

# Trends and Influencing Factors in Film Box Office: A Study on Chinese Domestic and International Films

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## Abstract:

At present, box office performance has become one of the critical indicators of a film's success. Both domestic and international film markets have shown steady growth; however, the box office performance of different films varies significantly. In light of this, this paper focuses on the box office development of domestic and foreign films, reviewing and analyzing the factors that influence the box office performance of many films. Additionally, a comparative analysis between domestic and foreign films is conducted. According to research findings, the primary factors affecting the box office performance of domestic films include the "mainstream" theme, storyline, realistic social topics, release timing, and multimedia promotion. In contrast, the factors influencing the box office performance of foreign films mainly involve the production company, country of origin, type of film, technological innovation, and online reputation. Based on these findings, this paper further analyzes the shortcomings that have led to the box office failures of both domestic and foreign films. Furthermore, recommendations for enhancing box office performance, applicable to all films, are proposed from four dimensions: film content, filming technology, market timing, and marketing strategies.

**Keywords:** Box Office; Influencing Factors; Domestic Films; Overseas Films.

## 1. Introduction

Box office performance can be measured by either the number of viewers or ticket revenue, and it generally refers to the commercial success of a film or theatrical production. The term "development trend" indicates the sequence or tendency of growth exhibited by an entity over time. The trend in box office performance serves as a predictor of the future trajectory of the film market. Since the onset of the pandemic, both domestic and international film markets have been severely impacted, with 2020 being a particularly sluggish year. Fortunately, in recent years, the trend in box office performance has shown signs of steady recovery globally. Nowadays, box office revenue has become one of the most critical indicators of a film's success. The primary objective of this study is to analyze the factors that influence box office performance in domestic markets and compare them to those affecting international markets. The study aims to identify effective

methods for boosting box office revenue. This paper will employ case studies and comparative research to examine the factors that impact box office performance. It will first discuss the elements influencing box office performance for both domestic and international films, followed by a comparative analysis of cases where high-budget films failed to achieve box office success. The reasons behind these failures will be explored, ultimately leading to the identification of strategies to enhance box office performance.

## 2. Domestic and International Film Development Status and Trends

### 2.1 Development of the Chinese Film Box Office

Based on the annual reports of the film industry over the past five years, the following data has been compiled:

**Table 1. Total Box Office Revenue of Chinese Films in the Past Five Years [1-5]**

Year	Box Office Income	Proportion of the total domestic box office
2019	41.175 billion yuan	64.07%
2020	17.093 billion yuan	83.72%

2021	39.927 billion yuan	84.49%
2022	25.511 billion yuan	84.85%
2023	46.05 billion yuan	/

It can be observed that, although the Chinese film market has faced uncertainties and challenges due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in some fluctuations, it is steadily recovering. The overall recovery has been positive, with the market retaining its vitality and gearing up for future growth (Table 1).

## 2.2 Development of the International Film Box Office

Based on the cumulative overseas box office data from the Box Office Mojo by IMDbPro website over the past five years, the following information has been compiled [6]:

**Table 2. Overseas Box Office Totals Over the Past Five Years**

Year	Box Office Income	Rise
2019	\$11.363 billion	-4.4%
2020	\$2.113 billion	-81.4%
2021	\$4.483 billion	112.1%
2022	\$7.37 billion	64.4%
2023	\$8.908 billion	20.9%

It can be seen that the international film market was significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, after experiencing a downturn during the pandemic, a gradual recovery began in 2021, exhibiting a trend of steady growth (Table 2).

## 3. Factors Influencing the Box Office Performance of Chinese Films

### 3.1 Thematic Mainstream Films

Thematic mainstream films, also known as “main melody” films, refer to movies that portray major revolutionary historical events, predominantly rooted in realist themes. These films aim to promote mainstream values and reflect the spirit of unity and resilience of the Chinese people, as well as China’s remarkable rise and revival. With the progression of time and thought, a new genre known as “new mainstream” films has emerged. These films not only carry forward the mainstream ideology but also incorporate more entertaining elements and relatable characters. By integrating mainstream values that resonate with a broader audience, these films have achieved box office success and gained international influence. An illustrative example is the film *Chosin Reservoir*, which is set against the backdrop of the second battle of the War to Resist U.S. Aggression and Aid Korea, specifically the Battle of Lake Changjin. The film powerfully depicts the brutal and heroic nature of this battle, fought under extreme cold and with overwhelming logistical challenges. The heroic acts of the Chinese People’s Volunteers, including the “Ice

Sculpture Company,” the sacrifice of Mao Anying, and the scenes of soldiers sacrificing themselves with explosives, artistically recreate the courageous fighting spirit of the volunteers, embodying revolutionary heroism. The film concluded with an impressive box office revenue of 5.775 billion yuan, securing the top spot on the Chinese box office chart [7].

### 3.2 Engaging Storylines

A compelling storyline that resonates with the emotions of ordinary people and follows a clear narrative arc is another essential element of a high-grossing film. *Wolf Warriors 2* serves as a prime example, telling the story of the protagonist, Leng Feng, who, after leaving the military, is drawn into a rebellion in an African country. Although he initially has the opportunity to evacuate safely, Leng Feng is unable to abandon his sense of duty as a soldier and returns to the battlefield to carry out a daring rescue mission. The film weaves together its main plot and subplots, providing the audience with a rich and tightly-packed narrative. The different segments of the story are seamlessly connected yet maintain a degree of independence, offering the audience a range of emotional experiences, from warmth and patriotism to resolve and tension. *Wolf Warriors 2* not only highlights modern China’s shift from a passive “other” to a self-determined and dominant “self” but also portrays a highly masculine image of China. The film’s climax features a confrontation between Leng Feng and the antagonist, Big Daddy, who threatens Leng Feng with death. Leng Feng’s retort, “I was born to protect the

people!” elevates his soldier persona and further enhances China’s international image of benevolence and compassion. As a result, the film not only reinforced Chinese people’s cultural identity and national cohesion but also ignited patriotic fervor. It marked an attempt to assert China’s subjectivity in a world dominated by Western-centric narratives [8]. The film earned 5.69454 billion yuan at the box office, placing it second on the Chinese box office chart [7].

### 3.3 Drawing from Real-life Social Issues

Movies that draw from real societal issues often achieve remarkable box office success. The reason lies in their ability to connect with audiences by addressing real-life challenges and profound social topics. These films resonate deeply because they mirror the complexities and struggles that people may have encountered or might face in the future, sparking widespread interest and discussion. They are not just engaging films but also reflections of reality. Take the 2018 film *Dying to Survive*, for example, which continues to be hailed as a “masterpiece” by viewers. Based on true events, the movie tells the story of a health supplement store owner who smuggles leukemia medication from India. Despite its title, *Dying to Survive*, the protagonist Cheng Yong’s compassionate actions earn him widespread acclaim. In the end, the medication he smuggled is eventually included in China’s healthcare system, offering hope to leukemia patients who had lived in despair. The film, through a seemingly simple narrative, powerfully unveils the hardships faced by leukemia patients. As one line in the movie poignantly asks, “Can you guarantee that you’ll never fall ill in your lifetime?” The film touched the hearts of many, prompting reflections on China’s healthcare system and encouraging viewers to consider the struggles of leukemia patients, as well as the value and significance of life itself. The film grossed 3.1 billion RMB, placing it 17th on the list of highest-grossing films in China [7].

### 3.4 Timing of Release

The timing of a film’s release plays a crucial role in determining its box office performance. For instance, the “New Year’s Release Season” in China can serve as a case study. This period originated with the 1997 film *The Dream Factory*, directed by Feng Xiaogang, which achieved a box office revenue of 33 million yuan. This success opened the door for the “New Year’s Release Season,” leading to the establishment of other key release periods, such as the May Day holiday, National Day, and summer vacation slots. The total box office revenue for the New Year’s Release Season was 750 million yuan in 2006-2007, 950 million yuan in 2007-2008, 1.47 billion yuan in 2008-

2009, and 3.2 billion yuan in 2009-2010 [9]. By the end of 2012, this release period accounted for 14.76% of the annual film market box office, and in 2013, it represented 10.2%. Films released during this season are typically characterized by peak production quality, star-studded casts, and compelling storylines, which heighten audience expectations. As of December 31, 2023, the box office revenue for the 2023 New Year’s Release Season (November 24 - December 31) had reached 4.46 billion yuan [10]. Therefore, the New Year’s Release Season is a highly significant period in the Chinese film market. While its impact on domestic box office revenue is somewhat less pronounced than technological factors, it is comparable to the influence of actors and production companies [11].

### 3.5 Multimedia Promotion

With the ongoing advancements in media dissemination technologies, multimedia promotion has become an integral aspect of film marketing. Early screenings, for example, represent a direct and effective method of promotion. An effective early screening strategy not only provides an opportunity to present the film to consumers and media, thereby generating favorable word-of-mouth prior to the official release but also allows cinemas to recognize the film’s potential, leading to increased attention and additional screening opportunities, thus optimizing the promotional impact. The practice of early screenings in China began in 2002, when renowned director Zhang Yimou conducted a seven-day early screening in Shenzhen for his film *Hero* to qualify it for an Oscar nomination for Best Foreign Language Film. Since then, early screenings have been widely adopted by films to generate buzz. For instance, *Dying to Survive* held early screenings that garnered box office revenues of over 14 million and 35 million yuan, respectively, prior to its official release. This strategy not only enhanced the film’s visibility on various platforms but also directly contributed to its post-release box office performance and cinema screenings [12].

## 4. Factors Affecting the Box Office of Overseas Films

### 4.1 Production Company

The production company represents the film’s brand and style. For example, when Lionsgate is mentioned, audiences often associate it with high-grossing films that feature elements of suspense and horror, such as the *Saw* series, the *Twilight* series, and the *Hunger Games* series. Other prominent Hollywood production companies include Paramount Pictures (e.g., *Forrest Gump*, *The Godfather*, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*), Disney (e.g., *Zootopia*, *Frozen*, *The Lion King*), 20th Century Fox (e.g.,

Avatar, Titanic, Star Wars), Universal Pictures (e.g., Fast & Furious, Despicable Me, Jurassic World), and Warner Bros. (e.g., Aquaman, The Matrix, Harry Potter). Reputable production companies bring extensive experience and resources, which provide high-quality production and distribution support. Consequently, they become a significant reference for audiences in evaluating film quality and making viewing decisions.

### 4.2 Country of Production

In the global box office landscape, the United States holds a dominant position. Hollywood, as the epicenter of the global film industry, possesses substantial capabilities in production, distribution, promotion, and marketing. This dominance enables American films to exert extensive influence and capture a significant market share worldwide (Table 3).

**Table 3. Top 10 All-Time Global Box Office Rankings [13].**

Rank	Title of the Film	Box Office Income	Country of Production
1	Avatar	\$2.924 billion	America
2	Avengers: Endgame	\$2.799 billion	America
3	Avatar: The Way of Water	\$2.32 billion	America
4	Titanic	\$2.265 billion	America/Mexico
5	Star Wars: The Force Awakens	\$2.071 billion	America
6	Avengers: Infinity War	\$2.052 billion	America
7	Spider-Man: No Way Home	\$1.922 billion	America
8	Jurassic World	\$1.672 billion	America
9	The Lion King	\$1.663 billion	America
10	Avengers: Age of Ultron	\$1.542 billion	America
Rank	Title of the Film	Box Office Income	Country of Production

### 4.3 Type of Source Material

Many high-grossing films are adapted from best-selling novels, comics, or well-known intellectual properties (IPs) with large fan bases. The popularity of IP films can be attributed to their established audience, with viewers having a high level of familiarity and affection for them. Furthermore, successful IP films often lead to sequels or derivative works, thus becoming series films. Series films have become a mainstream trend and brand characteristic in Hollywood cinema. Since the The Godfather series, iconic series such as Star Wars, 007, and the Marvel Cinematic Universe have captivated global audiences, dominating a significant portion of the Hollywood film market. As noted by Liu Jingyu in their paper An Empirical Study on Factors Affecting Domestic Film Box Office, “Film producers can leverage the brand effect of the original film to extend the film’s lifecycle and reduce investment risks. As for distributors, they can utilize the market recognition of the original film to save on marketing and promotional resources” [14].

### 4.4 Technological Innovation

Advancements in information technology have led to significant improvements in image processing technologies, which have become crucial components of film and television production. The advent of 3D technology and IMAX (Image Maximum) technology has maximized the audiovisual effects of films. As a result, new directions have emerged in the film industry, profoundly impacting box office performance. 3D technology transforms flat movie images into three-dimensional experiences, allowing viewers to achieve an immersive viewing experience through the use of 3D glasses. IMAX technology, often described as the “ultimate movie experience,” combines proprietary software, cinema design, and equipment to create a deeply immersive environment. The light-sensitive area of each frame in IMAX films is ten times larger than that of standard 35mm film and three times larger than that of traditional 70mm film, resulting in clearer and more vibrant images on the “giant screen.” On December 19, 2022, IMAX announced that the global box office for Avatar: The Way of Water reached \$48.8 million (approximately 350 million RMB) during its opening weekend,

marking the second-highest opening in IMAX's global history [15]. Despite the higher ticket prices for 3D and IMAX films, they continue to be highly sought after by audiences.

### 4.5 Online Word of Mouth

With the development of the internet, viewers can access a variety of information about films through different online platforms and engage in discussions with other users, leading to the rapid exchange of online word of mouth. Numerous studies have highlighted the significant role of word of mouth in achieving high box office revenues. For example, Chintagunta (2010) compared user ratings on review sites like Rotten Tomatoes and IMDb to estimate the influence of film word of mouth, finding that word of mouth has a substantial and positive impact on box office revenues [16]. Baek (2017) collected different forms of online word of mouth from platforms such as Twitter, Yahoo, and YouTube. Their study revealed that word of mouth on Twitter has a greater impact on box office revenues in the early stages of a film's release, while Yahoo's platform shows more influence in the later stages. Conversely, word of mouth on YouTube has a minimal effect on box office revenues both early and late in a film's release [17]. Chong Oh (2013) examined the relationship between online user engagement, word of mouth, and box office performance, concluding that greater willingness of film producers to engage with users via social media increases the likelihood of positive word of mouth, thereby enhancing box office performance during the film's opening week. Online word of mouth has become a crucial reference for viewers making purchasing decisions, with both positive and negative reviews influencing viewers' attitudes and expectations [18].

## 5. Case Study of High-Cost Films with Box Office Failures

### 5.1 Domestic Box Office Failure Case

The science fiction romance film *Shanghai Fortress* was released in China on August 9, 2019. The film depicts the story of protagonists following a female commander into *Shanghai Fortress* to fight against extraterrestrial invaders during a future world attack on Earth. The film, featuring popular star Lu Han at the time, was invested with over 360 million RMB. However, it ended with a disappointing box office of 123 million RMB, becoming a typical case of high-cost film failure.

The reasons for the film's failure include the following: Firstly, the special effects were hasty. As a science fiction film, most of the scenes were focused on indoor battles. In many scenes, to save on special effects costs, holographic

projections were used to represent the aliens' attacks on the shield; in the final battle, the protagonist's early crash led to an indoor setting.

Secondly, the details were crude. The protagonist's phone resembled a reinforced Nokia, which was inconsistent with the futuristic setting featuring shields and advanced weapons like the *Shanghai Cannon*. The weapons used by the ground troops were still at the physical bullet stage, making the combat with the aliens less realistic. These details caused the audience to be pulled out of the experience. The supporting characters also lacked detail, with almost no discernible personality.

Finally, the script was distorted, and key characters were poorly developed. The creative team might justify the rough sci-fi elements with insufficient budget. However, the film also lacked detail in character development and emotional relationships. For a film's protagonist to be three-dimensional and persuasive, a background is required to understand their behavior and internal motives. The protagonist in this film had no background, with all actions explicitly aimed at showcasing a war-damaged tragic love. Specifically, the male protagonist's details were intended to highlight his unspoken affection for the female lead, while the female protagonist's details were meant to show her being admired by many. For a science fiction film, this depth was insufficient.

### 5.2 International Box Office Failure Case

The science fiction film *Water World* was released in the United States on July 28, 1995. The film tells the story of a future Earth covered in water where humans can only survive on the water. The production cost was high, with an investment of 175 million USD (equivalent to approximately 470 million USD today), but the final box office revenue was only around 88 million USD, making it a high-cost, low-revenue case.

The reasons for the film's failure include the following: Firstly, the high production cost, numerous difficulties encountered during filming, and complex but poorly executed structure. The film was one of Hollywood's most expensive at the time and was fraught with technical challenges. The production encountered continuous accidents, causing the budget to escalate. For example, during filming in Hawaii, a typhoon destroyed the main sea-based steel ring reef, forcing the crew to purchase and rebuild steel, nearly depleting all the steel available on the island. Secondly, the filming process was hindered. Director Kevin Reynolds and star Kevin Costner had multiple disputes over the script, editing, and production details, leading to endless stoppages and multiple delays. These gossip-filled issues were widely reported by the media during filming, causing the film to become notorious even before its re-

lease.

Thirdly, the plot diverged from the prevailing mainstream consciousness. Although the film had some level of quality in background setting and character development, the advanced consciousness and excessive information in the structure made it difficult for many viewers to understand, leading to poor reception. The complex plot also left viewers confused.

Fourthly, the handling of details was inadequate. The film's depiction of human life on future oceans included a female lead who could not swim and lacked freshwater collection equipment. These inadequate details not only disrupted the audience's immersion but also led to dissatisfaction.

Finally, the lack of promotion contributed to the failure. Negative news during filming and the absence of an effective promotional strategy led to heightened audience expectations and increased disappointment.

However, the film eventually turned a profit in 2013, earning 8 million USD, due to revenue from video tapes, DVDs, television rights, video games, novel adaptations, and Universal Studios theme park attractions.

## 6. Recommendations for Enhancing Movie Box Office Performance

Based on the aforementioned content, the following recommendations for enhancing movie box office performance have been summarized.

Firstly, the content of films should be aligned with contemporary values, mainstream awareness, and emotional needs of the audience, a practice commonly known as grasping market dynamics. Solely pursuing artistic qualities is deemed inadequate, as audience acceptance must also be considered. Films may shape and educate the audience; however, films that are not recognized by the audience or aim to completely alter the audience's perspective are destined to have low box office performance.

Secondly, advancements in filmmaking technology are necessary to optimize the viewing experience. Although 3D and IMAX technologies entail higher production costs compared to standard films, their economic effects are undeniable. It should be noted that the film production process should not be driven solely by profit motives, nor should technology be used merely for the sake of technology or high ticket prices. A flexible integration of film content and technology should be implemented to provide a visual feast for the audience.

Furthermore, the screening rates must be increased, market timing should be carefully considered, and opportunities must be sought to further develop market potential. Films should be scheduled according to market periods

and themes, such as comedy during the Spring Festival, children's films during the summer vacation, and family-oriented films during Christmas. In third- and fourth-tier cities, market expansion should be approached gradually, with a focus on understanding consumer characteristics and targeting pain points to develop loyal users.

Finally, leveraging media to create diversified and precise marketing strategies is indispensable. With the continuous advancement of technology, the audience's perception of films is increasingly influenced by media. The advantages of the internet should be recognized by distributors. By integrating traditional and new media, and utilizing online platforms and channels, a positive public opinion should be cultivated. This will establish a communication advantage, achieving the best promotional effects and gaining audience recognition and theater confidence. It should be noted that the market competition is intense, and standing out in the vast film market is challenging. A thorough understanding of the film's themes, content, target audience, and cast is essential to highlight its unique features while keeping track of competitors. Most importantly, diversified and precise marketing strategies should be employed to stimulate consumer interest and drive viewing behavior.

## 7. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has analyzed the factors affecting both domestic and international movie box office performance based on empirical research and the actual development of the film industry. However, there are some limitations in the study that need to be addressed and improved upon in future research.

Firstly, the study lacks extensive research. The focus has been limited to recent high-grossing films. Given that the film industry flourished at the end of the 20th century with numerous high-grossing films, these should also be included in the research scope to provide a more detailed analysis of the factors influencing box office performance and to achieve more comprehensive results.

Secondly, the sample size needs expansion. Only one case each from domestic and international films was selected for the high-cost, low-return film analysis. More failure cases should be analyzed to summarize the reasons behind box office failures more comprehensively and to provide targeted recommendations for improving box office performance.

Finally, as the author has recently entered the media field, the observational perspective remains incomplete. Further learning and research will contribute to acquiring a more comprehensive research perspective, which remains an area for future improvement.

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