

Transnational Circulation and Cultural Legacy of Sinophone Cinema in the Digital Era

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Abstract: This paper examines the transnational circulation and cultural legacy of sinophone cinema in the context of contemporary digital media. Based on recent research in transnational film studies, platform studies, and cultural memory theory, this paper argues that sinophone cinema has an unusual place in the digital age; while streaming platforms and diaspora networks have increased its international dissemination, concurrent forces of mainstream integration, co-production pressures, and post-2019 political restrictions have fundamentally changed its identity and cultural meaning. By analysing distribution circuits, platform politics and community-screening practices, this study reveals how this cinematic heritage is continually constructed through diasporic viewing communities and alternative exhibition networks. Therefore, it is held that digital platforms not only serve as unbiased transmitters but actually create which aspects of sinophone cinema's cultural legacy are preserved overseas and appreciated globally.

Keywords: Snophone Cinema; Transnational Cinema; Digital Distribution; Teaming Platforms; Cultural Legacy; Diaspora

1. Introduction

For most of the twentieth century, this regional film and television tradition played an unparalleled role in the development of world cinema. It ranks among the world's top film production nations based on per capita output, producing films that combine a high level of commercialization with artistic characteristics; these films have been exported to consumers in South-east Asia, East Asia, and among the Chinese diaspora, and they are even popular in international markets. Its general innovation, such as the kung-fu film and the heroic-bloodshed subgenre, had a lasting impact in world popular cinema; these films also

influenced other filmmakers and industries worldwide. Yet the same industry that once defined regional popular cinema has confronted a series of existential pressures since the late 1990s: declining theatrical attendance; the complex cultural aftermath of the 1997 handover; closer ties with the Chinese market through co-production imperatives following the 2003 Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement (CEPA); the seismic disruptions of the 2019 social movement; and the National Security Law enacted in June 2020.

The digital media revolution has at the same time both challenged and revived this cinema's international audience. Streaming platforms such as Netflix, iQIYI International, Viu, Hi-Yah! and Disney+ make sinophone films accessible worldwide. There is a community screening networks established in diaspora cities such as Vancouver and London, where politically sensitive works cannot be released on conventional film release platforms. The digital era may have expanded the transnational reach of sinophone films, but it has also altered the conditions for creating, discussing, and protecting its cultural identity in a new form.

Through three linked analytical perspectives, this paper explores these transformations. First, it explores how digital distribution platforms transform the circuits and geopolitics of sinophone film circulation. Secondly, this paper analyses how political restrictions after 2019 and the interplay between production pressures and platform logics have contributed to the reconfiguration of Sinophone cinema's identity. Third, it investigates how diaspora communities and alternative exhibition practices maintain cultural memory for sinophone cinema under domestic restrictions. The study draws upon recent research in transnational cinema studies, platform studies, and cultural memory theory, along with relevant data on production trends, platform content strategies, and distribution patterns. The main idea is that sinophone

cinema's cultural legacy is neither uniformly preserved nor erased; it can be contested through various politically diverse archival and distribution structures, which include the efforts of diaspora communities to create alternative exhibition practices that challenge domestic restrictions and promote cultural memory.

2. Theoretical Framework

Analytical Framework: Three Converging Bodies of Scholarship. The first perspective draws on transnational cinema studies, which emphasise that film circulation is shaped by unequal geopolitical and economic conditions rather than occurring as a form of frictionless cultural exchange. More recent scholarship has increasingly adopted decolonising perspectives and paid greater attention to non-Western industrial and regulatory contexts. Yang and Higbee point out that research on Sino-international film co-productions needs to consider four different historical periods in China's film policy, including state-led nationalisation, post-2001 liberalisation of trade under the WTO [1], and now Belt-and-Road-inspired globalisation. Rejecting the notion of "soft power instrumentality," this framework focuses on industrial, aesthetic, and political interactions among media industries to determine the outcomes of co-productions and their cultural implications.

Platform studies are another strand of the literature that has expanded considerably over the past few years as they explore non-western digital media ecologies. The comparative study by Lotz and Eklund [2] among non-U.S.-based streaming service providers can also be used as a reference for identifying the approaches adopted by the international streaming platforms of these three Asian companies to overseas content acquisition. Instead of achieving a form of globalisation, these platforms express regional and diaspora identities; however, their state-linked ownership structure directly impacts political sensitivity, which in turn affects the

dissemination route of politically charged sinophone cinema. Therefore, it cannot be considered an equal platform or merely a means of regulatory oversight; rather, it has a selective nature in offering its spaces and functions, which limits the diversity of voices and narratives that can be shared, particularly those that challenge the political status quo.

The third theoretical register is cultural memory studies that understand cinema as a means of recording, disputing and transgenerationally passing down communal experiences. Building on this legacy, recent studies focusing on post-2019 sinophone cinema have expanded the scope of cinematic remembrance to include community film screenings and diaspora-based spectatorship as key sites for cultural heritage transmission. According to Wu's theory of community screenings as a performance of civic recognition [3], other research has also shown that cultural memory in the era of digitalisation is not just stored within archival systems; it exists in collective experiences realised through performances that construct dislocated communities based on common political and historical understandings. Taking these three theoretical paths as an overall basis for investigating the ways in which sinophone cinema's transnational circulation is connected with issues of cultural identity, platform governance and diasporic memory in the context of digitalisation.

3. Sinophone Cinema in the Digital Ecosystem

The digitalisation of film distribution has given rise to a paradox: although global reach is broader than ever, the new model of access, curation and content control determines which films can be presented. Who will view these films, and under what circumstances? Table 1 lists the main streaming platforms that feature sinophone cinema programmes and have different content strategies due to various reasons such as ownership structure, regulation environment and audience characteristics.

Table 1. Major Streaming Platforms and Their Sinophone Film Content Strategies (2023-2025)

Platform	Ownership / HQ	Sinophone Film Library (est.)	Content Focus	Geographic Reach
Netflix	US-headquartered (Nasdaq-listed)	80–120 titles	Classic martial arts & genre films; select the SAR (Special Administrative Region) co-productions	190+ territories (Mainland China excluded)
iQIYI International	Mainland China-listed (Baidu-)	200–350 titles	the SAR–the Mainland China co-productions; drama serials;	SE Asia, Middle East, diaspora markets

	affiliated)		politically Mainland China-compliant	
Viu	PCCW Ltd. (Sinophone-headquartered)	150–250 titles	Cantonese drama; local SAR productions; niche genre content	SE Asia, Middle East, Sinophone Special Administrative Region (SAR)
Hi-Yah!	Well Go USA Entertainment (Texas, US)	300–500 titles	Martial arts, action, classic SAR genre canon (Ip Man franchise etc.)	North America; select global streaming
Disney+	Walt Disney Co. (US)	40–80 titles	Prestige SAR co-productions; selected archive titles	100+ territories (Mainland China excluded)

From Table 1, we can see that the platform layout of sinophone film is diverse and politically divided. Jacks and Li analyzed Chinese-language film distribution in North American cinema houses; distributors' selection criteria for acquiring films and their commercial intentions will directly influence which films are imported [4]. Similar issues can also be observed on streaming platforms. Hi-Yah!, run by Well Go USA Entertainment, has gathered an extensive collection of classic sinophone martial arts and genre films, including the Ip Man series—marketed mainly at North America's genre fans and overseas communities. This platform has focused on the inheritance of genre to define this cinema as a category for preserving its transnational nature and excluding discussion of current social changes.

However, iQIYI International's content strategy is based on the regulatory requirements of its Mainland China-listed parent company. The platform carries a large volume of sinophone–Mainland China co-productions compliant with Mainland China regulatory screening requirements but excludes works addressing the 2019 social movements, pre-handover historical memory, or post-National Security Law political dissent. There is thus a dual digital archive: On one hand, there are some platforms inside the Mainland China's regulatory system that display sinophone cinema as entertainment genres and cultural affinity with Mainland China. However, some external systems (such as Netflix and Viu) face no such restrictions, but they may still encounter commercial constraints. Lotz and Eklund found in their study of US-based streaming services focus on domestic content versus global standards across multiple titles [2] that supports the explanation for why Viu is more committed to producing content in Cantonese, despite having a majority stakeholder base from the region (which could be considered a counterbalance towards more politically acceptable content). The research by Su on

digital distribution in the greater Chinese media ecosystem shows that, influenced by multiple factors such as market needs, regulations, and technical conditions, platform operations are constrained from various angles; it cannot be explained comprehensively using any one theory [5].

4. Co-Production, Hybridization, and the Transformation of Sinophone Cinematic Identity

The Digital Age, rather than reversing it, has accelerated the structural change in sinophone cinema started by CEPA in 2003. Under CEPA, These co-productions are classified as Mainland China films and can enter the large Mainland China market but must must comply with Mainland China's requirements regarding production, casting, and censorship. Wang and Ye explored the cultural hybridity in cross-border film production, arguing that such practices are not merely cultural integration but rather a strategic adjustment: while film creators conform to mainstream industry norms, they still retain distinct Chinese cultural characteristics [6].

This process of hybridization operates at three levels: cast integration, modification of plot content according to market demand. Production infrastructure enhancement: utilising resources from Mainland China to expand production scale and strengthen production capabilities.

Various factors in the post-2020 digital environment have exacerbated this mixture. After the regional theater market contracted due to the COVID-2019 pandemic, many works had no other choice but to be distributed through Mainland China streaming platforms. The National Security Law adds new uncertainty to the content about sinophone politics, pre-handover cultural heritage, and so on in order to drive self-censorship of works intended for a Mainland China audience, which may result in a homogenization of narratives that align with

Mainland China government perspectives. Moreover, digital forms may lean towards serialized, platform-friendly content more suitable for Mainland China IP systems compared to the auteur-focused or genre-diverse approach of sinophone cinema's creative peak,

which has led to a homogenization of storytelling that prioritizes commercial viability over artistic expression. As shown in Table 2, a series of structural changes occurred over the five years from 2019 to 2024.

Table 2. Sinophone Film Industry Key Indicators, 2019-2024.

Year	Local Sinophone-only Productions	Sinophone–Domestic Chinese Co-productions	Over The Top (OTT)/streaming releases (Sinophone content, est.)	Theatrical Admissions (millions)
2019	42	31	28	28.4
2020	29	22	47	9.8
2021	33	28	68	15.2
2022	38	35	89	20.6
2023	41	40	112	23.7
2024	37	44	138	22.1

Table 2 shows the changes as follows. The OTT/streaming release of sinophone content has increased nearly fivefold in the past five years, reaching around 138 in 2024; the Mainland China co-produced works surpassed purely local productions in 2024. This trend is an obvious change from quantity to quality for the industrialization direction. Yeh and Davis's policy analysis explains these problems in this way: after adjusting to the streamer-based funding model from 2022, the SAR Government announced the introduction of a content development scheme for streaming platforms in late 2022 [7]. Therefore, although sinophone cinema has achieved a certain level of internationalization in this system, there are still conflicts between the cultural mission to protect against the pressures of globalisation and the expansion of streaming business models. In conjunction with the long-term effects of economic factors, regulation and technology on sinophone cinema, it is gradually transforming into one type among many under the unified banner of Mainland China films, and thus may lead to the dilution of its unique cultural identity and storytelling traditions.

5. Cultural Legacy, Diasporic Memory, and Alternative Circulation Networks

In light of the situation of Mainland China-integration and platform politics, a parallel circuit for cultural transmission has emerged to carry on the political and historical legacies of sinophone cinema through diaspora community practices. Wu's ethnomethodological study provides an account of this process [3]. Documentaries such as "Inside the Red Brick Wall" (2020) and "Revolution of Our Times"

(2021) were subject to regulatory screening at home and, although not listed on domestic mainstream streaming platforms, were spread through ticketed events, rent-a-theaters and overseas film festival exhibitions. Wu has identified the above activities as producing a kind of diasporic spectatorship in the making: a type of audience group formed by the connection between film consumption and political consciousness regarding regional politics, which establishes a viewing community based on screen culture but not territorial presence.

This community-based circulation model is a particular type of cultural-memory production and does not aim to resolve the problem of platform regulatory screening directly. Wu and Lai have studied the ten years of omnibus films and their later international adaptations (such as Thai, Japanese and other Asian adaptations) from 2018 to 2023. They show that the political imagination of sinophone cinema has become a model for dystopian narratives across Southeast Asia dealing with autocracy and democracy collapse in this period [8]. Within the transnational network, the legacy of sinophone cinema no longer functions as an immovable archive of past glory but rather as a living cultural model that circulates across multiple national borders far from those defined by platform operators or state authorities. Ten Years Project is an example demonstrating that the legacy of sinophone cinema both remains localized and gains global mobility, thereby embodying a sense of local identity within transnational cooperation.

Tam explores the relationship between films, places, and memory in the context of social-activist documentaries produced in the region.

Her analysis of documentaries tracking contested urban sites such as Queen's Pier, Choi Yuen Village, and Kowloon rooftop communities argues that they form a folk record of local life, challenging the dominant ideology of modernization and land reclamation alongside maintaining social memory of eroded spaces described by officials. [9] Works circulated in the digital age flow on social media, online platforms, community events, etc., and reach diaspora communities far from the original sites of memory that have become detached entirely from physical environments. Wong has examined the impact of the 2021 film "Lost in the Fumes" on the collective experience of dispersed protesters through forms of affective political mobilisation at a distance; it also serves as a form of historical memory and a means of political cohesion for isolated groups [10]. In short, the above cases show that the cultural heritage of sinophone cinema has been actively renewed in the digital era through alternative circulation and community-based public viewing.

6. Discussion

The above analysis demonstrates that a single theoretical approach cannot explain the cross-border circulation of sinophone cinema in the digital age. Its global reach is achieved by way of the streaming service; however, as a result, this representation breaks down in several places, both contradictory. Martial arts and genre legacies appearing in Hi-Yah! and Netflix are one way that sinophone cinema has constructed its global image—aesthetically unique, entertainment-oriented, relatively politically neutralized, and adapted for transnational commercial release. A second round is released via iQIYI International and other Mainland China-licensed platforms: co-produced, blended, and economically incorporated into Mainland China media environment under the condition of losing political and cultural uniqueness. The third version traverses the screens of diaspora communities and international film festivals, forming a form of counter-archive memory practice that preserves works excluded from mainstream digital distribution and reconstructs political community in dispersed geography. These three forms of circulation are not just different manifestations of the same kind of cultural inheritance; rather, there is an active politics of representation that actually affects how people understand, preserve, and pass down

the history of sinophone films among their children. Yang and Higbee have called for a second stage of research on transnational cinema to seriously consider platform politics, co-production policies and diaspora agency in their work on second-generation transcultural film [1]. At the same time, with the arrival of the digital era, new questions have emerged about what "sinophone cinema" is and who watches it today. According to Yeh and Davis's policy analysis, institutions' responses to the platformization problem have generally accommodated it without resistance; thus, they cannot be seen as effective ways for governments at all levels to resist commercialized and geopolitically pressurized structural challenges in culture. Zhang's research on strategic hybridization proposes that an individual creative agency can retain some dimensions of cultural particularity under co-production constraints; however, systematic power revealed in the previous sections operates at a system level where individuals' artworks cannot be resisted individually.

7. Conclusion

In this paper, it was pointed out that under the condition of the development of digital technology, sinophone Cinema's transnational circulation features three trends happening concurrently but contradicting each other at times: The expansion of global dissemination via online release; Disruption of cultural cohesion due to hybrid production and platform control, which can lead to fragmented audience experiences; and emerging alternative diaspora circuits preserving the political sensitivity of sinophone cinema, which highlight the diverse ways in which the films are received and interpreted in various cultural contexts. Together, these processes can be called the "Digital Condition of Sinophone Cinema." It allows for a relatively wide spread overseas at the same time as imposing political differences on how it is perceived across different contexts, which can lead to varying interpretations and receptions of sinophone cinema based on local cultural and political climates.

The cultural heritage of sinophone cinema is not a set of data awaiting uploading on the network; instead, it continuously generates and reinterprets under conditions such as platform restrictions, national policies, industrial norms, and community activities for its existence. In the

future, further study should be conducted on audience practice in community-screening networks and its long-term impact on how sinophone cinema is perceived by young generations worldwide through platform-curating algorithms, as well as changes in the policy environment influenced by both commercialization and cultural construction at regional institutions. There are both theoretical and practical values in this research on film studies at present, and given this, it is necessary for films to document, inherit, and comment on the history of their country over time in order to be relevant to the present day.

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