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Narrative, Identity and Communication: The Construction Status and Optimization Path of "Chinese Story" in Online Movies

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ABSTRACT

As an important form of online art, online films bear significant responsibilities and missions in promoting the main melody and inspiring positive energy. Given the young demographic of online film audiences, telling stories that align with the main melody, conveying the values of truth, goodness, and beauty, and inspiring positive energy among young audiences while guiding them to enhance their moral judgment and sense of honour are inherent requirements for online films to strengthen their positive orientation. Although the box office revenue of online films has been growing year by year, and an increasing number of films have achieved both box office success and critical acclaim, the overall quality of online films still needs improvement, and their ability to tell Chinese stories effectively remains underdeveloped. Based on an analysis of the current state and issues surrounding online films in telling Chinese stories, this paper proposes three pathways for online films to effectively tell Chinese stories.

INTRODUCTION

With the rapid advancement of the internet and information technology, China's film industry has displayed a wide array of development levels and structural complexities. The integration of internet technology and new media has not only transformed artistic forms of expression but also given rise to numerous innovative genres, sparking significant shifts in both artistic concepts and practices. Online films, as a distinct category, contrast with traditional theatrical films. They represent a new mode of film consumption enabled by the rapid growth of the internet. These films are characterized by relatively low production costs, a runtime exceeding 60 minutes, high production values, a complete narrative

structure, and adherence to national policies and regulations, with primary distribution through mobile and online platforms (Ulin, J, C, 2019). In 2014, China's video streaming platform iQiyi introduced the concept of online feature films and set industry standards for this new genre. In 2019, the China Online Film Industry Committee, in collaboration with major platforms such as iQiyi, Youku, and Tencent, issued an industry initiative that further clarified and standardized the definition of online films. Since then, online films have exhibited a trend of structured growth within the mainland Chinese market.

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FROM THE MARGINS TO THE MAINSTREAM: RESHAPING THE VALUE OF CHINESE NARRATIVES IN ONLINE FILMS

Since iQiyi introduced its online feature film initiative in 2014, online films have undergone years of evolution, becoming a complementary sector to traditional theatrical films in both content and genre. Over time, they have developed into an industry ecosystem with distinct characteristics. In their early stages, online films experienced rapid growth in quantity, with a focus on short, fast, and efficient production methods aimed at maximizing returns in the shortest time possible. This approach led to widespread issues such as homogenization and imitation. In terms of management, the relatively lax review environment at the time resulted in a surge of low-quality, poorly produced films flooding the market. Since 2018, however, influenced by relevant policies, the number of new online films released in China has steadily declined year on year. Yet, in terms of both film quality and audience preferences, there has been a marked improvement compared to previous years. According to data from the Beacon Professional Edition, *The Grey Men* topped the 2024 online film box office chart, earning 37.671 million yuan in revenue. It is foreseeable that the development of online films will continue to become increasingly standardized, with their revenue and quality advancing toward more sustainable, high-quality growth.

As a significant form of expression within network literature and the arts, online film holds an important responsibility in promoting key themes and fostering positive energy (Chen, S, & Lunt, P, 2021). Given the young demographic of online film audiences, it is essential for these films to tell stories that highlight core values—such as truth, goodness, and beauty—while inspiring positive energy. This process also aims to guide young viewers in enhancing their moral judgment and cultivating a sense of honor. Strengthening the positive orientation of online films in this way is a fundamental requirement. In the new era, how to use artistic works to tell Chinese stories well has become a shared challenge for cultural workers. This, in turn, represents a new mandate for online films moving forward.

THE CURRENT LANDSCAPE OF ONLINE FILMS IN TELLING CHINESE STORIES

The genres of online films are becoming increasingly diverse, presenting significant potential for the development of original works. On one hand, due to historical and creative inertia, online films have primarily focused on genres such as fantasy, martial arts, comedy, and mystery. On the other hand, driven by industry regulations and the evolving preferences of real-world audiences, there has been a rise in realist-themed works

that center on the lives of ordinary people, contemporary issues, and heroic figures. This shift has broadened the range of genres available within the online film market.

IP-Adapted Films: Achieving Greater Maturity

Currently, a significant number of online films are adaptations of existing intellectual property (IP). On one hand, IP naturally attracts a dedicated audience due to its inherent popularity. On the other hand, IP provides a pre-established narrative framework or character design, which greatly facilitates the creative process. The majority of online films fall under the fantasy adventure genre, while also incorporating elements from other genres. According to statistics, among online films with box office revenues exceeding 10 million yuan, the *Ghost Blows IP* is the most popular, followed closely by the *Di Renjie IP*. Notably, online film producers have increasingly focused on adapting traditional classical mythological IPs, marking a proactive effort to tell Chinese stories through this medium. Among these, the *Creation of The Gods IP* has produced five online films: *The Fox Demon Su Daji*, *Jiang Ziya*, *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King*, *Alluring Woman*, and *The First Myth Clash of Gods*. Similarly, the *Journey to the West IP* has inspired five works: *Qi Tian Da Sheng*, *Biography of Demon*, *Havoc in Heaven*, *Flame Mountain*, and *The Pig King*. However, despite the popularity of these IPs, statistical data shows that the cumulative box office revenue for both franchises has yet to exceed 100 million yuan.

The Continued Diversification of Realist Themes

In recent years, mainstream and realist-themed online films have made significant strides in both quantity and quality, with several standout works emerging. *Chinese Fighting Man*, which tells the story of a delivery rider striving to make a living, earned a box office revenue of 25.87 million yuan and achieved an 8.9 rating on the platform, with a production budget of 15 million yuan. Similarly, films like *Fragrance*, which focuses on disaster relief and rescue, and *The Spring of Salween*, which highlights the spirit of rural poverty alleviation, also garnered high ratings of over 8 on the platform. The diversified development of realist-themed online films is driven by multiple factors. On one hand, the influence of industry policies plays a crucial role, encouraging major online streaming platforms like iQiyi, Youku, and Tencent Video to prioritize the demand for realist films. On the other hand, as the online film industry continues to mature, production teams from the traditional film and television industry, equipped with strong capabilities, have increasingly ventured into this space. This influx of talent has fostered a diverse range of realist-themed works, leading to the widespread integration of realist themes in online films.

Cross-Cultural Elements: Starting To Yield Results

Online films are increasingly integrating cross-cultural elements to tell Chinese stories, reaching diverse audiences through more flexible approaches. Some productions preserve the essence of traditional Chinese culture while incorporating globally popular narrative structures and visual styles. For example, certain martial arts online films depict martial arts rivalries, blending them with Hollywood-style character development arcs, which help overseas audiences better grasp the concept of chivalry (Wong, W, 2019). Other fantasy-themed works cleverly merge divine figures from Chinese mythology with magical settings typical of Western fantasy, thus creating a unique and expansive worldview. This fusion is not merely a collection of disparate elements, but a bridge for cross-cultural communication, constructed through shared cultural themes such as courage, justice, and familial bonds. Market feedback reveals that online films featuring these cross-cultural elements have garnered strong viewership on international platforms. This success not only broadens the global appeal of Chinese stories but also paves new avenues for the internationalization of online film.

CHALLENGES IN TELLING CHINESE STORIES THROUGH ONLINE FILMS

Although online film box office revenues have been steadily increasing, with a growing number of films achieving both commercial success and critical acclaim, there remains a notable imbalance between the total number of online films released and the number of films that generate over 10 million yuan in box office revenue. In other words, the overall quality of online films still requires improvement. As previously mentioned, online film producers have begun actively exploring innovative ways to tell Chinese stories, and while some successful experiences have been accumulated, significant challenges persist.

Narrative Level: Weak Interpretation of Chinese Stories

In recent years, the Chinese online film industry has experienced steady growth in production volume, with numerous adaptations of classic literary works such as *Journey to the West* and *Creation of The Gods*. The *Journey to the West* and *Creation of The Gods* intellectual properties alone have spawned dozens of online films. However, the quality of these films has not kept pace with their quantity, leading to a market flooded with low-quality productions criticized for their crude storytelling and illogical plots. A high-quality online film cannot rely solely on dazzling special effects, exaggerated costumes, and props. It must also demonstrate refined narrative techniques, anchored in a rigorous script and coherent storyline (Zwarun, L, & Hall, A, 2012). Moreover, it needs a solid academic and cultural

foundation to truly resonate—for instance, when adapting the story of *Three Times Beating the White Bone Demon*, the film should preserve the core themes of distinguishing good from evil while using nuanced character development to convey the deeper logic behind Sun Wukong's rebelliousness and Tang Sanzang's stubbornness.

Unfortunately, many online films take a careless approach to adapting these classics, often employing subversive, reconstructive, or even satirical techniques. Some depict Tang Sanzang as a cunning, opportunistic merchant, reducing Sun Wukong to a comedic caricature. Others simplify the *Creation of The Gods* narrative into a shallow, childish monster-slaying adventure, stripping away the original text's profound explorations of divine mandate and human nature. While these adaptations may present themselves as innovations on the classics, they ultimately undermine the spiritual essence of Chinese storytelling. This reflects the entertainment-driven trend in film and television adaptations within modern consumer culture (Artz, L, 2015). Film and television works have increasingly become a means of fragmented leisure and entertainment. Creators often prioritize attracting attention with sensational plot twists and quick popularity over a thoughtful exploration and accurate interpretation of the philosophical ideas, ethical concepts, and cultural values embedded in Chinese stories. As a result, many works fail to convey the depth and power of Chinese narratives beyond transient sensory stimulation.

Production Level: the High-Start, Low-End Phenomenon Is Widespread

The online film industry, with its relatively low entry barriers, has attracted a flood of capital and creative talent, resulting in significant disparities in the quality of films available in the market. A notable phenomenon within this landscape is the high-start, low-end trend—many films achieve impressive box office results through extensive pre-release marketing, yet their critical reception remains consistently poor, creating a stark contrast.

This phenomenon is driven by several industry-wide issues. During the promotional phase, some production companies have mastered the traffic formula, overly relying on the fan base and buzz generated by popular intellectual properties (IPs), or resorting to tactics such as inviting celebrity cameos and crafting sensational trailers to elevate audience expectations. For example, an online film adapted from a classic martial arts IP released teaser clips showcasing the protagonist's stylish fight scenes, meticulously designed costumes and props, and appearances by veteran martial arts stars. These elements initially sparked high anticipation, resulting in millions of views on its release day.

However, when audiences actually watched the film, they found that the content was severely disconnected from the promotional materials. The plot was riddled

with logical flaws, the main storyline diluted by numerous irrelevant subplots, and glaring contradictions between scenes. Character development was superficial, with forced motivations, and iconic, well-rounded characters were reduced to flat, one-dimensional symbols that failed to resonate. The production quality was notably subpar—only a few standout scenes from the trailer met expectations, while the rest of the film featured crude special effects, poorly constructed sets, and continuity errors. Overall, it fell far short of the cinematic-quality production promised in the promotional campaign.

What is even more concerning is the rampant trend of imitation within the industry, which further exacerbates the vicious cycle of high expectations followed by disappointing results. Once a particular genre or format achieves market success, a flood of similar works quickly follows. For example, after a particular online film combining suspense and folk elements became wildly popular, dozens of similar films were released within just six months. These films largely adhere to the same plot framework, with even their poster designs and promotional slogans bearing striking similarities. However, they fall far short of the original in narrative depth and production quality. Ultimately, they rely on riding the initial wave of popularity to attract traffic, only to be abandoned by the market due to negative word-of-mouth. This mindset of prioritizing traffic over quality and imitation over innovation not only erodes audience trust but also impedes the sustainable development of the online film industry (Chen, Y, 2024).

Promotion and Distribution: Homogeneous and Monotonous Marketing Strategies

The promotion and distribution of online films are encountering significant challenges, with the increasing homogenization and monotony of marketing strategies forming a major bottleneck in effectively reaching target audiences. From a content perspective, the industry has almost established a fixed promotional template: generating buzz through the film title, employing exaggerated terms to reinforce genre labels (such as epic or revolutionary), or leveraging the popularity of classic IPs to create vague associations. Similarly, poster designs have become formulaic, often featuring a mish-mash of celebrity faces and fantastical elements, or mimicking the visual style of similar blockbusters, making it difficult for audiences to quickly identify a film's unique qualities amid a sea of similar imagery.

The industry also relies heavily on the strategy of treating the first six minutes as a golden window for audience acquisition, which has led many films into a vicious cycle (Lagerstrom, L, et al, 2015). In these cases, the first six minutes are excessively intense, while the subsequent content lacks momentum. To capture audience attention quickly, some works strategically place climactic scenes at the beginning or use editing tricks to create a "high-energy illusion." However, this short-

sighted approach not only disrupts the narrative flow but also raises doubts about the overall integrity of the film. Audiences are left questioning whether the initial intensity is a genuine reflection of the film's quality or merely a marketing gimmick.

From a marketing standpoint, while the concentration of online platforms aligns with the distribution characteristics of online films, it has also heightened internal competition. The iron triangle of promotional strategies consists of homepage recommendations on streaming platforms, topic virality on social media, and distribution through short video platforms. However, the challenges faced by short video channels are particularly pronounced. In the early stages, short videos capitalized on their ability to deliver fragmented content, becoming an efficient tool for online films to reach younger audiences. A 15-second clip packed with humor, excitement, or emotional moments could drive a significant increase in viewership (Qi, M, et al, 2024).

However, as the market has become more saturated, short video promotion has entered a hyper-competitive phase. The cost of top-tier traffic slots has risen nearly fivefold over the past three years, while user fatigue with movie montages and spoiler-style promotions has intensified, leading to a sustained decline in conversion rates (Huang, R, 2019). Even more concerning is the lack of diversity in marketing strategies, which is also reflected in the insufficient exploration of emerging promotional channels. While some films have attempted collaborations with the gaming and live-streaming sectors, these efforts often remain superficial, failing to create the deeper synergy of content co-creation.

Moreover, offline promotion and distribution have been largely neglected. Only a handful of top-tier films hold small-scale premieres, missing opportunities to leverage city landmarks, themed events, and other promotional settings in the way theatrical films do. When all works are funneled into the same channels and compete for user attention with similar marketing tactics, it not only drives up overall promotional costs but also causes high-quality works to be drowned out in the flood of information due to marketing homogenization. As a result, these films struggle to showcase their true content value.

PATHWAYS FOR ONLINE FILMS TO TELL CHINESE STORIES

Building on high-quality film content, the combined effects of targeted marketing and efficient operations are strengthening the ability of online films to tell Chinese stories. After analyzing the current state and challenges faced by online films in this regard, this article proposes three key pathways for improvement.

Adhering to the “Three Closeness” Principle in Content Creation

The “Three Closeness” principle, originally applied in the Party’s propaganda and ideological work, emphasizes being close to reality, close to life, and close to the people. This principle is equally relevant to content creation in online films. Online films should reflect the spirit of the times, maintain a people-centered creative focus, effectively tell Chinese stories, and embody the Chinese ethos. The ideological theme serves as the soul of a film (Stuckrad, K, 2022). Universal themes possess enduring appeal, as they resonate not only with contemporary audiences but with people across all ages and cultures. Creating audiovisual works around the socialist core value system can subtly guide the public toward correct worldviews, perspectives on life, and values, playing a positive role in establishing foundational social moral standards and fostering a constructive social atmosphere.

From the perspective of production companies, there should be a dedicated effort to refine and deeply cultivate content, with the aim of producing high-quality online cultural works. The creation of archetypal characters is central to producing high-quality content (Bassil-Morozow, H, 2024). The artistic execution of these characters not only determines the overall quality of cultural works but also reflects the artistic standards of the era. Only by developing iconic characters can cultural works possess real appeal, emotional resonance, and vitality.

From the perspective of platform operators, the prioritization of high-quality content should be the sole criterion for online scheduling. Platforms should allocate more promotional resources to content that attracts higher user engagement, longer viewing times, and better word-of-mouth reviews. By directly presenting user viewing data, comments, and evaluations, platforms can help audiences avoid the uncertainty of blindly choosing films.

In summary, all reforms should center around content as the core, employing fair and transparent distribution mechanisms, along with multi-dimensional business models, to provide outstanding online films with greater opportunities to stand out.

Integrate Innovation Throughout the Entire Production Process

In recent years, cultural and artistic workers have actively explored and innovated, allowing traditional Chinese art to captivate the world. As mentioned earlier, adapting classical intellectual properties (IPs) has become a significant approach for online films to tell Chinese stories. However, it is important to note that one of the main reasons behind the prevalence of adaptations is the current lack of original screenwriting capabilities. This highlights a deficiency in originality and vitality within China’s screenwriting community. Premium film

and television works should originate from screenwriters’ original creations, as originality carries power, energy, and courage. Therefore, the industry must vigorously encourage creativity and provide the necessary support for outstanding original works.

Furthermore, innovation in realist-themed online films should be prioritized, with continuous progress in both aesthetic expression and value. We must firmly reject pseudo-realism—a portrayal that is disconnected from life and the masses. In contrast to the fleeting popularity of IP-adapted dramas, original online films have the potential to better convey profound themes and strive for artistic excellence, offering audiences more lasting appeal.

Online film creators should aim high, embracing innovation in line with the times, and continuously explore and refine the effective implementation of realism. They should use their own artistic personalities to drive this innovation. Creators must also cultivate a craftsman’s spirit, staying grounded and avoiding superficiality. It is essential to respect the true nature of life and authentically portray the essence of characters (Grossberg, L, 1993). Only realism crafted with a craftsman’s spirit can withstand the test of time, leaving an indelible mark in the ever-evolving landscape of cinematic art.

Leveraging New Platforms for Comprehensive Marketing

With the rise of the online film industry, numerous platforms have actively explored cross-media marketing strategies to broaden the promotional channels for films. At present, the promotional and marketing budgets for top-tier online films are on par with those of theatrical releases, and online films are increasingly demonstrating a trend toward diversified marketing approaches.

Online promotion is conducted through emerging platforms and channels such as social media, live streaming, bullet comments, and short videos. Offline, comprehensive promotional efforts are executed through roadshows and scene-based marketing. For instance, *The Enchanting Phantom* utilized a Weibo cloud roadshow live stream for promotion and, following the film’s release, leveraged the influence of Weibo KOLs (Key Opinion Leaders) to encourage audience reviews, effectively spreading word-of-mouth and sustaining the film’s popularity.

The marketing strategy for online films is diverse, encompassing themed season marketing, IP marketing, word-of-mouth promotion, and the integration of short videos and platform marketing to establish a comprehensive, multi-dimensional marketing system (Araujo, A, V, F, 2018). Additionally, video platforms leverage their resource advantages to offer robust support for online film marketing. For example, iQiyi launched a joint marketing program, while Youku introduced its “youku” commercial cooperation model.

In terms of marketing strategies, there is a strong focus on the direct promotional impact of marketing on the film's revenue-sharing box office. In terms of marketing methods, high-quality promotional materials are employed to enhance the precision of ad targeting. Tencent Video and Youku have also introduced dedicated ad slots for online films, while iQiyi continues to improve the conversion efficiency of its existing performance-based ad formats. As a result, the personalized recommendation and commercial marketing capabilities within video platforms are gradually improving.

CONCLUSION

Currently, the development trend of online films is characterized by standardization, orderliness, and quality improvement. Alongside the steady growth of the entire industry and the domestic film sector as a whole, online films are showing positive progress across multiple dimensions, including industry regulation, capital investment, genre innovation, box office performance, and reputation building. We have every reason to believe that online films will continue to surpass their previous achievements, making new strides in telling Chinese stories and promoting Chinese culture. In doing so, they will contribute significantly to the flourishing development of China's film industry.

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