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## Review of *Contemporary Art Cinema Culture in China*

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### Abstract

This paper reviews the book *Contemporary Art Cinema Culture in China* by Xiang Fan.

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## Review of *Contemporary Art Cinema Culture in China*

Ke Zhu

How do Chinese audiences engage with art cinema in the sense of public culture? Where do small, niche films that never make it to theaters set foot? Xiang Fan's *Contemporary Art Cinema Culture in China* (2024) exemplifies the richness of the concept of art cinema (*yishu dianying* 艺术电影) itself. The book contextualizes the traveling of art cinema in China since the turn of the twenty-first century. A critical intervention is how art cinema reaches urban cinephiles while circulating through alternative spaces amid state regulation and the film market economy. Drawing on feminist ethnography, Fan foregrounds how state institutions, creative collectives, grassroots individuals, and various intermediary networks produce, distribute, and exhibit art cinema in contemporary China.

The book engages with scholarly conversations on Chinese film festivals, exhibitions, and infrastructures (Berry and Robinson 2017; Berry et al. 2025). The aim goes beyond the textuality of art cinema. Instead, its main framework draws on the Bourdieu lens of “field”: how power relations between institutions, cine-club spaces, film critics, cinephiles, and fansubbers animate the discourses of art cinema. The introduction follows the genealogy of art cinema in China. Since the 1990s, “Chinese cinema shifted from socialist propaganda towards

neoliberal marketized mechanism” (3). Art cinema straddles state control, commodity culture, and alternative political and aesthetic stands. On the one hand, only films approved by the Film Bureau bearing the dragon seal were permitted public exhibition. On the other hand, state-led cinema infrastructure continues to delimit what counts as legitimate art cinema culture. In response, self-initiated cine clubs and screening venues emerged to contribute to a diversified art cinema circuit. Parallel to this, the rise of DVD-mediated “grassroots cinephilia” consumed art cinema and amateur knowledge, “transcending the confines of the public sphere governed by the political and economic power of the state” (5).

With key terms spanning piracy, amateurism, and networks, the five chapters closely look at what art cinema *means* and *does* from below. Chapter 1, “Home Space and Piracy,” examines pirated DVD cinephilia circuits since the late 1990s. At a time when the state regulated theatrical releases of foreign films, households had limited access to legally distributed titles. Film enthusiasts shopped for pirated (*daoban* 盗版) DVDs from underground shops and enjoyed the secret pleasures of watching them at home. Piracy operated in a grey market between copyright infringement and censorship. Yet these risks did little to suppress the growing appetite for mass consumption or the entrepreneurial ambitions. Vendors sold “Region 9” DVDs (*jiuqu die* 九区碟), the unofficial copies that mimicked Hollywood’s region-coding

system. The disks circumvented copyright restrictions and offered cheap, widely accessible films. Through interviews with practitioners, this chapter also discusses how piracy entrepreneurs stylized DVDs (such as pirated copies of *The Last Emperor*) to cater to customer tastes. Despite its illegal status, the DVD rebranding amounted to “a declaration of authority and ‘copyright’ ownership” (39).

What shifts art cinema from domestic intimacy to the public is the film exhibition initiatives since the 2010s. Chapter 2 examines major art cinema venues in China and how they contribute to building an alternative public cinematic space. The discussion highlights both state-led and independent arthouse institutions in Beijing and their roles in presenting Chinese and foreign films. Institutions such as the Nationwide Alliance of Arthouse Cinemas (NAAC) are “caught between the imperative of adhering to political correctness enforced by censorship and the commercial criteria used to assess film success” (53). In other words, arty films became instruments of soft power and cultural diplomacy. Drawing on participant observation, the chapter finds that screenings at these venues negotiate tensions between national brand-building, aesthetics, education, and economic drives. Screening Chinese film classics of the 1930s serves to uphold national heritage; canonical foreign-language films educate the audience. By contrast, independent institutions such as the Ullens Centre for Contemporary Art (UCCA) identify themselves as “independent” of state sponsorship and commercial

imperatives. They enjoy relative autonomy in an arthouse atmosphere through open spatial settings, film discussions, and public engagement. Yet such movie-going experiences face challenges as being an “isolating mode of accessing film” (73), particularly in a post-cinema context where online media resources make titles easily available.

Independent exhibitions represent a more radical form of art cinema distribution. In recent years, many indie festivals have been forced to shut down. At the same time, outside Beijing, cine-club screening events have continued to nurture indie culture. Chapter 3 revisits the implication of “independent” in Chinese independent cinema and networks of cine-clubs, cinephiles, filmmakers, critics, and curators. Rather than an opposite force to state power, it now operates “in dependence”, given the state’s “co-optation with the commingling of commercial entities and institutional forces” (78). Screening groups in Shanghai and Guangdong mobilize themselves in three strands: public and official institutions, creative industry clusters, and indie spaces such as cafés and bookstores (82–94). These venues are interdependent, and most of them must maneuver censorial pressures. Echoing Chapter 1, independent screenings often sustain piracy culture by relying on pirated DVDs and online files. The co-opted forces between official and independent cinema contribute to making the art film “public.”

Chapters 4 and 5 constitute the book's most original case studies. Chapter 4 examines the underacknowledged role of Internet film critics. Drawing on first-hand interviews, the chapter asks how amateur critics both challenge and reinforce boundaries between professionalism and amateurism. Unlike professional critics in mainstream media, online criticism on the Douban platform "challenges the monopoly on critical discourse and judgement exercised by ideologically aligned criticism and market-orientated discourse" (106). At the same time, these influencers strive to manage self-presentations and amass cultural capital. Many rose to fame as "professional critics" affiliated with or endorsed by the media industry. Gender hierarchies, however, exist within the male-dominant cinephilia industry. Chapter 5 extends this gendered dimension to the fansubber community. It examines translators of foreign-language films who keep contesting cinephile culture and digital labor "in the margin" (127). To compete with rivals, these "text porters" work in a streamlined process. Embedded advertisements monetize their subtitling. Fansubbers' imagined community is gendered and hierarchical, where male, more experienced, or institutionally affiliated members enjoy privilege, while women and junior practitioners tend to be in subordinate roles. Both online critics and fansub translators mediate cultural meanings and embrace community ideals, thus complicating the distribution of art cinema culture.

Finally, concluding with director Tsai Ming-liang's complaints about his films being pirated in China, the conclusion addresses "the entire issue of the complexity of (art) cinema culture in China" (148). In a context where audiences yearn for an art cinema infrastructure amid state regulation over public spaces, alternative circulation of films raises challenging questions of piracy, legitimacy, and public culture. It would be overly reductive to say that art cinema replicates a utopian space of civil participation in China. Rather, each chapter interrogates how different intermediaries inevitably impose hierarchies from their positions of class, gender, and capital within the field of art cinema.

Perhaps due to this complexity, the boundary between indie, commercial, and art cinema in this book oftentimes remains unclear. Although the book does not focus on individual art cinema works per se, a more precise definition of the category, attuned to genre-style specificities in the Chinese context, could situate the convergence and divergence among international, domestic, and indie films, as well as the different stakes that their circulation entails. A stronger regional focus might also shed light on the broader cultural and political-economic landscape. While the book draws on fieldwork in Beijing, Guangdong, and Shanghai, the vast geographical and temporal scope of art cinema in China calls for further scholarly attention to local sites of difference. That said, *Contemporary Art Cinema Culture in China* is

a must-read reference for researchers, students, and curators interested in Chinese and East Asian screen cultures. Its timely and reflexive analysis offers a critical framework for us to see the growing art cinema scenes in China beyond the Western canon.

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