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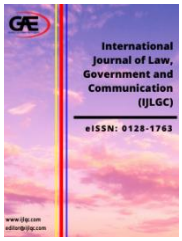

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REGULATING CREATIVITY: THE EVOLUTION, MECHANISMS, AND IMPACT OF CHINA'S FILM CENSORSHIP SYSTEM

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Abstract:

China's film censorship system, deeply rooted in state control and ideological oversight, has evolved from decentralized regulation in the Republican era to a highly institutionalized framework under the People's Republic. This study examines its key mechanisms—pre-production approvals, content restrictions, post-production editing, and self-censorship—highlighting their impact on creative expression and industry growth.Amid calls for reform, debates persist over adopting a film rating system as a viable alternative. Comparing international models, this paper explores the contradictions between China's industrial modernization and rigid censorship, underscoring tensions between traditional values and contemporary market demands.While full liberalization remains improbable, a dual-track system integrating censorship and classification may offer a pragmatic path forward. As China's film industry globalizes, balancing state interests with artistic freedom and audience autonomy will be critical in shaping the future of its regulatory framework.

Keywords:

Film Censorship, Regulatory Framework, Creative Freedom, Industrial Modernization, Institutionalization, Rating System

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Introduction

The Chinese film censorship system has long been a subject of debate among scholars, filmmakers, and policymakers. As one of the most regulated film industries in the world, China's censorship framework significantly influences film production, distribution, and reception (Chen, X. H., 2010). Unlike Western democracies, where freedom of expression is constitutionally protected, China's film censorship operates within a state-controlled media environment that reflects broader political and ideological imperatives (People's Republic of China Film Management Regulations, 2001). This paper investigates the evolution of China's film censorship system, its key regulatory mechanisms, and its impact on both domestic and international film industries.

In addition to tracing institutional changes and their impact on creative practice, this study also contributes to broader discussions across academia, industry, and governance. This study offers a new perspective on China's film censorship system by examining its historical evolution, flexible mechanisms, and social effects. It contributes to academic research by bridging institutional analysis with cultural governance, showing how control is not only enforced through rules but also shaped by shifting political and market contexts. For the film industry, the study highlights how creators adapt to regulatory uncertainty through self-censorship and strategic compromise. This helps explain the ongoing tension between creativity and control in China's media environment. On a broader level, the findings reveal how censorship acts as a tool of cultural management, guiding narratives in ways that support state legitimacy while maintaining surface-level diversity. These insights provide a useful foundation for future research and for evaluating cultural policy reform.

Historical Evolution of Film Censorship in China

Film regulation in China can be traced back to the early 20th century and has evolved alongside the nation's political transformations. During the Republican era (1912-1949), censorship was relatively decentralized, with different warlords and governments imposing varying restrictions (Wang, H., 2012). However, following the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, film censorship became a centralized state function, aligned with socialist propaganda goals (People's Republic of China Film Management Regulations, 2001). In the Maoist era (1949-1976), the state strictly controlled the film industry, mandating adherence to socialist realism and revolutionary themes. The Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) witnessed an extreme form of censorship, with only a handful of politically approved films produced. The post-Mao reform era (1978-present) introduced gradual liberalization, allowing increased commercialization while maintaining strict political oversight. The establishment of the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film, and Television (SAPPRFT) in 2013−later replaced by the National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA) in 2018−marked a continuation of centralized control with updated regulatory mechanisms for the digital age.

Mechanisms and Criteria of Film Censorship

Chinese film censorship operates through a combination of pre-production approvals, script reviews, content editing, and distribution controls. Filmmakers must first secure a Dragon Seal from the NRTA prior to public screening (People's Republic of China Film Management Regulations, 2001). Content restrictions are imposed to prohibit depictions of politically sensitive topics, excessive violence, explicit sexuality, supernatural elements, and narratives

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that challenge social harmony (Chen, X. H., 2010). Moreover, even after initial approval, authorities may require further post-production edits or, in extreme cases, impose outright bans if a film is deemed politically or culturally inappropriate. In addition to these official measures, market-based censorship − manifested through self-censorship among filmmakers and production companies−has become increasingly prevalent as a means of avoiding regulatory complications (Liu, Y., 2015). These mechanisms collectively shape the creative landscape of Chinese cinema, significantly influencing both the content of films and the strategies employed by filmmakers in response to regulatory demands.

Research Methodology

This paper employs a qualitative research methodology to examine the evolution, mechanisms, and implications of China's film censorship system. The approach combines literature review, policy document analysis, and theory-driven interpretation. Relevant academic sources, including Chinese and international scholarship, were reviewed to establish a conceptual foundation. Key censorship-related policies and official documents were systematically analyzed to trace changes in regulatory language, priorities, and ideological orientation. The research draws on frameworks from institutional theory and cultural governance to interpret how state control interacts with creative expression and media regulation.

The research process followed a structured, multi-phase design. It began with the identification of core research questions and the selection of appropriate theoretical perspectives. This was followed by the collection and examination of literature and regulatory texts. Insights from the document analysis were integrated with broader theoretical discussions to form a comprehensive picture of how film censorship operates in practice and how it affects creative autonomy.

The Debate on Film Censorship and Classification in China: Policy Challenges and Industry Implications

The issue of film censorship in China is inherently linked to the debate on film classification, as the latter is frequently proposed as a viable alternative to existing regulatory mechanisms. In recent years, calls for reform have intensified, particularly from within the film industry. In 2012, media reports noted that Xie Fei—a veteran professor at the Beijing Film Academy and an acclaimed director (notably of films such as *Benmingnian*)—published a public letter on Weibo titled *A Call to Replace Film Censorship with a Film Rating System.*

> *'The film censorship administrative regime, which has been in effect for many years, is a relic of the planned economy era and is no longer suited to the demands of a society governed by the rule of law and a market economy. In practice, the film censorship system frequently produces outcomes that conflict with the constitutional provisions guaranteeing citizens the freedoms of speech, press, and artistic expression.' (China News Service,2012a)*

He proposed that '*the current administrative model of film censorship should be transformed into a film rating system—one that is characterized by legal constraints, administrative oversight, industry self-regulation, and voluntary discipline. Such a reform is both necessary and reflective of contemporary societal needs (China News Service, 2012a).'* As a senior figure in the film community, Xie Fei's extensive Weibo post was subsequently disseminated by several directors—including Wang Xiaoshuai and Zhang Yibai—thereby marking one of the earliest and most public critiques of the film censorship system by a seasoned industry veteran.

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Furthermore, amid the accelerating and deepening process of film industrialization in China, calls for the adoption of a film rating system have persisted. In March 2003, during the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, renowned screenwriter Wang Xingdong submitted a proposal entitled *Implementation of the Not Suitable for Children Review Standard and the Imperative of a Film Rating System.* This proposal attracted widespread media attention and garnered support from numerous industry professionals, such as Teng Wenji, Zhang Yibai, Zhang Yuan, Lu Xuechang (deceased), and Feng Xiaogang (China Youth Daily, 2003). In the same year, a high-profile incident drew both domestic and international attention when a collective initiative by sixth-generation directors—led by Jia Zhangke and joined by figures such as Wang Xiaoshuai and Lou Ye—addressed the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT) with a proposal urging that "the rigid censorship regime be supplanted by a flexible film rating system." The film community largely concurred that "the scientific merits of a rating system lie in its ability to secure the creative freedom of directors while simultaneously categorizing and restricting film audiences. This dual approach would enable regulatory bodies to effectively guide audience consumption and allow directors to fully exercise the creative liberties enshrined in the Constitution" (Sohu News, 2003; Guangming Daily, 2003).

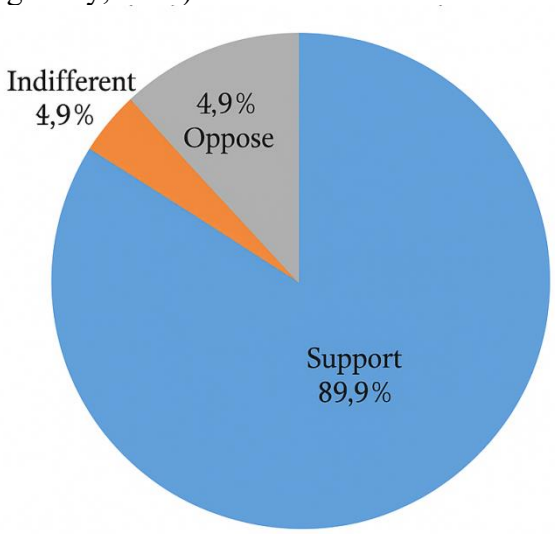

Figure 1: Support for Implementing a Film Rating System in China
Source: China Youth Daily Social Survey Center, 2009

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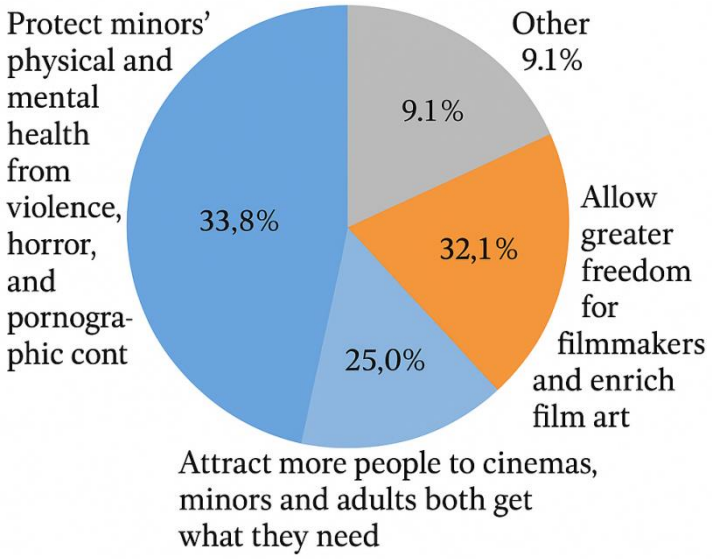

Figure 2: Perceived Benefits of a Film Rating System
Source: China Youth Daily Social Survey Center, 2009

A survey conducted by the China Youth Daily Social Survey Center (2009) via Sina.com, sampling 2,157 netizens regarding film ratings, revealed that 89.9% of respondents supported the implementation of a film rating system in China, while only 5.9% and 4.2% expressed oppositional or indifferent views, respectively (Figure 1). Regarding the significance of film ratings (Figure 2), 33.8% of respondents believed that a rating system could safeguard the physical and mental health of minors by shielding them from violent, horrific, and pornographic content; an additional 25% contended that such a system could attract a broader audience to theaters by catering to the distinct needs of minors and adults.

In February 2012, several theaters under Bona Xingguang Cinema Management Co., Ltd. in Beijing pioneered the practice of indicating age-appropriate ratings for films on their screening schedules. Although this initiative represented an innovative, self-initiated exploration by the theaters, it ultimately failed to be sustained (China News Service, 2012b; Xie, F., 2012). More recently, renewed debates concerning film ratings have emerged, exemplified by the release of the film *Heart Bloom Road*. As a paradigmatic adult-themed film replete with sexual innuendos and explicit adult content, its screening inadvertently led to incidents in which uninformed parents brought their children to view the film. Consequently, a significant portion of the public has argued that such films should not be publicly exhibited in regions lacking a formal film rating system.

In response to appeals from both the film industry and audiences, regulatory authorities initially reacted with considerable enthusiasm and proactive measures. For instance, following Wang Xingdong's proposal for the implementation of a film rating system, SARFT explicitly announced its intention to conduct research on the issue and develop a feasible model compatible with China's national conditions. In 2004, then Director Tong Gang of the National Film Bureau stated that the SARFT Film Bureau was expediting the drafting of the Film Promotion Law—a legislative framework intended to clarify the nature, function, and positioning of films; to standardize film management and development systems; and to promote governmental functional transformation and management innovation, particularly

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with regard to film censorship and rating (Tong, G., 2004). According to the plan disseminated at that time, a draft of the Film Promotion Law was to be finalized in May 2004, followed by the submission of a project-approval report to the State Council in June, with an initial draft compiled from August to October based on extensive consultations and subsequent revisions from November to December. However, progress on the legislation stalled thereafter, and no substantive advancements were achieved (National Film Bureau, 2004).

It was not until February 2009—during a cross-strait directors' seminar held in Hong Kong—that Professor Zheng Dongtian of the Beijing Film Academy, a member of the censorship committee, remarked that the draft of the Film Promotion Law, which had been under development since 2004, had finally been finalized and formally submitted by SARFT to the State Council; however, the law remains in a state of "hearing the stairs without seeing anyone descend" (Zheng, D., 2009). In August 2010, SARFT Vice Director Zhao Shi declared at a joint press conference that research on existing domestic and international film rating systems indicated that the multiplicity of current rating standards had failed to effectively prevent minors from accessing age-inappropriate films. He explicitly asserted that China was, at present, not in a position to implement a film rating system—a stance representing the most recent and unequivocal position of SARFT on the matter (Zhao, S., 2010). Subsequently, despite proposals advanced by Xie Fei and other stakeholders in both formal and informal settings, as well as vigorous online debates among public figures, SARFT refrained from further comment and adopted a cold treatment approach.

From the 1990s to 2010, numerous articles discussed the censorship and classification of Chinese films. While perspectives varied, many critics viewed these debates as indicative of the insufficient modernization of China's film management system and the unbalanced development of film modernization. This ongoing entanglement between tradition and modernity underscores the inherent conflict in China's modernization process—a process marked by modernity's aspirations juxtaposed against traditional regulatory practices. One of the central concepts in this debate is modernity.

Tradition And Modernity

Modernity cannot be considered in isolation. During the period from the 1990s to the early 2000s, debates on modernity reached significant intensity. Much of the discourse centered on China's modern intellectual and literary history. Some studies also examined the issue from the perspective of film studies; however, these cinematic analyses generally remained superficial. In this research, I examine New Century cinema through the perspective of modernity. Addressing modernity necessarily involves engaging with tradition. Modernity inherently includes tradition, and postmodernity emerges alongside it; hence, it is imperative to delineate the interrelationships among these phenomena.

Every nation has its own distinct tradition. In China—a country deeply influenced by its traditional culture—this legacy is most evident in its political ethos. Chinese traditional culture rests on two fundamental themes: moral value monism and the unity of Heaven and humanity. These interrelated concepts have pervaded Chinese thought over centuries, forming a value system in which individual morality seamlessly extends to the family and society. Moral value monism posits that personal virtue, family ethics, and social justice are inherently identical. For instance, the ideal of cultivating one's inner virtue (the inner sage) to achieve external success (the outer king) clearly illustrates this principle (Chen, L., 2014). Equally significant

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is the concept of the unity of Heaven and humanity. Although it is now often interpreted through ecological or aesthetic frameworks, it originally underwent a profound transformation through Confucian reinterpretation during the Han Dynasty. Early scholars, such as Dong Zhongshu, reinterpreted the ancient Daoist notion of Heaven—traditionally seen as nature—into a personified, morally charged entity that legitimizes imperial rule. In this framework, the natural order, family, society, state, and cosmos are viewed as an integrated whole (Feng, Y, 2014; Li, M., 2023a).

Modernity does not constitute a total break from tradition. Instead, it embodies both continuities and contradictions within the traditional framework. Numerous scholars contend that a critical reassessment of tradition—achieved through creative transformation and innovative development—is essential for comprehending contemporary cultural expressions, including film. For example, examining how traditional doctrines, such as moral value monism and the unity of Heaven and humanity, shape narrative strategies and aesthetic sensibilities can illuminate the unique cultural identity of Chinese cinema in the modern era (Zhang, L., 2003; Xi, J., 2022).

At the theoretical level, scholars argue that any substantive discussion of modernity in China must engage with its traditional intellectual heritage. Prominent thinkers such as Feng (2014) have emphasized that the metaphysical and ethical frameworks of traditional China—particularly its integrated conception of human nature and cosmic order—serve as crucial resources for addressing contemporary issues. Subsequent scholars concur that modernity represents an evolution characterized by both critical inheritance and radical innovation rather than a complete repudiation of tradition (Fang, C., 2006). This perspective is reinforced by governmental policies that stress the integration of traditional cultural values with modernization efforts (Xi, J., 2022).

Furthermore, the incorporation of traditional thought in film studies remains relatively underdeveloped. A more thorough engagement with classical Chinese concepts may not only clarify the unique cultural identity of modern Chinese cinema but also enrich our understanding of its aesthetic and ideological dimensions (Zhang, L., 2003; Zhang, X., 2003).

In summary, the dialectical interplay between tradition and modernity in China is a complex issue that necessitates a synthesis of historical, philosophical, and cultural analyses. Recognizing both the enduring influence of traditional doctrines and the dynamic innovations of modern thought enriches our understanding of Chinese cinema and contributes to global debates on modernity.

Contemporary discourse frequently asserts that the individual must submit to the collective. This concept is not imposed externally; it is deeply embedded in traditional Chinese cultural values. In the doctrine of Tianren Heyi (the unity of Heaven and humanity), **one** represents Heaven—or more precisely, the Way of Heaven. Whether viewed from the perspective of the natural order or personal morality, the expectation is that humans conform to the mandate of Heaven rather than assume that Heaven exists to serve individual needs. Within this framework, the individual is not regarded as an autonomous subject (Fung, Y.-L., 1952; Liu, H., 2005). Consequently, traditional Chinese culture integrates individual identity into the collective whole, forming a cohesive political culture in which personal value is realized through participation in and contribution to the larger society (Wang, Y., 2012).

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In contrast, modernity calls for a reexamination of foundational concepts. The term modern is temporal and is often conflated with contemporary or present-day, resulting in conceptual ambiguity. From an intellectual history standpoint, modernity primarily denotes the period beginning with the Renaissance, an era characterized by the emergence and sustained development of Western capitalism (Baudrillard, J., 1998). Notably, Western historiography lacks an equivalent to China's modern era—commonly considered to commence with the Opium War—since global narratives typically divide history into ancient and modern periods (Chen, K., 2010a; Lu, X., 2004). The Renaissance rejected the medieval worldview, a period when tradition held that God is supreme and man is subordinate, with the Church acting as God's earthly representative. In the post-Renaissance period, a key ideological shift was the elevation of human subjectivity to counter divine authority (Taylor, C., 1989).

Within the concept of modernity, the suffix "-ity" denotes an essential quality, an ideological disposition, and a type of spiritual force. Thus, modernity embodies a unique modern spirit characterized by the establishment of the human subject as the central agent. In traditional societies, the ultimate referent was Heaven or God. In modernity, however, the focus shifts to human agency, positing that humans are the primary architects of their destiny and central to the world (Lu, X., 2004; Taylor, C., 1989).

Following the establishment of human subjectivity as central, modern thought identifies three fundamental dimensions of human existence. The first dimension is the affective or sensual realm, which encompasses human emotions, desires, and the pursuit of material satisfaction. For example, purchasing an iPhone 6 may not be based on genuine necessity—since a basic telephone or domestic alternative might suffice—but rather on a powerful material desire that reflects an irrational affective impulse (Baudrillard, J., 1998). Similarly, the pursuit of romantic relationships represents a modern affective demand. Works such as *The Peony Pavilion,* composed during the Ming Dynasty, vividly convey a woman's intrinsic longing for emotional fulfillment. Moreover, the prevalence of nude imagery in post-Renaissance art can be seen as an expression of carnal desire (Zhang, Y., 2007).

The second dimension is rationality, which can be divided into value rationality and technological rationality. Unlike traditional societies governed by divine authority, modern societies are organized through human institutions. The establishment of democratic systems, legal frameworks, and structured social orders exemplifies value rationality. Concurrently, technological rationality is evident in the rapid advancement of science and technology, which propels human civilization and promotes societal prosperity (Habermas, J., 1987; Miller, D., 2001).

The third dimension is transcendence. Beyond sensory and rational experiences, human beings demonstrate a persistent aspiration to transcend their finite existence. This transcendental impulse, rooted in medieval traditions, appears in various forms. For example, religion, as a domain of secular governance, embodies transcendence by postulating an omnipotent, absolute deity that surpasses human limitations. Similarly, the aesthetic experience in art allows individuals to achieve a sense of transcendence beyond everyday reality (Dewey, J., 1934; Habermas, J., 1987).

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In modernity, transcendence introduces an additional dimension. Once it surpasses the finite nature of human existence, it continually prompts reflection upon the limitations of our current state. When rational elements intertwine, this reflective process is triggered, gradually exposing inherent problems within modernity (Lyotard, J.-F., 1984). The notion of positioning man as the center of the world is fundamentally flawed, given that human desire is inherently boundless; this endless desire leads to the unchecked exploitation of global resources and consequent environmental degradation (Baudrillard, J., 1998). Ultimately, reflection upon our existential conditions propels us to transcend the present, culminating in a postmodern state. The critical dimension of postmodernity lies in its sustained critique and reflexivity regarding modernity; it rejects the idea of man as the central, dominant subject and instead advocates that humans are merely one element among many, sharing equal status with other species. Moreover, many mistakenly attribute a postmodern character to China; however, this is only superficial. In reality, China has yet to achieve genuine modernization and lacks a substantive spiritual core to sustain such a transformation (Lu, X. , 2004; Wang, X., 2012).

Another pressing issue is modernization. (Here, modern refers to a temporal concept, while modernity denotes a particular spiritual essence.) Modernization typically refers to the level of material advancement. For instance, after the Cultural Revolution in the late 1970s, initiatives such as Four Modernizations were introduced; later, under Deng Xiaoping's leadership, the Four Cardinal Principles were proposed, followed by Jiang Zemin's Three Represents, Hu Jintao's Harmonious Society, and Xi Jinping's Chinese Dream. In effect, the policy frameworks put forth by these leaders serve as benchmarks for modernization (Deng, X., 1984; Jiang, Z., 1997; Xi, J., 2013). Within the Four Modernizations, the emphasis is on achieving modernization in technological and material spheres. More broadly, the suffix "-ization" denotes an evolving process—one in which modernity progressively permeates various social strata. As the inherent spiritual qualities become increasingly visible, the process of modernization is realized. Academically, modernization is often used to describe the tangible dimensions of technology, industry, and the economy, whereas modernity is reserved for the inner, spiritual domain (Lu, X., 2004).

In contrast, despite government slogans emphasizing people-centered approaches, the scientific development concept, and humanistic care—which purport to treat teachers and students as subjects whose interests should be at the core—all too often, in many universities, individuals are not genuinely regarded as autonomous beings but are instead reduced to mere objects of management.

China's historical context is uniquely complex. Following the Opium War, China suffered from the aggression of Western powers. Yet, when viewed from an alternative perspective, the origins of the Opium War can be traced back to a talking past one another dynamic between Chinese and Western interlocutors—where differences in logical frameworks and value systems, rather than merely linguistic barriers, precipitated conflict (Chen, K., 2010b). Moreover, with Japan's subsequent invasion, the urgency of China's historical predicament became even more pronounced. The nation's backwardness compelled a vigorous push toward modernization. Particularly after enduring events such as the Opium War, the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression, and the Cold War—which, during the latter, led to massive steel production and agricultural neglect—the reopening of China's borders in the 1980s spurred an intense desire to learn from Western models. This trend profoundly influenced academia, where premier theories were predominantly imported, translated, and

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explained, leaving a dearth of original indigenous theoretical contributions—a circumstance that is, to some extent, conditioned by historical factors. In barely a hundred years, China has cycled through traditional, modern, and postmodern paradigms, experimenting with nearly every theoretical model, yet persistent issues remain. For instance, challenges in film censorship offer just one glimpse into the broader array of problems.

Film Rating Systems Driven by the Appeal to Modernity

From the perspective of film rating systems, three primary emphases emerge. First, there is the creative freedom of the film's author, an issue intimately linked to the freedom of expression of the creative subject. Second, the protection of minors remains paramount. Third, there is a clear aspiration to establish a standardized and rational film management system (Smith, J., 2015a).

The evolution of film censorship in the United States—from the adoption of the Hays Code to the implementation of a formal rating system—was complex. Before the Hays Code, a film association was formed to curb unethical and illegal practices within the industry. Although films were produced primarily for commercial success, early unethical practices spurred protests from various religious groups. In response, leading figures in production, in collaboration with Hays, developed the Hays Code. This code prescribed in detail what content was acceptable for the screen. During the Hays Code era, the film industry was explicitly excluded from the First Amendment protections regarding freedom of speech. Films were not recognized as a form of expression equivalent to the press (Bordwell & Thompson, 2013). Approximately fifty years later, bold and innovative European films, which frequently addressed taboo subjects, generated considerable controversy when entering the U.S. market. For instance, the Italian film Miracle led to numerous lawsuits upon its American release. The legal challenges surrounding the Miracle case eventually established a legal foundation for freedom of expression in film. This case acted as a catalyst for the gradual establishment of the modern film rating system (Staiger, J., 2002).

In China, proponents of a film rating system argue that its primary purpose is to secure the right to freedom of expression in cinema. Public letters by figures such as Xie Fei, and petitions by filmmakers like Jia Zhangke, Lou Ye, and Wang Xiaoshuai, explicitly call for the safeguarding of free speech in film. Freedom of expression is a crucial dimension of modernity. It represents an essential element of the value rationality inherent in a people-centered system. Without the guarantee of this right, a system cannot be considered truly modern (Lu, X., 2004).

Following the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949, the Common Program of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference—acting as a de facto provisional constitution—explicitly stated in Article 5 that '*Citizens of the People's Republic of China shall enjoy freedom of thought, speech, publication, assembly, association, communication, residence, migration, religious belief, and demonstration.'* Since the promulgation of the first Constitution in 1954 and its subsequent revisions, freedom of speech has consistently been affirmed. The current Constitution of the People's Republic of China, in Article 35, declares that '*Citizens of the People's Republic of China enjoy freedom of speech, of the press, of assembly, of association, of procession, and of demonstration.'* Moreover, Article 47 guarantees that citizens have '*the freedom to conduct scientific research, engage in literary and artistic creation, and participate in other cultural activities.'* It is generally understood that the cultural activities and artistic creation protected under Article 47 include film, dance,

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television, painting, and other cultural expressions. Thus, the constitutional framework supports freedom of expression in film. Public appeals by Xie Fei and others have stressed the need to fully implement the rights granted by the Constitution.

Nevertheless, both Western and Chinese legal frameworks impose limits on the exercise of free speech. In the West, there is an emphasis on prohibiting defamation and insults. Similarly, Article 51 of the Chinese Constitution states that '*when exercising their freedom and rights, citizens of the People's Republic of China shall not infringe upon the interests of the state, society, or the legitimate rights and interests of other citizens.'* The balance between freedom and its restrictions serves as a measure of the government's capacity to protect public interest. This balance also reflects the extent of modernity within a nation's legal and ideological framework. Currently, Chinese film censorship regulations tend to align closely with the stipulations of Article 51, thereby subordinating individual rights to state interests (Zhang, H., 2017).

Regarding the proponents of film rating systems, their emphasis on protecting minors was particularly effective when films were exhibited primarily in theaters. With the rise of segmented media channels—such as television, videotapes, DVDs, Blu-ray discs, and the Internet—the mode of film consumption has shifted from collective viewing to individualized experiences. As a result, film rating systems have evolved from being instruments of mandatory restriction to forms of self-regulation that offer guidance. However, these systems cannot guarantee that minors will be fully protected from films that exceed their designated classification (Smith, J., 2015b). The rationale of "protecting children" carries a deeper implication. It ultimately seeks to safeguard audience autonomy. By employing film rating systems to moderate content in a guiding rather than prohibitive manner, viewers are empowered to make choices that suit their personal needs. This approach ensures audience autonomy and reinforces the modern principle of placing the individual at the center.

In a human-centered film rating system, freedom of expression manifests in two key ways. First, it grants creative freedom to filmmakers. Second, it empowers viewers with the freedom of self-selection. A rating system does not prescribe which films one must watch or avoid; instead, it categorizes content and allows the audience to decide freely. This is in stark contrast to a censorship system, which effectively removes that right (Smith, J., 2015a).

Another widely advocated measure is the establishment of a comprehensive film law. Such a law would codify a standardized and rational film management system, a fundamental requirement of modern rationality. A comparison between China's current censorship regulations and the U.S. Hays Code reveals distinct differences. The Hays Code consists of clear and detailed regulations. Before its implementation, the United States had already formed a film association aimed at curbing unethical and illegal practices within the industry. Due to commercial pressures and protests from various religious groups, industry leaders, along with Hays, developed the Hays Code. This code meticulously specified what could or could not be depicted on screen. During the Hays Code era, films were excluded from the First Amendment protections related to freedom of expression. In contrast, China's Film Management Regulations contain only ten brief provisions related to censorship—comprising fewer than 200 Chinese characters. Similarly, the accompanying *Film Script (Synopsis) Filing and Film Management Regulations* list only nine items for deletion or modification, totaling fewer than 500 characters. Although the Hays Code may appear overly conservative in some respects, its

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clarity and operability render it a highly standardized modern regulation. Its normative strength remains far superior to that of China's current system (Li, M., 2013b).

Moreover, detailed regulations serve as a reliable reference for filmmakers. In contrast, the ambiguous nature of China's censorship system forces directors into a trial-and-error process. A director may produce a version deemed unsuitable, re-edit, and resubmit it for review, repeatedly modifying the film until it conforms to vague standards. This process often results in a final product that is dramatically altered from the original vision. A typical example is the Hong Kong film Big Head and Great Wisdom. When released in Mainland China, this film was labeled a "bad film." However, audiences who viewed its original version in Hong Kong praised it as excellent. Extensive cuts—such as the removal of sequences involving cyclical causality—undermined the film's narrative logic. This case illustrates that the lack of clarity in current regulations leads to creative chaos, leaving directors without clear guidelines. Consequently, there have been calls for a Film Promotion Law to explicitly codify these standards. However, no such law has been enacted to date (Zhang, H., 2017).

Conclusion

To date, there appears to be a degree of resolution regarding the comparative advantages of a rating system versus a censorship system. However, a comprehensive review of the evolution of China's film management framework since the 1980s reveals that the issue is far more intricate. This complexity highlights an underlying imbalance in the development of modernity and modernization. While China has made significant strides in technological and economic modernization, the advancement of a modern cultural ethos and individual autonomy has been notably delayed (Zhao, J., 2009).

In fact, China has experimented with a film rating system. On May 1, 1989, the Ministry of Radio, Film, and Television—the predecessor of SARFT—issued a temporary notice entitled *Notice on the Implementation of a Censorship and Screening Rating System for Certain Films (Ministry of Radio, Film, and Television, 1989).* This document, which did not have the force of law, provided fluctuating guidelines for the classification of films. It explicitly designated the following types of films as not suitable for children (Table 1).

Table 1: Film Classification Based on Suitability for Children

Category	Description
Films with illegal/harmful behaviors	Includes rape, theft, drug use, drug trafficking, or prostitution.
Films with excessive violence	Includes violent, murderous, or excessively graphic content that might terrorize children.
Films with sexual content	Includes films portraying sexual content or explicit sexual behavior.
Films with socially aberrant phenomena	Includes films that exhibit socially abnormal or deviant behaviors.

Source: Notice on the Implementation of a Censorship and Screening Rating System for Certain Films (Ministry of Radio, Film, and Television, 1989)

The notice stipulated detailed procedures for the distribution, screening, and viewing of such films. Any film containing the aforementioned content had to be marked with a "not suitable for children" label prior to entering the cinema market. During distribution and screening, promotional materials—such as posters and advertisements—were required to clearly display

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this designation to ensure public awareness and caution. In addition, such films were prohibited from being shown by rural screening teams or broadcast on television (Ministry of Radio, Film, and Television, 1989). To reinforce this framework, the "Regulations on the Screening of 'Not Suitable for Children' Films" issued by the China Film Distribution and Screening Company mandated that all distribution and screening entities adhere to these provisions under the supervision of local cultural authorities (China Film Distribution and Screening Company, 1989).

Following the establishment of this rating system, the first batch of films designated as "not suitable for children" included *Widow Village* (1988), *Ghosts of the Black Building* (1989), *The Silver Snake Murder Case* (1988), and *Black Sun 731* (1988). Among these, *Widow Village* depicted the marriage customs of the Hui'an women in Fujian, illustrating how women oppressed by traditional customs aspired to a new era. *The Silver Snake Murder Case* tells the story of a film projectionist with psychological disorders who lures and brutally murders young women using a silver-ringed snake, marking director Li Shaohong's debut work. *Ghosts of the Black Building* portrays a group of filmmakers who, after recording eerie sounds, trace them to the persecutions of the Cultural Revolution; this reflective narrative later transforms into a scene set in a psychiatric hospital, where a nurse's intervention with a cart of medicine symbolically represents a sick nation (Li, X., 2008). *Black Sun 731* reflects on the human experiments conducted by Japan's Unit 731 in .

However, shortly after the rating system's introduction, the market encountered significant difficulties. Numerous screening entities exploited the system as a marketing tool, engaging in sensationalized and eroticized promotions to attract audiences. Inadequate management and part-time oversight further compounded the issue; many films marked as not suitable for children were nonetheless accessible to minors, resulting in adverse societal effects. This situation was exacerbated by the market's bifurcation of films into internal and reflective categories, with internal films being regarded as more provocative. As Professor Zhou Chuanji of Yunnan Arts Institute recalled, central leadership once resorted to live translation for internal films due to the absence of subtitles—a circumstance that underscored the chaotic implementation of the rating system and ultimately led to its abandonment (Zhou, C., 2008).

This scenario illustrates a critical issue: although there was a subjective desire to modernize film censorship by incorporating modernity into the regulatory framework, the corresponding legal mechanisms, regulatory coordination, and management practices among cultural departments and local broadcasting authorities were insufficiently developed. Without a robust and scientifically managed system to enforce sound legal provisions, the initiative proved unsustainable. In other words, mere advocacy for modernity, without a concurrent modernization of management practices, is inherently flawed. The challenges faced in the 1980s lay in harboring modern aspirations without the requisite modern management infrastructure (Wang, H., 2012; Zhao, J. , 2009).

Since the 1990s, China has progressively embarked on the path of film industrialization and commercialization. In particular, with the advent of the new millennium and the release of films such as *Hero*, the industrialization of the film sector was firmly placed on the national agenda. A series of comprehensive policies was introduced to stimulate the development of the film industry, and in recent years, the domestic market has expanded dramatically, characterized by a high volume of film productions and substantial box office revenues.

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Yet this industrial progress stands in stark contrast to the situation of the 1980s. Although a system intended to promote modernization has been established, the modern spirit—particularly in legal and cultural dimensions—has essentially been undermined. As a result, the traditional censorship system remains in force, and a rating system alone is insufficient to meet the needs of a predominantly market-driven industry. Historically, both the censorship regime and the rating system have experienced misalignments, making it difficult to definitively determine which model is superior.

At present, the future direction of Chinese cinema will largely depend on the interplay between China's cultural traditions and modernity, and on how these forces can be balanced. Considering various perspectives, it appears that under the current political system, the implementation of a film rating system in China is feasible. However, it is likely to be adopted as a dual-track system—one that incorporates both censorship and rating—similar to the model in India, where films are subject to both censorship and classification. In such a system, while fundamental principles remain intact, a relatively broader degree of flexibility is provided, thereby enabling audiences to exercise a wider range of choices.

This analysis demonstrates that the challenges of modernizing film management in China are not merely technical or administrative, but also deeply embedded in the nation's broader cultural and legal frameworks. Modernization, in this context, entails not only the advancement of industrial processes but also the evolution of a modern cultural spirit that upholds individual autonomy and creative freedom. Without a comprehensive and scientifically managed regulatory framework, modern aspirations remain unfulfilled. Thus, while the dual-track system—combining censorship with a flexible rating mechanism—may represent a pragmatic compromise, its ultimate success will depend on the integration of modern legal principles and management practices into China's cultural governance system.

In summary, the historical evolution of China's film management framework reveals the complexity of reconciling traditional censorship practices with modern regulatory aspirations. The experience of the 1980s, marked by the experimental implementation of a film rating system and its subsequent challenges, underscores the necessity for a more robust and clearly defined regulatory infrastructure. As China continues to modernize its film industry, the balance between state control and individual creative freedom remains a critical issue. The future of Chinese cinema will thus depend on the successful integration of modern management practices that respect both cultural traditions and the evolving demands of a dynamic market.

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