.

"Foreign films' storytelling skills, visual effects techniques, and successful formulas can serve as references for Chinese films, while also catering to the diverse demands of audiences of different ages and backgrounds," Rao said.

Innovative success

Traditionally, cinemas have been viewed as tranquil spaces where viewers are expected to remain quiet, enabling audience members to fully immerse themselves in the story unfolding on the screen. However, industry players are exploring innovations that go beyond this convention.

During the 2024 Paris Olympics, over 800 cinemas nationwide were selected to livestream the Games from a pool of 10,000. The participating venues had over 2,300 screenings that attracted 55,000 visitors and earned 2.4 million yuan in box office revenue, according to China Film Co, the organizer.

Yu Xiaoyan, a 34-year-old sports fan from Beijing, recalled seeing the thrilling moment when Zheng Qinwen secured China's first Olympic gold medal in tennis singles by defeating Croatia's Donna Vekic. Yu found it exhilarating to shout and cheer for her favorite athlete in the cinema, while experiencing an enhanced visual experience.

In 2024, some local cinemas also functioned as venues where fans could revisit iconic performances by their idols.

Similar to the concert film *Taylor Swift: The Eras Tour*, the *Jason Zhang Brilliance Tour* captured three concerts by the popular singer at the Beijing National Stadium, in 159 minutes of screen time. The concerts were part of Zhang's *The Future Live: Yao Beidou* tour, which spanned two years and included 23 shows in 13 cities, and attracted a combined audience of over 900,000.

The film grossed over 46 million yuan at the box office, according to Beacon, breaking several box office records for domestic musicals.

Zhi Feina, a professor at the Chinese National Academy of Arts, said that such innovations have energized the film market and attracted more young audiences to cinemas.

She cited other innovations, such as director Jia Zhangke's *Caught by the Tides*, which received a Palme d'Or nomination at the 77th Cannes Film Festival last year. The film employed a striking and ceremonial approach to hold theatrical screenings in just 22 days, symbolizing the 22-year production process behind it. Normally, a film is screened in theaters for a month.

"In the relatively less busy box office seasons, the market can also re-screen classics to attract a larger audience," Zhi said. "For instance, the eight films of the *Harry Potter* franchise were re-screened in 3,400 cinemas last year, also achieving box office success."

Word-of-mouth winners

Women comprised 58 percent of all moviegoers last year, an 11 percent increase from the proportion in 2023. This gender shift in viewership has set the stage for a rise in films focused on women and delving into feminist themes, as indicated in a report co-released by the China Film Association and Beacon.

As the most successful films in this category, *Her Story* was director Shao Yihui's second feature depicting independent women in modern society. It received a score of 9.1 points out of 10 on the review aggregator Douban, making it one of the highest-rated Chinese films of the year.

Centered around three unconventional female characters, the film boldly delves into women's perspectives on sex, and confronts societal taboos surrounding menstruation with a light and humorous approach.

A dark horse in cinema earnings, the film topped China's single-day box office charts for 24 consecutive days. With earnings of 715 million yuan, it became the highest-grossing film in November, surpassing British director Ridley Scott's sword-and-sandal epic *Gladiator II*, and Disney's animated film *Moana 2*.

Other women-centric films garnering acclaim through word-of-mouth included *Like a Rolling Stone*, based on the true story of a woman in her 50s who courageously leaves her abusive husband to embark on a cross-country road trip, and *Chinatown Cha-Cha*, a documentary that follows a group of senior dancers from San Francisco's Chinese nightclub scene.

"As these acclaimed films by female directors depicting women's issues emerge, the plights and struggles of women can be seen by more people, giving the movies a richer social significance," said Zhi.

Scoring 9.3 points on Douban, the highest rating among all Chinese films this year, *The Sinking of the Lisbon Maru* stands out as the most popular documentary of 2024. Directed by Fang Li over an eight-year period, the film chronicles his investigations into a tragic incident during World War II — the sinking of a Japanese ship carrying 1,816 British prisoners of war, which was torpedoed by a United States submarine in 1942.

The film won the Best Documentary at the 37th Golden Rooster Awards and was selected as China's entry to compete in the Best International Feature Film category at the 97th Academy Awards.

Rao, from the China Film Critics Association, said the film is inspirational, showcasing that an excellent documentary is not only a window to revisit history or observe contemporary life, but can also play a pivotal role in boosting the diversity of the domestic film market.

"During the post-pandemic era, the market is confronted with a generation of young audiences who are more accustomed to consuming video content on the internet. Chinese filmmakers should refine their storytelling skills and elevate their artistic creations to produce higher-quality work. I believe that Chinese cinema has a promising future with new talent," said Rao.



A promotional event for *YOLO* is held in Xiangyang, Hubei province, on Feb 15. YANG DONG / FOR CHINA DAILY





Top: A poster of *Her Story* at a cinema in Shanghai in December. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY
Above: Visitors engage in a discussion at the China-Brazil Film Exhibition in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, on Aug 26. WANG TIANCONG / XINHUA

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Left: Local audience attend the opening of the 4th Chinese Movie Week in Tehran, Iran, on Sept 23. SHADATI / XINHUA
Right: Chinese and foreign filmmakers and actors attend an exchange seminar during the Cannes Film Festival in France in May. ZHANG BAIHUI / XINHUA



An audience member reads the brochure for a Chinese film during China Film Week in Canberra, Australia, on Sept 11. CHU CHEN / XINHUA