Educating the independent: the shifting paradigms in Chinese film-maker training

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Abstract

Since the 1990s, Chinese independent cinema has undergone remarkable transformations, transitioning from a period marked by a robust political stance to adopting a more conciliatory approach in the post-2000s era. This article explores the relationship between these changes and the evolving education of independent film-makers. The focus is on how educational paradigms adapt to support independent film-makers in a dynamic external environment, and how innovative teaching models contribute to the diversity and sustainability of Chinese independent cinema. The article analyses three practice-based education models: institutionalised film schools, alternative film schools and film-maker incubation projects. It assesses their unique values, challenges and impacts, providing insights into the influence of practice-based film education on China's independent cinema landscape.

Keywords practice-oriented film education; Chinese independent film-makers; alternative film schools; film-maker incubation projects

Introduction

Since the 1990s, Chinese independent cinema has undergone significant shifts, moving from the advocacy for 'art films' by Sixth Generation film-makers to a market-oriented transformation following the

liberalisation of China's film industry in the early 2000s. As Nakajima (2016) notes, Chinese independent films have transitioned from a strongly oppositional stance against the authorities to a more conciliatory relationship with the state film bureaucracy, leading to a period termed 'post-independent' (Tong and Ma, 2023).

This article investigates the intricate relationship between the evolution of Chinese independent cinema and the education of independent film-makers. It examines how changes in the Chinese independent film landscape have influenced educational paradigms for film-makers, exploring evolving methods and philosophies that nurture film-makers to adapt and thrive in a dynamic external environment. The article also considers how innovative educational models inject new diversity into the film industry and sustain the spirit of independent cinema amid stringent regulatory environments, thereby maintaining the career viability of independent film-makers. Specifically, it analyses three models of practice-based film education: institutional film academy education, alternative film schools and film-maker incubation projects, driven by diverse social, creative or political needs, and it examines their 'distinct values, challenges, and contributions' (Hjort, 2013a: 18).

Institutionalised film schools: from art-oriented to industry-oriented

'The Sixth Generation' is recognised as the pioneering cohort in Chinese independent cinema (Song, 2009; Wang, 2014). This categorisation arises from their collective cinematic practices, which exemplify the essential attributes of 'independent'. Their films, engaging with politically sensitive themes, mark a departure from the state-sanctioned film production system, thereby positioning them in 'an antagonistic relationship with mainstream cinema' (Bordwell et al., 2008; Pavsek, 2013: 83). Typically undertaking low-budget projects funded through personal investments, external support or grants from non-governmental entities, these film-makers demonstrate autonomy from established industrial economic frameworks and major studio systems (Berra, 2008; Tzioumakis, 2006), which allows them a significant level of creative control over their projects. Due to the absence of governmental and cinematic regulatory approval, their films have been precluded from public screenings in domestic markets, and instead have relied on underground distribution or film festival circuits for audience exposure to bypass stringent oversight and censorship, thus preserving their expressive integrity. Consequently, the Sixth Generation film-makers have imbued the concept of 'independent' with a unique connotation within the context of Chinese cinema, where 'independent' not only signifies deviation from mainstream film production norms or major studios, but also embodies a philosophical and creative stance against official institutional and ideological constraints.

The trajectory of the Sixth Generation film-makers towards independent cinema is fundamentally anchored in their education experience. They graduated from the directing and literature departments of the Beijing Film Academy (BFA) in the mid-to-late 1980s. Their grounding in the formal academic institution has led to their designation as 'academy-trained film-makers'. The academy-trained approach originated in 1956, a pivotal year that witnessed the transformation of the Central Academy of Drama and Film Art Research Institute, founded in 1950, into the Beijing Film Academy under direct oversight by the Ministry of Culture (Beijing Film Academy Online School History Museum, n.d.). This transition signified the official acknowledgement of film-making as an academic discipline within China's higher education system. The BFA closely emulated the pedagogical model of the Moscow Film School in the Soviet Union; it adopted a similar organisational structure in film production, encompassing departments dedicated to various aspects of film-making, such as directing, acting, cinematography, art design, sound recording and screenwriting, thus forming a relatively narrow specialisation-focused talent cultivation model. Over time, the BFA emerged as China's premier institution for nurturing film talent.

The academy-trained approach has four distinct characteristics. First, it employs a mentorship system and a pragmatic 'teaching while making' methodology, emphasising small class sizes and a low student-to-teacher ratio (Zhong, 2006). This approach facilitates hands-on learning under the guidance

of experienced film-makers, deviating from the 'theory first, practice later' model. It adopts a task-driven pedagogy, where students engage in progressively more complex creative assignments, fostering practical skills through execution, discussion and critique. Second, the curriculum integrates theory with practice, allocating 60 to 70 per cent for practical courses, and 30 to 40 per cent for theoretical studies (Hou, 2019). Theoretical courses encompass film history, film theory and criticism, supplemented by elective courses in humanities, social sciences and technology to enhance multiple literacy. Third, the education philosophy emphasises cultivating elite talent, with a focus on nurturing creative leaders and industry-ready artists in film-making. The objective extends beyond imparting technical proficiency to developing students who can drive industry innovations and transformations. Fourth, the BFA adopts a 'master one discipline while developing multiple areas' training philosophy (Guo, 2013). It provides cross-disciplinary elective courses, ensuring broad exposure to various subjects, thereby broadening students' creative horizons (for example, students majoring in scriptwriting can take courses in directing, acting and cinematography).

While the curricular structure at the BFA is aligned with industry-specific divisions, the pedagogical approach transcends a narrow vocational or industrial focus. Instead, there is a pronounced emphasis on embedding philosophical theories and artistic ideologies into film production. During their studies at the BFA, the Sixth Generation were extensively exposed to diverse cinematic theories, including André Bazin on film realism, Siegfried Kracauer's film theory, and principles of film semiotics. Described as having 'film running through their veins' (Chen, 2005: 41), they delved into a vast array of art and avant-garde films across the spectrum of world cinema, significantly influenced by styles of seminal movements and iconic directors. They drew inspiration from Italian neorealism, the French New Wave, the Taiwanese New Wave, and 'auteur' directors from world cinema. The approaches employed across these film canons, such as on-location shooting, use of non-professional performers, deviation from Hollywood's traditional dramatic storytelling and linear narratives, and distinct auteur styles, significantly shaped the cinematic concepts and creative paths of the Sixth Generation film-makers.

Additionally, an important idea instilled by the BFA was to value cinema as a powerful instrument for intervening in social reality (Wang, 2017). Zheng Dongtian, a mentor to the Sixth Generation film-makers, explained that their distinction as the first in China to receive a practice-focused film education led them to view film-making as a way to communicate social and political ideas, integrating audiovisual sensitivity as an inherent part of their creative expression (Zheng, 2003). The use of the camera as a surrogate witness has become a common characteristic of the Sixth Generation, revealing a cruel poetic realism in their cinematic style (Dai, 2000). Sixth Generation film-makers have articulated their approach in those terms; for example, Zhang Yuan, writes: 'At least we can use film for self-discovery, to connect with people we sympathise with, to listen to the voices of this era' (Zhang, 2012: 1). Guan Hu (Guan, 1995: 189) similarly notes: 'Our subjects demand that we confront the bloody realities of life, in our creative attitude, without a hint of falsehood or pretence, because what we want to say is to be as sincere as possible!' As Jia Zhangke states in his autobiography: 'In life, not knowing the loss of freedom is unwise, and knowing it's irretrievable yet doing nothing is cowardice. Freedom demands our resolve to face gains and losses without fear of pain. Let's keep making films, as it is my way to approach freedom' (Jia and Wan, 2008: 116).

However, 'the academy-trained approach' of the Sixth Generation is not without controversy. Critics argue that their adherence to inheriting and emulating avant-garde experimental cinema and European art film traditions not only restricts their ability to translate artistic concepts into broadly accessible ideas, but also fosters a sense of superiority, leading to a self-congratulatory attitude (Pickowicz and Zhang, 2006). Lv (2003) argues that the long takes and handheld cinematography masks superficiality and an excessive self-focus. As a result, these film-makers have been critiqued for their ineffectiveness in facilitating substantial public discourse or acting as agents of social change, highlighting a significant disjunction between their cinematic pursuits and societal engagement (Zhu, 1997).

Another perspective posits that the dynamics of the global market have influenced early Chinese independent film-makers to engage in deliberate self-orientalisation. Pickowicz, drawing on Chen Xiaomei's Westernism framework, argues that the traits of their films are heavily influenced by

neo-Westernism, with their cultural representations perceived as a narrative of 'post-socialist reality' that seeks to affirm 'Western identity politics' (Pickowicz and Zhang, 2006: 36–8). The Sixth Generation's films, categorised as 'youthful brutality writing', significantly diverge from 'political avant-garde cinema' by not directly confronting state ideology, but rather subtly expressing alienation and indifference towards it through a focus on individual experiences, rendering these film-makers more aptly described as 'solitary children' than 'rebellious children' (Su, 2009: 33).

Despite controversies over their artistic style and thematic representations, the Sixth Generation is acknowledged for their revolutionary significance and pioneering role. Within the Chinese cultural context, the notion of 'civil narrative' contrasts with official, national and mainstream narratives, inherently embodying ideological opposition and tension (Wang, 2009). The Sixth Generation consistently explores themes of human existence, interpersonal relationships and human dignity amid societal transformation, demonstrating profound empathy and concern for individuals in a rapidly changing society (Hao, 2004). In this sense, independent film-makers are akin to 'hybrids of social anthropologists and social realists', contributing to public awareness by bringing peripheral interests into the mainstream and creating alternative modes of representation (Wang, 2006: 24).

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the landscape of Chinese film education has undergone substantial transformations in response to the evolving dynamics of the film industry. Over the past decade, China's domestic film market has seen tremendous growth, with audience numbers soaring to 1.167 billion, and the number of cinemas reaching 11,375 by 2021 (China Movie Database, n.d.). This expansion has positioned China as a dominant force in the global film market, overtaking North America to become the world's leading movie market as of 2020 (Clark, 2022). To meet the talent gap in the industry, numerous universities in China have established film education programmes. Currently, nearly 300 universities enrol students in film majors, and more than 1,100 universities offer film courses. So far, Chinese higher film education exhibits a 'one centre, multiple strengths' and a 'pyramid-shaped' pattern, represented by the Beijing Film Academy at the pinnacle, followed by art, communication and comprehensive universities with independent film departments or film-related majors, which constitute the middle tier, and private industry-focused film schools forming the foundation.

Liu (2017) summarises four models of film education in China. First, the 'master-cultivation model', exemplified by the BFA, emphasises practical training and creativity. These schools have industry facilities, and they provide systematic professional training from experts. They maintain strong industry connections, and they update the curriculum based on industry needs. However, they have limited enrolment capacity, and they cater to smaller student populations. Second, the 'artist-oriented model', exemplified by institutions such as the Nanjing Arts Institute and the Central Academy of Fine Arts, concentrates on cultivating individual artists in the realm of film and moving images. This approach emphasises the development of strong individuality and artistic expression. However, graduates from these institutions might not possess a comprehensive understanding of the discipline of film and the intricacies of the film industry system. Third, the 'comprehensive media talent model' is represented by universities such as Beijing Normal University and Peking University. They aim to develop a broad range of skills in students, encompassing moving image production, cultural industry management, communication and advertising knowledge, and social media platform operations. This model prepares students for various roles and challenges within the media and film industry. Finally, the 'applied and technical talent model' is represented by institutions such as the Vancouver Film School of Shanghai University, focusing on the regional industry's specific needs. They provide education and training in technical aspects of film production, equipping students with the necessary skills to become proficient technical professionals in the film industry.

The divergent models of film talent cultivation reveal a critical dilemma in contemporary film education: prioritising the nurturing of 'artistic masters' versus industry-aligned craftspersons. The direction of travel in film education, moving from an experimental, tailored approach to more standardised methodologies, is observable across both comprehensive universities and specialised art schools in

China, and more globally. While this shift towards a more professional and craft-oriented education can successfully increase the employment rate of graduates it stifles the emergence of novel ideas and perspectives within film schools, potentially leading to a homogenisation of creative expression (Petrie and Stoneman, 2014). In addition, if film education solely prioritises the industrial aspects of cinema, neglecting its cultural, social and artistic dimensions, the public may raise concerns about the loss of cinema's role in promoting social democracy, subjective expression and aesthetic ideas. As Stoneman (2019) posits, the purpose of film education should extend beyond mere technical proficiency; he envisions it as a transformative force that cultivates individuals who are adept in industry skills and also capable of independent action, thus preparing film-makers to serve as cultural activists, creative artists or public intellectuals.

Alternative film schools: collaborative and community-based learning

Driven by the widespread availability of affordable and portable filming equipment, such as smartphones, and the accessibility of digital post-production software, the process of film-making has undergone further democratisation. This shift has rendered film education no longer an exclusive domain confined to formal institutionalised settings. Consequently, alternative film schools, such as the Li Xianting Film School and Wu Wenguang's Caochangdi Workstation, have emerged, offering distinct learning experiences.

Li Xianting Film School

Li Xianting Film School was founded by Li Xianting, a key figure in Chinese contemporary art and co-founder of the Beijing Independent Film Festival. Inaugurated in 2008, the school was supported by the Li Xianting Film Fund, an initiative launched in 2006 specifically aimed at bolstering Chinese independent film-makers. The school operates under a philosophy that champions 'the spirit of freedom, thinking independently, and the ability of realisation' (Li Xianting Film Fund, n.d.: n.p.).

The Film School is anchored in two core principles. First is 'resistance', particularly in opposing governmental restrictions on free speech. Second is 'openness', which posits that 'independent film' transcends being merely a creative phenomenon; it necessitates integration with the broader tapestry of contemporary society and culture, including political and aesthetic dimensions. This underscores the school's commitment to fostering a cinematic space that is both creatively free and deeply intertwined with the larger socio-political and cultural discourse.

The school offers an innovative curriculum to a diverse age group, ranging from 20 to 60 years old, without any prerequisite for a specific background or prior film-making experience, and the programme runs as a 40-day summer school, with class sizes between 10 and 15 students. The initial phase of the curriculum focuses on essential film-making techniques, such as camera operation, sound production and editing software. As the course progresses, students engage in practice-oriented projects under the guidance of experienced industry professionals. For instance, in Daizo Otsuka's workshop, students engage in scriptwriting exercises centred on 'the imagination of pictures', where they select a personal photograph and weave a story around it, while the cinematography class explores 'expressing emotions through lighting', with students working in groups to create emotionally resonant scenes using light. Another instructor, Yonghong Liu, uses yoga music for meditative dreaming in scriptwriting, where students translate these dreams into storyboard designs; for short film creation, students are encouraged to select a colour and theme – such as fear, separation, the end of the world or an adventure – to craft a four- or five-minute film.

Creative and experimental film projects are complemented by documentary practices. In the Discovering Songzhuang project, students are immersed in the Songzhuang area, one of the largest artist communities in China, establishing a profound connection with their surroundings by making

documentaries. They employ an anthropological approach to document the community, studying a diverse range of subjects, such as artists, migrant workers and local market vendors. The programme culminates in a public screening of their work, followed by collective feedback sessions. This method cultivates a deep understanding of societal undercurrents, enabling students to create films that directly confront and articulate the complexities of contemporary Chinese society.

Caochangdi Workstation

Initiated by Wu Wenguang, hailed as 'the father of Chinese independent documentary', Caochangdi Workstation has emerged as a dynamic platform for individuals passionate about independent documentary film-making. Annually, the workstation hosts documentary workshops to create a unique space for collaborative documentary creation. This ongoing project is an experiment in blending imagery with rural practices, and artistic engagement with social realities. It explores how numerous individuals can form a grass-roots force, transitioning from citizen imagery to citizen consciousness, and it attempts to establish a 'folk memory archive' through community-driven methods.

The creative process at Caochangdi Workstation is community-oriented, with participants convening weekly to share insights and experiences. A key project of the workshop is the Folk Memory Project, started in 2010 and ongoing. It focuses on interviews, storytelling, historical research and the visual representation of historical events in Chinese rural areas. Over the years, more than 33 authors from the workshop have returned to the villages with which they have connections – whether birthplaces or ancestral homes – and they have collectively produced more than 80 films between 2005 and 2020.

From an organisational perspective, the documentary-making process is structured into phased workshops, such as Interview Workshop, Oral History Workshop, Body and Memory Workshop and Editing Workshop. These workshops encourage participants to share and discuss their work, facilitating the completion of their projects. Caochangdi encourages creators to return to the simplicity of everyday life, and to document from a participant's perspective. These documentaries play an important role in contributing to the construction of a diverse, personalised historical narrative.

From an organisational form, alternative film schools typically originate from initiatives by independent film-makers or individual artists, gradually evolving into close-knit, small-scale networks. This organisational structure is characterised by its limited scale, contrasting with the extensive infrastructure and resources of traditional film academies. These schools prioritise creating an intimate and supportive creative environment, where like-minded creators explore various possibilities in film art. This smaller-scale operation allows for more flexible and personalised teaching approaches, fostering deeper interaction and collaboration between instructors and students.

In these educational institutions, a practice-based approach is embraced, challenging the traditional cognitivist view of learning as a solitary process of acquiring knowledge within the learner's mind, mainly in formal educational settings (Omidvar and Kislov, 2014). Learning takes place in communities of practice, viewed as a collective, relational and social activity (Omidvar and Kislov, 2014). Through active participation in the shared practices of the real world, people learn; knowledge creation is intertwined with being socially engaged in these context-specific practices. Furthermore, learning is not just about acquiring information; it is also about identity development, and transforming into someone different (Murillo, 2011). Wenger (2010) notes that this learning process is twofold, involving a reconciliation between the competencies defined by the community and the experiences of its individual members. In their pedagogical approach, alternative film schools exhibit characteristics of constructivism, where knowledge is understood as being formed through interactions. This perspective holds that an individual's knowledge comprises an intricate construct of facts, concepts, experiences, emotions and values, and their interrelations (Baviskar et al., 2009). Knowledge creation within cultures or groups occurs through mutual discourse and interaction, moving away from individualistic discoveries or authoritarian directives

(Rodriguez and Berryman, 2002). Teachers and students have moved away from the traditional disparity of higher authority and greater deference, adopting instead a collaborative, peer-driven approach to reflect on their jointly created educational environment (Munro, 2023).

Furthermore, alternative film schools place a strong emphasis on cultivating a sense of responsibility and awareness for action. These alternative institutions set themselves apart from traditional film academies by radically emphasising the concept that life itself surpasses film language. They advocate that training in film production techniques and artistic skills should yield to the primal impulse and intention of expression. Students are motivated to investigate and contemplate societal issues under an empowerment model, aiming to cultivate a 'critical literacy' that enables them to actively engage in addressing community challenges and become critical thinkers and socially responsible citizens (Nunn, 2020: 202).

However, the small-scale operation also becomes a limitation of alternative film schools. The practice within small circles and communities has not shifted from 'internal processes within individual communities' to 'interactions between groups co-located in complex, overlapping landscapes and constellations of interconnected practices' (Wenger, 2010: 267), arguably resulting in limited impact.

Film-maker incubation projects

From the mid-2010s onwards, a number of film-maker incubation projects, as can be seen associated to film festivals across the world, have begun to cement themselves in the Chinese film education landscape.

SIFF NEXT

Established in 2017, SIFF NEXT (https://www.siff.com/english/) constitutes a vital part of the Shanghai International Film Festival's six-tiered nurturing framework. This hierarchical system, tailored to support emerging film-making talents, comprises various stages: the short videos competition, short films competition, SIFF NEXT, SIFF PROJECT, and the Asian New Talent Award, culminating in the prestigious Golden Goblet Award. Each stage is structured to guide film-makers from nascent stages of their careers to professional maturity and recognition. Many directors have advanced in their careers through this nurturing system. For example, Li Xiaofeng's debut film, *Ne Zha* (2015) emerged from the SIFF PROJECT. Later, it was selected for the Golden Goblet main competition, and he became an evaluator and mentor for SIFF NEXT.

Central to the ethos of SIFF NEXT is its dedication to supporting the completion of debut and second feature films by up-and-coming film-makers. SIFF NEXT, which is accessible to young producers, screenwriters and directors across Chinese-speaking regions, selects approximately 20 trainees annually for its final project. The training involves two primary stages: an Industry Workshop and a Project Development Workshop. The former, taking place over eight days, immerses participants in industrial knowledge through courses led by seasoned professionals, and it offers festival experiences for practical insights. The latter stage, spanning three-to-five days, focuses on project development, where selected participants receive guidance with various film-making stages, and help with script refinement, funding strategies and professional advancement.

China Film Director's Guild Young Director Support Programme

The China Film Director's Guild (CFDG) Young Director Support Programme (http://www.zgdydyxh.com/zh/qc/index.shtml#qcjj), known as the 'Scallion Plan'. is an initiative under the support of the State Film Administration and organised by the China Directors Association. Launched in 2015 and spearheaded by Li Shaohong, President of the China Directors Association, this non-profit film education programme is dedicated to discovering and cultivating young, talented directors within the film industry.

The CFDG programme's rigorous process includes multiple stages of development and education for young film-makers. Initially, a panel of renowned professionals in the film industry select the top 15 projects from submissions, with submitted short films being a crucial component of the assessment. The selected candidates then participate in a Script Workshop, mentored by experienced scriptwriters and directors to refine their screenplays. This is followed by the Directors' Training Camp, where participants produce themed short films as practical demonstrations of their skills. The organising committee then supports each of the top 10 directors in producing a demo for a feature-length film, ultimately leading to a final evaluation to select the top five promising projects. The final training stage involves one-on-two guidance from five renowned directors in the industry. Later, the top 10 directors present their project ideas for the first time at the annual CFDG Investment and Financing Forum, introducing their projects to the industry. The last selection procedure involves post-forum surveys, interviews and feedback from various representatives from the industry. Based on these evaluations, the organising committee ultimately determines the final list of the top five promising projects.

Experienced producers then lead each of the five awarded directors' projects. They represent CFDG and the directors in engaging with investors on various aspects of film production, including copyright agreements, investment entities and ensuring completion of shooting. Following the investment and financing forum, CFDG follows strict legal procedures. Investors must sign confidentiality agreements to access project scripts, safeguarding the directors' copyrights. As young directors may lack legal teams, CFDG assists in reviewing potential legal risks. Investment and financing arrangements for CFDG projects are negotiated based on each company's resources, with the goal of providing optimal support for project advancement.

The CFDG programme stands out for its holistic approach to nurturing film-making talent, going beyond financial support by extending its assistance throughout the entire process of film production, including pre- and post-investment phases. Such an approach enables CFDG to function as a crucial springboard for aspiring film-makers, aiding them in the realisation of their debut feature films.

FIRST

Originally a student film festival at the Communication University of China, FIRST evolved from a campus event into the Xining FIRST Youth Film Exhibition in 2011 (https://www.firstfilm.org.cn/en/). Supported by the local government of Xining and the China Film Critics Society, it has grown into an international platform that nurtures young film-makers' works. Emphasisng freedom, inspiration, vitality, sharpness and sincerity, FIRST has significantly impacted the discovery and introduction of emerging talents to the industry.

There are two central components to FIRST: the FIRST Training Camp and the FIRST Lab. The FIRST Training Camp employs a rotating mentorship system, enlisting accomplished film-makers as advisers. Annually, the camp adopts a unique theme (2018: 'Nothingness'; 2019: 'Like Life'; 2020: 'Isolation'; 2022: 'Opportunity'; 2023: 'Crossing Boundaries'), and it selects 35 participants to form several crews, not entirely unlike the Children Meet Cinema project in operation in Japan in conjunction with the Tokyo International Film Festival created by Etsuko Dohi (Chambers, 2023). Each crew faces the challenge of creating a 15-minute short film under constraints of limited resources and time, with only three days for filming and less than a week for post-production. The camp's purpose is to challenge existing notions of film, and to encourage participants to tap into their creative instincts by following their intuitive understanding of film-making. As mentor Zhang Lyu aptly stated during the opening ceremony of the 2022 Training Camp: 'No clever tricks, no catchy phrases, just simplicity, and more simplicity. Forget about the beautiful flower; true creators should be the plain earth beneath the flower.'

The FIRST Lab, comprising the Documentary Lab and the Genre Film Lab, aims to adapt to the evolving film market and to provide collaborative guidance for aspiring film-makers, and from 2023, this has included a Screenwriter Lab. For selected screenwriters, the lab will provide guidance in areas such as copyright transactions, project positioning, script enhancement and industry dialogue. Furthermore, it

will also provide opportunities for them to collaborate on high-quality project development and industrial partnerships. According to the founder of FIRST, another indispensable role of the lab is to provide the industry with a clear understanding of early stage authors, and the lab acts as a 'firewall' isolating profit-driven capital and protecting film-makers.

The Documentary Lab, established in 2016, supports projects that explore culturally significant topics, promoting diversity in the documentary market. The Documentary Lab divides its applicants' projects into three categories – developing projects, rough-cut projects and explorative projects – and it provides targeted support accordingly. The FIRST Genre Film Lab is dedicated to developing genre films and training feature film directors. Annually assisting about 10 films, it encourages directors to experiment with audiovisual language while adhering to industry standards.

The Training Camp and the Lab represent a two-way approach to nurturing independent film-makers. The Training Camp encourages breaking traditional norms and cultivating authentic creativity, while the Genre Film Lab focuses on genre-based storytelling and market viability. This two-way approach showcases FIRST's continuous endeavours to balance its commitment to experimental spirit and broader market opportunities, serving both as a guardian of creative vision and as a bridge to the film industry for emerging film-makers.

These three film-maker incubation projects adopt a moderate strategy, navigating the regulatory environment by publicly positioning themselves as initiatives focused on nurturing young and emerging film-makers wisely. This approach serves a dual purpose: it attracts public attention and gains legitimacy under government support, while also providing a platform for independent cinema. By branding themselves as youth film festivals, they fill a crucial void in Chinese film education and cinema. They also represent a strategic adaptation to counteract the shrinking opportunities for grass-roots film exhibitions and screenings, as almost all independent film festivals have been prohibited by the government since 2014. The concept of *qingnian dianying* (youth cinema), increasingly integrated into the contemporary market-driven film network/industry, and the state's cultural management and censorship, is reshaped by networked auteurism that continually redefines connections among film-makers, various government levels, industry stakeholders, and other film and media sectors in the festival domain, potentially creating trajectories that challenge simplistic classifications of being (or not being) independent (Tong and Ma, 2023).

All three projects focus on incubation of young independent film-makers. The term 'incubation', originally derived from biology, typically refers to a period in which environmental conditions are controlled to ensure the successful development of eggs or the growth of organisms such as bacteria or cell cultures (Aernoudt, 2004). This concept has since been adapted in management studies, particularly in the context of entrepreneurial incubation, to denote a necessary nurturing environment for new enterprises and projects (Hackett and Dilts, 2004). Key conditions for successful incubation include access to critical resources such as capital, mentorship and networking opportunities, alongside a supportive external environment that fosters innovation and growth. The role of an incubator, paralleling the controlled environment in biological incubation, is to supply these resources, thereby ensuring the optimal development of its incubatees (Bergek and Norrman, 2008; Bruneel et al., 2012).

Three film education programmes incubate young film-makers in two ways. The first is cinematic ecosystem incubation, which refers to a comprehensive process that nurtures and develops film talents and projects through various stages of the film production life cycle. This holistic approach extends beyond mere creative support, encompassing the entire film industry chain, including investment and financing, distribution, exhibition and post-production development.

One crucial segment in cinematic ecosystem incubation is the venture capital sessions, allowing independent film-makers to directly engage with investors and producers. Before entering the financing phase, the programmes organise training sessions led by successful directors and producers. These sessions not only expose film-makers to potential funding sources; they also offer invaluable insights into aspects of film-making such as project pitching, budget management and legal risk avoidance.

Director Zhang Jiayun, whose film project *Stand Out* won Best Project at the 2022 SIFF NEXT, and who participated in the 2023 SIFF PROJECT, highlighted the impact of the project pitching training in his acceptance speech:

> As someone who is not articulate and introverted, the training in the camp greatly guided me on how to pitch my project. I tried to use simple language and limited time to tell others about my unfinished film. This can be considered as acquiring a new skill for myself. Perhaps it is a skill that all the beginner film-makers need to pay more attention to, that is how to introduce and publicise your work.

Another crucial segment in cinematic ecosystem incubation is to build collaborations between young film-makers with leading producers and production studios, embedding emerging talents within the network of the film industry, ensuring that they accumulate sufficient tacit knowledge and social capital. Collaborating with established industry entities offers young film-makers networking opportunities to foster lasting partnerships, along with enhanced market exposure and distribution possibilities.

Apart from cinematic ecosystem incubation, the other kind of incubation is film project incubation. Project incubation pertains to the process of transforming nascent ideas and scripts into viable and operable film projects. In the three film talent training programmes, participants found the project development workshops particularly beneficial. These workshops contribute to the development of film-makers in two significant ways. First, they offer creative support encompassing script revisions, the design of cinematographic language and guidance on post-production techniques. Second, the workshops facilitate a critical evaluation of the projects' feasibility that spans the initial shooting plans to the final completion of the film. It ensures that the film-makers have a realistic and pragmatic understanding of their project, from conception to fruition.

Conclusion

Analysing the various film education models for Chinese independent film-makers reveals distinct approaches and focuses. Institutionalised film schools offer a structured curriculum, providing comprehensive training in film-making techniques and theories. In recent years, these institutions have placed increasing emphasis on industry-oriented education, prioritising technical mastery and adherence to established cinematic norms. In contrast, alternative film schools offer a more flexible and unconventional approach. The focus of these programmes lies in cultivating an experimental spirit and promoting freedom of expression, while also encouraging the utilisation of film production as a means to document and intervene in social reality. The third model, incubation projects, combines industrial ecosystem incubation and film project incubation. These projects are tailored to assist film-makers in transforming initial concepts into viable film projects, focusing on both creative and practical aspects of film production, ranging from the creation process to publicity and distribution.

The three types of film education model reveal that the journey to becoming a film-maker is influenced by a myriad of factors that shape an individual's approach to cinema. As highlighted by Hjort (2013a, 2013b), these factors include skills, narrative and aesthetic preferences, preferred modes of practice, and an understanding of cinema's role. The growth of a film-maker entails a threefold focus: the acquisition of theoretical knowledge and proficiency in the technical aspects of film-making; the cultivation of a personal cinematic ethos, which is sculpted by the film-maker's individual values, aspirations and professional orientation; and a nuanced understanding of the external environments and the abilities to finish their film project, such as effective communication with producers and production studios, securing investments, managing resources, navigating distribution and exhibition channels, and mitigating legal risks.

Each model addresses different needs and stages in a film-maker's journey, highlighting the diversity in educational approaches within the Chinese independent film landscape, which provides independent

film-makers with a range of options. This variety ensures that film-makers can find suitable educational paths that best align with their artistic vision and professional aspirations. However, this diversity also presents challenges.

First, in balancing autonomy and market influence, independent film-makers are often caught in a conflict between the inner pursuit of film-makers and market conditions. Independent film education programmes in China do not resist the possibilities of commercialisation. They strive to enable independent film-makers to adapt to the expanding and complex industrial landscape while preserving their autonomy as much as possible. The practical significance lies in the fact that without legitimate dissemination channels, independent film-makers, even if not seeking financial gain, face a limited audience within small underground communities, which not only lowers the audience appeal of the work but also challenges the sustainability of their professional careers.

The evolution of China's independent cinema towards commercialisation reveals a shift in the interpretation of 'independent'. In the past, independence was perceived as subversive to authority, signifying a confrontational stance against mainstream or official ideologies, which often aligned with the Chinese government's ideology (Pickowicz and Zhang, 2006). Now the question is whether a film must be overtly dissident or subversive of the party or government authority to qualify as 'independent'. A narrow interpretation of 'independent film' constrains the varied forms of artistic creation, cultural and political expression, and the democratic aspirations embodied in 'independence' and its creators. Perhaps, the definition of the independent film cannot be solely based on factors such as political stance, funding sources, external assistance, selection of theme, style, genre, or the commercial–artistic dichotomy. Defining 'independent film' by specific criteria that constitute its independence could lead to the erosion of the essence of the term. Real 'independence' can only be realised when free from any predetermined definitions or rules. A more flexible definition of Chinese independent cinema could be contemplated, where 'independence' denotes 'films with an independent spirit', emphasising whether film-makers can make films according to their own vision, maintain control over production, and exercise freedom of expression (although there may be limitations under strict censorship).

Caution against over-commercialisation is necessary, as the burgeoning market threatens to shift independent cinema from its niche origins to a more industrial, mainstream trajectory. This transition prompts critical questions about the success of independent cinema – is it a genuine breakthrough into the market or a surrender to dominant economic interests? Has a new generation of independent film-makers injected vitality into Chinese cinema, or has the establishment domesticated them? Art, politics, capital and fringe elements, once in competition with each other, are now increasingly compromising with each other in the pursuit of greater market performance (Wang and Barlow, 2002).

To secure the essence of independent cinema, a viable approach may be to distinguish between industrialisation and commercialisation. While commercialisation seeks profit maximisation, industrialisation refers to the professionalisation and systematisation of production and distribution. The process of industrialisation has the potential to establish a sustainable framework that upholds the authenticity of independent cinema, while simultaneously ensuring its accessibility to a wider audience. This may foster an ecosystem where independence and commerce can coexist harmoniously, ultimately benefiting both film-makers and audiences.

A second concern surrounds the paradox of inclusivity. While the joint efforts of various agents – film-makers, curators, critics, scholars, audiences – have created new public spaces for Chinese independent cinema and nurtured a growing community for film education, there persists an underlying issue of internal power dynamics. The roles of project initiators, industry professionals and film critics, as well as of non-human agencies such as the review systems and news media, play a crucial part in shaping access to film education. Their roles oscillate between guiders and gatekeepers, a balance that warrants careful negotiation.

The selection and competition mechanisms in film education programmes may result in a hierarchy that, although unintentionally, enables certain ideologies to become dominant. There is a pressing need

to ensure that these prevailing discourses do not overshadow the fundamental objective of producing and disseminating moving images; nor should they stifle the radical expressions inherent in independent cinema. Film festivals and communities, while motivated by a desire for free society, open speech and dialogue, paradoxically also contribute to building discursive camps and fences that defend against each other and exclude unwanted voices (Gao, 2015).

It is necessary to be alert to the dominant views, the tendency for complacency or excessive emphasis on authority within the inner circles of independent cinema becoming the crux of the real limit of the diversity and vitality of independent films. As Gramsci's theory of hegemony emphasises, dominance in society is not just maintained through force or coercion, but also, crucially, by a dominant group leading others to accept its values and norms as common sense, thereby assimilating the interests of opposing groups into its own (Filippini, 2016). The real challenge lies in ensuring that educational platforms genuinely support a variety of perspectives, fairness and inclusivity.

A final consideration may be the question of independent cinema moving beyond awareness to action. In China, independent films have not yet become a tool for citizens to engage in the public sphere and instigate social change. Merely exposing issues to the public is insufficient for their resolution. While these films raise awareness and provoke discussion, they do not necessarily inspire, educate or mobilise audiences towards collective action. This limitation points to the need for combining independent cinema with broader social activism and policymaking, ensuring that the issues uncovered can be addressed in a more effective manner.

Recent shifts in China's independent film education reflect efforts to adapt to changing external environments, yet film-makers have not actively intervened to transform these established external conditions. The trend towards industrialisation in the film sector risks turning independent films into sophisticated artistic products rather than catalysts for social movements. Conversely, short videos are increasingly playing a role in initiating public discourse, with Chinese citizens using smartphones for short video creation to promote freedom of speech and push authorities towards greater transparency and accountability.

The concept of using film-making as a form of activism is increasingly absent in film education programmes. To ensure the efficacy of independent films as a potent means of public critique, it is imperative for film educators to cultivate a heightened awareness and advocacy. This necessitates fostering a discerning comprehension of the social, political and cultural contexts within which these films operate, and it encourages film-makers to transcend mere aesthetic and technical considerations by regarding their work as an integral part of a broader discourse on societal issues, actively engaging in this discourse. Realising this potential requires more than just the creation of impactful films; it requires a strategic engagement with audiences and stakeholders to translate awareness into action. This entails utilising diverse platforms for dissemination and dialogue, forging partnerships with social advocates and organisations, and actively engaging in public discourse on the themes presented in the films. Such a role elevates independent film-makers beyond mere creators, positioning them as vital contributors to the conversation on civil rights and social transformation.

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Declarations and conflicts in interest

Research ethics statement

The author conducted the research reported in this article in accordance with Ethical Guidelines for Good Research Practice provided by Association of Social Anthropologists, UK.

Consent for publication statement

The author declares that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

Conflicts of interest statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest with this work; all efforts to sufficiently anonymise the author during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

Filmography

Ne Zha (CN 2015, Li Xiaofeng)

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