

Research on the Development Trends of China's Streaming Film Industry in 2024

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Abstract

Since the Streaming Film was proposed in 2014, it has gone through a complex development process, from the sprouting to the barbaric growth and then to the quality and quantity reduction. The quality of content, genre exploration, and business models have all improved, and audience satisfaction has gradually increased. Over the past decade, the number of Chinese Streaming Films has increased, and their quality has improved, improving the conventions of the subject matter and creating a good online cultural space. Relevant policies have also included Streaming Films in the overall planning, and there has been increased discussion of Streaming Films in the industry and academia. Streaming Film is emerging in Chinese cinema, and related research is constantly evolving. This study will analyze its creation's current status, development bureau, and prospects, and contribute to related research.

Keywords: streaming film, Chinese film, film studies, streaming film development

1. Introduction

The Streaming Film concept has been developing for a decade, formalizing in 2014. During this period, it experienced a complex and convoluted development process. From the initial stages of development, which may be characterized as 'sprouting', to the subsequent period of growth, which may be described as 'wild', and now to what we might term the 'quality and quantity' stage, the network film has made notable progress (Adejunmobi, M., 2018). For example, there has been a certain degree of development in terms of content, genre exploration, and business model. Furthermore, there has been a gradual increase in audience satisfaction. Lighthouse Professional, Cat's Eye Movie Professional, and iQIYI

reported that the total box office revenue of online movies in China has exceeded 15 billion yuan over the past ten years, and the number of films with an annual box office share exceeding \$10 million has surpassed 300. Since the beginning of 2019, over 160 theatrical Streaming Films have been broadcast on prominent online audio-visual platforms. Among these works, many have distinguished themselves in terms of market impact, artistic innovation, and ideological complexity. Furthermore, it has enhanced the practice of Streaming Filmmaking, encouraging the exploration of novel themes and the creation of a positive and constructive online cultural environment. It shows the humanistic concern and historical responsibility of network film as an emerging film form.

Furthermore, the 14th Five-Year Plan for China's Film Development and the Opinions on Promoting the High-Quality Development of the Radio, Television, and Online Audiovisual Industries have also recommended the incorporation of Streaming Film development into the overarching plan. In relevant academic and industrial contexts, discussions and reports on Streaming Films are becoming increasingly prevalent. From a variety of perspectives, Streaming Films have emerged as a significant and influential force in Chinese cinema, warranting serious consideration and analysis. The influence of Streaming Film is growing exponentially, and the research related to it is also undergoing significant development. This study aims to analyze and provide insight into the current state, evolution, and future potential of Streaming Film in China, with the objective of furthering advancements in related academic research.

2. The Concept of Streaming Film and Its Creative Status

2.1 Streaming Film

In 2014, the iQIYI platform proposed the concept of a 'Streaming Film', which diverges from the conventional production mode of Streaming Film and is predominantly disseminated via streaming media platforms. The industry typically defines Streaming Film as follows: films with a duration of more than 60 minutes, structured and produced to the standards of a full-length film, and released on the Internet as their primary platform, in compliance with relevant national policies and regulations. Early on, it was known as 'Netflix', or 'Netflix' for short. Streaming films possess several advantages in comparison with cinematic productions. These include a shorter production and distribution cycle, the ability of the audience to make their own choices, a relatively low viewing cost, and the potential for strong audience interaction (Cross, C., Fischer, C. & Rothermel, C., 2014). However, in contrast to the mature management mechanisms and business models observed in cinematic productions, the censorship of Streaming Films was relatively lax at the nascent stage of their development. For the sake of commercial interests, some filmmakers use the subject matter to gain eyeballs and include a lot of vulgar content such as violence, pornography, and thrillers in their creations. The low barrier to entry into the film industry has resulted in a

significant number of Streaming film creators who lack the requisite professional training and education in film and television (Dambra, S., Samela, G., Sassatelli, L., Pighetti, R., Aparicio-Pardo, R. & Pinna-Déry, A.-M., 2018). The excessive pursuit of commercial interests on the part of those in a position of authority is to blame for the lack of artistic endeavor among creators. Nevertheless, following over a decade of development, Streaming Films have moved beyond the confines of conventional genre themes, such as fantasy, tomb raiding, and comedy. Instead, they have deliberately incorporated melodrama into their narratives, driven by a desire for high-quality product development, genre expansion, and policy support. This strategic shift has yielded noteworthy outcomes.

As a consequence of continuous improvement in the management mechanisms of Streaming Films and the gradual maturation of market development, there have been considerable changes in both content production and business model. Streaming Films has reached the tenth year of its developmental trajectory, having experienced a period of rapid growth characterized by a lack of structure and coherence, before entering a phase of accelerated growth. It is now entering a new phase of development focused on enhancing its qualitative aspects.

2.2 Development Status

The adhesion of cinema has facilitated the emergence of Streaming Films experiences in China. These experiences can be conceptualized as a third fusion, following the first and second fusions of cinema with other media. China's Streaming Film was born as a consequence of the network and its concomitant rise and complementarity, which enabled its positioning in the public domain as a provider of entertainment. The survival of this new form of media, which differs markedly from existing formats, warrants close analysis and consideration. Streaming Films is currently in the early stages of development. Both the creative team and the production of content are still at a relatively basic level and do not yet approach the standard of a traditional cinematic film. Nevertheless, the regulatory policies issued by the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SARFT) in 2016 and the official implementation of the Law of the People's Republic of China on the Promotion of

the Film Industry in 2017 have resulted in Streaming Film entering a regulated development track. The government's cultural management agency's program to support Streaming Films has attracted a significant number of filmmakers, facilitating the creation and development of Streaming Films with high quality. The global spread of the new coronavirus pneumonia epidemic in 2020 had a significant impact on the film industry (Blick, W., 2021). However, Streaming Films were able to meet the audience's demand for films by virtue of their channel advantages, at least temporarily (Changsong, W., Kerry, L. & Marta, R. F., 2021). In the same year, the term 'Streaming Films' was first used as a generic term to describe a particular type of film, and the film 'Lost Mom' was released in collaboration with streaming media platforms, marking the beginning of a new trend in filmmaking known as the 'cinema-network merger'. Moreover, cinematic works that align with a more realistic aesthetic, exemplified by films such as 'Spring Tide' and 'Spring River', have witnessed a notable increase in their dissemination through streaming platforms. A significant number of Streaming film production companies are engaged in the active production of a diverse range of film genres, including fantasy, suspense, action, and others that are not typically available in cinematic films. This has contributed to a notable expansion in the content of Streaming Films, facilitating a shift towards a more diversified development path. Since 1 June 2022, the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT) has formally issued a license for online dramas. 'Leaves on the Golden Mountain' has become the inaugural Streaming Film to obtain the 'net standard', signifying the integration of Streaming Films production into a more standardized and rigorous managerial framework. From the period following the emergence of the epidemic until the present day, the domain of Streaming Film has been subject to a process of uninterrupted renewal and transformation.

3. Expanded and More Participatory Channels

In recent years, the distribution mode of Streaming Film has become increasingly expansive, with the advent of numerous broadcasting methods, including the collocation mode and the PVOD mode, otherwise known as the Premium VOD service mode. iQiyi has initiated the development of a novel service

model, designated as the 'cloud cinema' Tencent video 'cloud debut', which is designed to facilitate the integration of cinematic networks with innovative service models. The content of 'Cloud Cinema', as exemplified by iQiyi, is classified into three categories: 'cinema movies released in PVOD mode', 'S-rated network movies', and 'iQiyi produced movies'. The content available on Cloud Cinema encompasses a diverse range of film genres, including international blockbusters, domestic cinema, and high-quality network movies. On January 13, 2022, the martial arts action film *No One in Sight* (2022), which was initially released on iQiyi Cloud Cinema with a Douban rating of 7.1, will be released in cinemas in 2023. This is a notable departure from the conventional practice of sequels in the film industry, as it represents the first instance of a Streaming Film reversing course to develop a theatrical sequel. In March 2022, the Beijing Municipal Bureau of Radio, Film, and Television (BBRT) and Beijing Radio, Film and Television (BRFT) jointly launched an exhibition of Streaming Films on the theme of 'Indelible Faith'. This took the form of a BST prime-time evening broadcast. "Warrior Company" "Sniper Heroes" "Blood Bath Nameless Sichuan" "Special Hero Huang Jiguang" "Detonator" and "Survivor 1937" six Streaming Films were broadcast, this was the first time the Streaming Films landed on TV prime time, Streaming Film. This has the effect of broadening the distribution channels of Streaming Films and establishing an official recognition of such films by the mainstream media. This represents a significant step forward in the potential for Streaming Films to enter the mainstream.

4. Innovative Services with Increased Interactivity

The ability of Streaming Films to innovate is a defining characteristic of the genre. Innovation is a defining spirit of Streaming Films, which is characterized by a disregard for traditional film production norms. Instead, Streaming Films prioritizes creativity and personality, as well as audience interaction and participation. The advent of the Internet, 5G, VR, AR, artificial intelligence, and other technologies has given rise to a plethora of novel forms of Streaming Films. In addition to pop-ups, new creative forms such as virtual reality (VR) and interactive Streaming Films have enhanced the interactivity and participation of Streaming films. On 31 May

2019, *The Painter*, the inaugural online, interactive film accessible only on mobile devices, was launched on Tencent Video. The film offers viewers five distinct endings, allowing for a high degree of interactivity. The film received 3.27 million views, with numerous online users indicating that they had selected it on multiple occasions. Furthermore, the various endings prompted considerable debate. Additionally, there is the fusion with games such as *Tough Guns* and *Invisible Guardians*, which employ interactivity to facilitate immersive audience participation.

5. The Industry Is Becoming Increasingly Standardized and Boutique

In 2022, the threshold for accessing Streaming Films content was increased, and the regulatory framework governing Streaming Films distribution was aligned with that of Streaming Films. On June 1st, 2022, the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT) officially released the “Network Drama Film Distribution License,” which is analogous to the “Dragon Label” for cinema films. This label is informally known as the “Net Label” within the industry. The reality-based film *Leaves on the Golden Mountain* became the inaugural Streaming Film to obtain the “Net Label.” The reality-based film *Leaves on the Golden Mountain* has become the inaugural Streaming Film to be granted the Net Standard. In December 2022, the General Office of the State Administration of Radio and Television officially released the Notice on Matters Relating to the Administration of Distribution Licensing Services for Domestic Streaming Drama Films. The document provided further clarification on the implementation of the distribution licensing management system for Streaming drama films. The transition from a filing and registration system to a licensing and management system for online drama films signifies a pivotal advancement in the standardization of the Streaming Films industry. In the year 2022, the three principal video platforms, namely iQiyi, Tencent Video, and Youku augmented their assistance and incentives for innovative content. As an illustration, in January 2022, Youku formally inaugurated the “Fuyu Plan” for its network film track. This initiative links numerous high-quality IP platforms across the network, offering a diverse range of high-quality IP, including books, tours, movies, dramas, comics, and other forms of media, to film and

television production companies, fostering collaborative opportunities. Youku Network Films/Alibaba Pictures will provide these partners with comprehensive project development, investment, and production services, enabling a seamless integration of creative and financial resources.

6. A Risk-Controlled ‘Light Film Industry Aesthetic’ Model

The film industry has long been regarded as a high-risk enterprise due to the considerable financial outlay required and the inherent uncertainty surrounding audience demand. The production of cinematic works such as the *Wolf* series, the *Lake Changjin* series, and the *Volunteer Army* series frequently necessitates the investment of hundreds of millions of dollars and the involvement of thousands of individuals. This is a high-cost, high-investment, wide-ranging business. Even though the film has undergone complete industrialization, the risk at the box office remains relatively high. In the current era, the majority of Streaming Films with a melodramatic orientation has developed the capacity to mitigate production-related risks and enhance production capabilities through the utilization of ‘light film industry aesthetics’. The term “light film industry aesthetics” is used to describe the distinctive visual style of low-budget films that are produced with a limited budget and industrial scale, but which nevertheless achieve an aesthetic quality that can be characterized as “small but beautiful.”

Furthermore, the notion of the film industry underscores the systematic and controllable nature of film production. This is evident in the adherence to industrial production characteristics, including budget precision, standardized production processes, the institutionalization of upstream and downstream industry chains, and the controllability of box office risks. Consequently, the minimal expenditure, limited commitment, and low probability of failure associated with Streaming Films facilitate a greater degree of risk management than is possible with cinema films. This allows creators greater latitude and encourages innovation. Concurrently, it can guarantee that a prosperous genre or model will furnish the film industry with experience and a standard format. Furthermore, Streaming Films are considerably faster than cinema films concerning the filing, review, production, and distribution cycles, thus allowing for

expeditious replication, multiplication of narratives, and extensive dissemination. Additionally, from the vantage point of a robust film industry, major studios must refrain from gradual acquisitions of smaller and mid-sized film and television enterprises, while also preventing the dominance of blockbuster productions from dominant industries. Light-industry films, which are rich in subject matter and diverse in style, also deserve a secure place in the film industry, and a prosperous and strong film industry cannot be achieved without the basic support of light-industry films. In conclusion, those who invest in film are concerned with the relationship between output and input. The film entitled *Taoist Out of the Mountain*, which was produced with a budget of 280,000 yuan and subsequently earned 24 million yuan at the box office, offers an example of an ultra-high rate of return. However, such a return is difficult to achieve in the context of theatrical film.

7. Limitations of Streaming Films and Prospects for Development

7.1 Limitations of Streaming Films

As a product of the marriage of film and the Internet, Streaming Films have seen a decade of development in China and have become an important part of the Country's film and online audiovisual industries. In these 10 years, Streaming Films have undergone an iterative upgrading in terms of image form, industrial ecology, production, and business model. However, the creation of Streaming Films in China is still plagued by problems. These include low-quality works, excessive entertainment, and severe homogenization. To help Streaming Films tell a good Chinese story and achieve quality development, we should adopt a multi-pronged approach in terms of management mechanisms, content production, and talent cultivation.

It is widely recognized that online cinema has unique media attributes, which stem from its important connection with the Internet. During this decade, the network film from "germination" to "barbaric growth" and then to today's "quality and quantity" rapid development has also revealed many problems, especially. The main manifestation:

- 1) The quality of work is generally not high and there is a lack of leading industry breakthroughs.

Streaming Films has the characteristics of a low threshold of creation, a short production cycle, and low investment risk. This is both the advantage and the disadvantage of Streaming Films. Because of this low threshold and the short and quick production, it is often difficult to guarantee the quality of their work. Although the quality of the content of Streaming films has improved to some extent in recent years, following the advocacy of 'reducing the quantity and improving quality' and 'excellence', the overall quality is still generally not high enough to meet the needs of the audience. From the point of view of word of mouth, Douban's rating of 6 points above the number of Streaming Films works is not many but can reach 7 points or even 8 points above the rarer. It can be said that the quality of the work is generally not high, which is still a prominent problem in the current Streaming Films.

- 2) Excessive entertainment, Streaming Films naturally carries the gene of network culture.

This 'networkedness' has led to Streaming Films being generally regarded as a kind of fast-food culture full of entertainment and carnival colors. From content production to distribution and marketing, Streaming Films have always followed the logic of the commercial market, to achieve maximum economic benefit. Under this commercial mechanism, some creators regard Streaming Films only as a tool to make money, neglecting their aesthetic and cultural value attributes, resulting in a general tendency towards excessive entertainment and even a lot of "triple vulgarity" (vulgarity, vulgarity, and kitsch), which has produced a negative social impact.

- 3) Lack of innovation and serious homogenization of content.

Influenced by the bad culture of the industry, Streaming Films generally lack the pursuit of content quality. Especially under the dominance of commercial thinking, creators often tend to imitate existing success stories, resulting in a large number of works with very similar stories, plots, characters, and other aspects. This highly homogeneous phenomenon reveals the lack of creativity in Streaming Films boasting.

7.2 Development Prospects

Streaming Films has experienced a new stage from the rough barbaric growth and flow-type explosive growth to the improvement of quality

and efficiency, boutique creation. The State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television, provincial management departments are also constantly exploring support measures, the next step is to open up venture capital activities, so that the Streaming Films from their own “small circle”, with high-quality resources to attract high-quality talent to participate in the creation of Streaming Films. On the first day of the Shanghai TV Festival, the “2024 Network Film Venture Capital Youth Creation Plan” was officially launched. This is the first time in a decade of Streaming Films development by the State Administration of Radio and Television, the Shanghai Municipal Bureau of Radio and Television, and other relevant units to guide the love of the three major video platforms to jointly implement a series of plans in recent years in the trough of the Streaming Films has ushered in a series of supportive policies.

Streaming Films must learn from the mature production experience and artistic expression of traditional films, and constantly improve their own creative level and artistic value. Traditional film should also actively embrace the emerging industry of Streaming Films using its flexible and diverse communication channels and broad audience base to expand its market space and influence. The audio-visual network has become a new position for literary and artistic creation in the new era, showing the development trend of diversification and excellence moving in the same direction and promoting each other. The future development of network film must be relayed together, with joint efforts, casting network film “new engine”: with self-confidence and self-improvement, integrity and innovation, renewing the network film “source of power”: cultivate Yingyuyu talent, talent pool, and wisdom, drawing network film “new blueprint”. New blueprint.

To foster cultural self-assurance and self-sufficiency, and to establish a robust socialist culture, it is essential to integrate the fundamental tenets of Marxism with the specific circumstances of China and its exemplary traditional culture, thereby imparting them with novel spiritual nuances that resonate with the present era. As a medium of cultural entertainment that is particularly accessible to the audience, Streaming Films has the potential to draw upon the rich heritage of traditional Chinese culture, disseminating its exemplary ideological concepts and spiritual values.

Furthermore, it can facilitate cross-cultural exchange and foster mutual understanding between different civilizations, while also elucidating the shared values that unite humanity. To enhance the quality of Streaming film content, it is essential to refine and elevate the narrative and value expression in a manner that is distinctive to Chinese culture. This approach will enable filmmakers to effectively influence the cultural preferences and mindset of global audiences, showcasing Chinese cultural values and ideals in a manner that resonates with a global audience. By presenting a credible, appealing, and respectable image of China, filmmakers can contribute to the advancement of a robust socialist culture, characterized by the advancement of high-quality Streaming Films production. The advancement of a robust socialist cultural nation will be facilitated by the superior quality of Streaming Films production.

8. Conclusion

In recent years, China’s Streaming film industry has achieved notable advancements in terms of both quantity and quality. The industry as a whole is actively engaged in exploring the potential for excellence in Streaming films, maintaining market stability in the face of complex external factors, and promoting the growth of Streaming films in international markets. The Streaming Films industry is confronted with a multitude of challenges. These include the insufficient supply of high-quality content, the inadequate diversification of development, and the underperformance of the market, particularly in relation to films with limited commercial appeal. Nevertheless, we contend that the principal driving force behind future development will continue to be the innovation of content and the identification and nurturing of talent. It is anticipated that network film will facilitate artistic exploration and expression of cultural values, thereby contributing to a more expansive and comprehensive cultural landscape.

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