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# Rise of the patriotic blockbuster

'New Mainstream Movies' with Hollywood-style action and effects are reshaping China's film industry

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When Jia Zhangke made his directorial debut with *The Pickpocket* in 1997, annual box-office takings in China were about 1 billion yuan (\$158 million). By last year, the figure had rocketed to nearly 56 billion yuan.

When interviewed at the Great Hall of the People on March 11 on the sidelines of the National People's Congress, Jia, an NPC deputy, said he was excited about the transformation of the movie industry in China, which boasts the largest number of film screens in the world.

With revenues from domestic movies accounting for nearly 54 percent of last year's combined box-office total, and the recent Spring Festival holiday seeing a surge of about 67 percent year-on-year, Chinese movies have enjoyed an unprecedented rise, mainly as a result of a number of mainstream blockbusters.

Last year, *Wolf Warrior 2* made 5.68 billion yuan to become the highest grossing fictional movie of all time in China. Meanwhile, *Operation Red Sea* has soared to become a sensational hit, raking in 3.36 billion yuan since it opened on Feb 16.

For most industry observers and researchers, this box-office bonanza exemplifies the rise of so-called New Mainstream Movies.

The term, coined by film buffs a few years ago, refers to patriotic movies that not only instill positive energy but also please mass audiences.

With the overwhelming popularity of these hits, including *The Taking of Tiger Mountain* (2014) and *Operation Mekong* (2016), the nation's movie industry is being reshaped.

"In the past, movies that publicized conventional values found it hard to win in the mainstream market because most of them were dull and preachy," said Yin Hong, professor of film and television studies at Tsinghua University in Beijing.

"Moreover, for some time, commercial blockbusters barely reflected mainstream values, as most of them were full of negative elements such as materialism, violence and conspiracies."

According to Zhao Baohua, a veteran scriptwriter and movie critic, and deputy director of the Chinese Film Literature Association, the surge in the number of mainstream-value blockbusters indicates that



A poster for the Chinese action movie *Wolf Warrior 2* directed by Wu Jing is displayed at a cinema in Yichang city, Central China's Hubei province, on Aug 20, 2017. IMAGINECHINA



Box-office hits such as *Wolf Warrior 2* exemplify the rise of China's so-called New Mainstream Movies. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

moviemakers have figured out a way to solve the problem — by merging formerly opposing sides, so the movies are educational yet still generate revenue.

Speaking of the huge commercial success of recent mainstream blockbusters, Zhao said the films resonate with Chinese audiences and their pride in the country's rise.

Actor-director Wu Jing's *Wolf Warrior 2* is the story of a former Special Forces operative and his heroic face-off with ruthless mercenaries as he evacuates Chinese citizens from a war-torn country in Africa.

Hong Kong director Dante Lam's *Operation Red Sea* has a similar theme to *Wolf Warrior 2* — it was based on the true story of the evacuation of Chinese civilians from strife-torn Yemen in 2015 — but focuses more on depicting the ensemble heroes.

Also directed by Lam, *Operation Mekong* was based on a cross-border manhunt by Chinese police to apprehend a drugs ring in the Golden Triangle.

Adapted from a hit novel and helmed by Tsui Hark, also from Hong Kong, *The Taking of Tiger Mountain* tells the tale of a 1940s Communist hero who leads a squad to crack down on a group of bandits.

"Hong Kong directors have worked and grown up in a market that requires movies to be attractive to, and quickly understood by, audiences. Thus, they use their own methods to tell Chinese mainland revolutionary history or show heroes, and make the stories more appealing," Yin said.

This year, China is demonstrating its determination to strengthen support for mainstream movies.

On Jan 30, the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio,

Film and Television issued a statement announcing the establishment of a People's Cinema chain, which will select 5,000 of the country's 50,000 movie halls to screen quality mainstream films.

Each hall must have at least 100 seats. That means South China's Guangdong province, which will have 594 such halls, will top the list, followed by East China's Jiangsu province, with 437, and East China's Zhejiang province which will have 383.

Most cinema operators believe the initiative will encourage domestic filmmakers to produce more high-quality mainstream movies.

*Zhuxuanlyu*, or "main melody", was one of the most familiar movie genres to Chinese born in the 1970s and 80s.

Zuo Heng, a movie researcher with the China Film Archive, recalled that the "main melody" concept was first highlighted by the State administration in 1987 as a way of encouraging filmmakers to produce works that emphasized national spirit and pride.

Signature hits included *The Birth of New China* (1989), an epic that related the country's arduous history in 1948 and 1949, and the biographical drama *Jiao Yulu* (1990), which focused on an iconic Communist Party of China cadre who dedicated his life to the people.

Reflecting on the success of *Jiao Yulu*, Zuo said the film reached a high unrivaled by most commercial films of the time, thanks to its breakthrough narration — which employed a tragic, poetic tone — and

star power, with the lead played by award-winning actor Li Xuejian.

When the movie opened across the country, tickets quickly sold out in most theaters, and venues recorded audiences of 90 percent, according to reports.

However, that level of success only belonged to a few outstanding movies, while most of the others failed to attract the public, as a result of cliched storylines and stereotypical protagonists.

Statistics from the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television show that China's movie industry was in a bad way, with theater admissions falling from 29.3 billion in 1979 to 10.5 billion in 1992, a decline of about 64 percent.

The turning point came about a decade ago, as the domestic movie industry took off, heralding an unprecedented expansion.

For most cinema researchers, the *Founding* trilogy, produced by the China Film Group, the largest State-owned studio, marked a milestone in the reinvention of "main melody" movies.

*The Founding of a Republic* (2009), the first film in the franchise and made to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the founding of New China, was a surprise hit.

In the past, such ideological dramas were usually low-budget and seldom recruited star names.

However, in an attempt to draw Internet-obsessed young people back to the big screen, the movie featured a cast of around 200 well-known faces, including kung fu giants Jackie Chan and Jet Li, who played cameos and usually gave their services for free.

A similar strategy of casting popular idols as politicians or military leaders was adopted for the follow-ups, *The Beginning of the Great Revival* (2011) — aka *The Founding of a Party* — and *The Founding of an Army* (2017).

However, the follow-ups failed to have the same box-office impact as *The Founding of a Republic* as a result of their pale storylines and the idols' undistinguished performances.

Meanwhile, an interesting trend has emerged: Just as State-owned studios are trying to commercialize revolutionary movies, private film companies have started showing an interest in making patriotic stories.

The Bona Film Group, a private company in Beijing, has become a frontrunner thanks to the consecutive successes of *The Taking of Tiger Mountain*, *Operation Mekong* and *Operation Red Sea*.