

# Youthful Narrative Strategies in New Mainstream Chinese Cinema

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**Abstract:** *In recent years, China's new mainstream films have delved deeply into the realms of magnetization and youthful expression. They have not only adhered to the core of mainstream values but also adopted a myriad of youth-oriented narrative strategies. These strategies abandon the stereotypes of the past and embrace a more vibrant and youthful perspective that intimately connects with the audience demographic. By vividly and profoundly narrating Chinese stories and conveying the essence of Chinese spirit, this transformation has not only met the aesthetic demands of young audiences but also infused new vitality and creativity into the film industry. This paper aims to deeply analyze the main types and significance of the diverse youth-oriented narrative strategies employed by recent new mainstream films. Additionally, it will examine the current challenges and dilemmas faced, with the hope of providing richer perspectives for the sustained prosperity and future creations of the new mainstream film industry.*

**Keywords:** *mainstream films; youthful narrative; innovative film expression*

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Definition of New Mainstream Movies

New mainstream films have liberated themselves from the constraints of a singular educational function and surpassed the limitations of purely commercial pursuits, evolving into a novel cinematic form that harmoniously blends educational depth with market influence. They encompass a wide range of themes, spanning realities, histories, sci-fi, and more.<sup>[1]</sup> These cinematic works pursue innovation in narrative techniques and integrate modern technological means, presenting audiences with a breathtaking viewing experience. The reason why new mainstream films are deeply loved by young audiences is that they successfully infuse mainstream values into colorful stories, allowing young people to immerse themselves in an audiovisual feast while subtly embracing mainstream culture, fostering a profound identification with core values such as patriotism and social justice.<sup>[1]</sup> This subtle and imperceptible mode of transmission embodies the unique charm of new mainstream films. In conclusion, the core essence of new mainstream films lies in their dual identity: they are both popular films embraced and recognized by the mainstream market, and cultural carriers that vividly convey mainstream values. With an open attitude towards the changes of the times, they lead cinematic trends with an innovative spirit, serving as a bridge connecting the past with the future, tradition with modernity.

### 1.2. Research Background

Traditional thematic films often overlooked emotional connections with audiences due to their sole reliance on grand narratives and positive propaganda, leading to aesthetic fatigue. With social development and the diversification of young audiences' aesthetic preferences, traditional forms of expression have become increasingly unable to satisfy their demands. As young viewers constitute a significant consumer group in the film market, their aesthetic preferences and emotional needs exert a crucial influence on film creation, prompting filmmakers to continuously adapt to these changes and shift towards youth-oriented narrative strategies.<sup>[2]</sup> According to the "2024 Spring Festival Box Office Data Insight Report" by Maoyan Research Institute, during the Spring Festival season, which generated over 8 billion yuan in total box office sales, three new mainstream films, including "Pegasus 2," garnered the favor of young audiences through innovative storytelling and themes, achieving high box office results and audience satisfaction rates, demonstrating the strong competitiveness of new mainstream films in the market and the enthusiastic response from young viewers.

### **1.3. Research Objective and Significance**

The youthful narrative strategies of new mainstream films have not only directly fueled box office growth and generated enthusiastic audience feedback, but also served as a vital bridge for the transmission of mainstream values and the fostering of cultural confidence. Through these youthful narratives, new mainstream films artfully weave their tales, allowing young audiences to be subtly nurtured by mainstream values. This subtle approach has brought mainstream values closer to the hearts of the younger generation, igniting a resonance and identification with core values such as patriotism and social justice.

The cultural values of the Chinese nation are deeply rooted in the fertile soil of millennia of civilization, and modern mainstream films have emerged as a new vehicle for excavating and inheriting these invaluable cultural elements. Taking "Ne Zha: I Am the Destiny" as an example, the film seamlessly blends ancient Chinese traditional myths with cutting-edge animation technology, creating a unique artistic style that is both nationally distinctive and internationally appealing. Such works have not only garnered high praise from audiences but also, imperceptibly, bolstered cultural confidence.

As new mainstream films continue to delve deeper into youthful expressions, they will further promote the excellence of Chinese culture, convey positive mainstream values, and enhance the country's cultural soft power.

## **2. Strategic Analysis**

### **2.1. Focus on Ordinary Youth**

The character portrayals in new mainstream films encompass not only heroic figures but also those of ordinary individuals, such as young adults, entrepreneurs, and social workers. These characters are often based on real-life stories or social phenomena, and through meticulous depiction and authentic emotional expression, they more readily resonate with young audiences. Beyond the lead protagonists, every minor character is imbued with distinctiveness. Youthful elements like love, friendship, and dreams are fully showcased in new mainstream films. By illustrating the setbacks, confusions, and struggles experienced during character growth, these films have created a cast of vibrant, emotional, and multi-layered youth personas. This not only enriches the depth of character portrayals but also enhances the film's appeal and emotional impact.

The film "Miracle · Boy" focuses on the entrepreneurial story of a new era in Shenzhen, centering on an inconspicuous young man who lacks both a prestigious background and exceptional talents. Yet, he pens his own miracle through steadfastness and perseverance. This ordinary yet authentic protagonist enables young audiences to find a deeper resonance within the character, as the challenges he faces and setbacks he endures are all part of the growth journey that anyone might encounter. This lifelike portrayal stands apart from online motivational clichés or hollow inspirational slogans, as every fall and rise of the protagonist feels genuine and relatable.

On the Douban movie platform, the film has garnered a rating of 7.4, while its box office surpassed 1.1 billion yuan, demonstrating its commercial success as well as its communicative value.

### **2.2. Narrative units in the form of a compilation**

As online communication increasingly fragments, short videos have won the favor of a vast audience with their unique charm, posing challenges to the traditional two-hour movie-watching experience where viewers may struggle to maintain full concentration for extended periods. In this context, skillfully integrating standalone segments into the overall film narrative has become not only a crucial strategy for attracting young audiences but also a significant direction in the exploration of youthful film narrative art. This requires creators to maintain the coherence of the film's story while focusing on the conciseness and appeal of each segment. By employing a compact pace, clear themes, and profound emotional resonance, the film can be both layered and cohesive, thereby satisfying modern audiences' – especially the young generation's – demand for quick, efficient, and creative viewing experiences.

The seven stories in the film "My People, My Country" all connect ordinary people with national events, each standing alone as a complete narrative yet collectively weaving into a grand cinematic tapestry. Through a civilian lens and highly dramatic storytelling techniques, the film showcases the emotions and sacrifices of ordinary individuals behind significant national milestones, igniting viewers'

patriotic sentiments and collective memories. Since its release, the film has led the way in critical acclaim across all platforms, achieving ratings of 9.7 on Maoyan, 9.5 on Taopiaopiao, and 8.0 on Douban. Notably, it holds the highest rating for a domestic film on the Maoyan platform. As the box office champion of the National Day holiday season, "My People, My Country" surpassed 2.4 billion yuan in cumulative ticket sales, ranking among the top 10 highest-grossing Chinese films. Furthermore, it boasted the highest percentage of second and multiple viewings during that holiday period, indicating a strong demand for this anthology-style film. Clearly, the cinematic strategy of utilizing an anthology narrative format holds immense potential for development in the film industry.

### ***2.3. Veteran actors & new generation share the stage***

Amidst the flourishing fan economy, new actors attract a vast array of young fans. As young audiences increasingly dominate the film landscape, integrating fresh talent into mainstream productions leverages fan enthusiasm, bolstering cinema attendance. However, striking a balance between ensuring film quality and accommodating new actors' limited experience is crucial. Seasoned actors, armed with deep acting prowess, serve as both quality guardians and mentors to the newcomers, fostering an intergenerational fusion that blends diverse age groups and performance styles. Veterans evoke nostalgia, while newcomers captivate with their vigor and novelty.

The popular movie "The Battle at Lake Changjin" well embodies the integration effect of fan economy and movie quality. The film, co-starring veteran actors Wu Jing, Hu Jun, and Duan Yihong alongside newcomer Yi Yangqianxi, has achieved tremendous success. With box office revenue exceeding 6 billion yuan, it has broken the record of Chinese box office. In the movie, the superb acting skills and rich experience of the veteran actors provide artistic value to the film. These veteran actors guided the performance of the new actor Yi Yangqianxi and helped enrich the depth of the character. This cross-generational cooperation not only diversified the performance styles but also promoted mutual growth between the two sides. Yi Yangqianxi, with his huge young fan base, greatly enhanced the popularity of the movie and, to some extent, boosted its box office. His fans actively promoted the movie, attracting a wider range of audience groups. This enthusiastic grassroots response improved the visibility and box office returns of the movie, reflecting changes in audience demographics and preferences. [3] "The Battle at Lake Changjin", which fully harnesses the momentum of the fan economy and the quality assurance of veteran actors, marks a triumphant milestone in the Chinese film industry. This case underscores the power of strategic casting and collaborative creativity in driving industry success.

In the future of filmmaking, it is advisable to continue exploring and implementing this cross-generational cooperation, infusing fresh vitality into the thriving film industry.

## **3. Development Challenges**

### ***3.1. How to balance the artistic value and the commercial viability***

In the pursuit of balancing artistry and commerciality in new mainstream films, it is crucial to establish the film's core aspiration at the initial stage of the project – whether it leans towards pure artistic exploration, market-driven commercial success, or a harmonious blend of both. A clear direction will serve as a solid foundation for the entire film production process.

Through meticulous market research and profound audience analysis, we grasp the preferences and expectations of our target audience. When crafting the screenplay, we strive to create stories that captivate, themes that resonate deeply, and characters that are vividly portrayed, all while accommodating the interests and demands of the audience, thereby achieving a harmonious coexistence between artistry and commerciality.

In the later stages of creation, it is essential to draw inspiration from successful cases such as "Wolf Warrior 2" and "The Wandering Earth," exemplary films that boldly ventured into new subject matters and forms of expression, ushering in a fresh era for the film industry. As the saying goes, "If today we make a fresh start, we must make a fresh start every day thereafter." Continuous exploration and innovation are the inevitable paths to satisfying the ever-evolving needs and expectations of audiences.

### ***3.2. How to combine individual arousal with thematic expression***

Zhang Yongxin, the director of "The Age of Awakening", once said, "Young audiences never reject

the theme of the times. What they reject are the works that are suspended, unrealistic, rough and careless."<sup>[4]</sup>

In the future creation of new mainstream films, it is necessary to adhere to the principle of people-oriented creation, draw on the advantages of previous theme films, and focus on the viewing needs of the younger generation as individuals as well as the thematic expressions of modern society, so that audiences can see "three-dimensional characters" rather than "two-dimensional roles." Only by continuously exploring the two questions of how to reflect social groups through individual youths and how to highlight major themes through small images, can the social significance and existential value of theme films be truly realized.

In the film "Wonder Boy," the protagonist fiercely pursues a speeding train while the background music, "Run Forward," seamlessly blends with the rapidly edited and fast-paced footage. On screen, we see the protagonist Jinghao's relentless strides, his perspiration mingling with dust as he pushes through, bruised and battered yet unyielding. Beyond the frame, the metaphorical "running" represents the fearless strides of countless young people across the vast landscape of our times. These young individuals in real life, some thriving in their careers while others still navigating their paths, can genuinely resonate with the "running" depicted in the film, as it mirrors their own life's journey of perseverance and pursuit.

#### 4. Conclusion

New mainstream films occupy a significant position in China's film industry and exhibit a formidable development trend that cannot be overlooked. In terms of ideological depth and artistic expression, they boldly break through traditions, innovate fearlessly, and skillfully integrate the "vigor of youth," touching the hearts of a vast audience through ordinary yet profound stories. Furthermore, they have successfully breached the inherent barrier between the pursuit of mainstream values and commercial success.

Looking ahead, new mainstream films should unwaveringly continue their youth-oriented creative approach, deeply exploring and embodying the spiritual essence and national soul of the new era. Concurrently, they must persist in exploring and innovating subject matter and expression techniques, boldly blazing trails to propel China's film industry towards high-quality development from a diverse, open, and forward-looking stance. By narrating exceptional Chinese narratives, they will illuminate the unique allure and profound essence of Chinese culture.

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