04/11/2026

Sacha Courtial,
Associate Researcher Fellow, EU-China relations
Iris Guyader,
Intern in Pascal Lamy's office
Maud Collet,
Intern in Pascal Lamy's office

BLOG POST



China's Screens of Influence: Cinema, Television and New Digital Formats

In 1993, when Chen Kaige's Farewell My Concubine won the Palme d'Or at Cannes, Western audiences were introduced to a distinctive cinematic aesthetic, marked by long takes, narratives unfolding over extended periods and a focus on ordinary protagonists. This approach can be found in independent works such as Wang Bing's Fengming, a Chinese Memoir (2007) as well as in larger-budget productions such as Jia Zhangke's Ash Is Purest White (2018).

Today, by contrast, shorter and faster-paced formats are gaining prominence, notably C-dramas (Chinese television series) and micro-dramas, whose brief episodes are designed for mobile viewing. Many draw on fantasy, romance and imperial settings. China's audiovisual industry has thus diversified beyond traditional cinema, adapting its content and distribution strategies to television, streaming platforms and mobile devices.

I • Shaping China's Image Abroad

Underlying this diversification is a broader strategic objective: using audiovisual productions as instruments of international cultural influence.

China's audiovisual industry benefits from a substantial domestic market, reducing its reliance on exports. Domestic box-office revenue reached US$7.4 billion in 2025, an increase of approximately 22 per cent over 2024.

Although international distribution has commercial benefits, the Chinese authorities also regard it as a means of shaping perceptions of the country and strengthening its 'discursive power' (see Box 2 in our previous article).

This strategy operates through three complementary channels: controlling domestic production, influencing foreign productions and developing new audiovisual formats with international reach.

(a) Controlling Domestic Cultural Narratives

For Beijing, control over cultural narratives begins with oversight of the domestic production process. Film projects are subject to review by the authorities, notably the China Film Administration (国家电影局). Regulatory oversight can extend throughout the production process, from script approval and filming authorisations to the review of completed films before theatrical release.

Under film-exchange regulations issued by the former State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT), Chinese films submitted to certain international festivals and competitions were subject to official authorisation. This illustrates the Party's ambition to influence not only domestic production but also the way China is portrayed abroad.

This system encourages substantial self-censorship among domestic audiovisual producers. The state does not need to direct every creative decision: by setting ideological boundaries, allocating resources and applying regulatory pressure, it creates incentives for studios, platforms and media companies to align their output with Party priorities. The interaction between direct oversight and self-censorship makes the precise scope of state influence difficult to assess.
At the same time, some Chinese productions have secured recognition at international festivals. Guan Hu's Black Dog (狗阵), for example, won the Un Certain Regard Prize at the 2024 Cannes Film Festival. The film illustrates the international recognition that selected Chinese productions can achieve within a tightly regulated system.

(b) Extending Influence over Foreign Productions

Beyond domestic content, Beijing can also influence foreign productions through three mechanisms.

1) Access to the Chinese Market

China operates one of the world's largest cinema markets in terms of screens. Access to this audience gives foreign studios a commercial incentive to accommodate Chinese regulatory requirements. Several features of the market are relevant:

- The annual revenue-sharing import quota covers 34 foreign films only. Additional foreign movies may enter the chinese market but through a much less profitable flat-fee distribution arrangements ;

- Under the revenue-sharing arrangements, foreign studios generally receive around 25 per cent of the box-office revenue generated by their imported films, a smaller share than in many other markets.

- Foreign releases may face shorter theatrical runs and tighter scheduling constraints than domestic productions;

- Periods of high cinema attendance, including much of the summer, have often favoured domestic releases under initiatives promoting Chinese films;

These arrangements make market access a source of regulatory leverage. To reduce the risk of losing distribution opportunities, foreign studios may adjust content at an early stage of production.

The marketing of Top Gun: Maverick provides an example. In an early trailer, patches featuring the Japanese and Taiwanese flags on the jacket worn by Tom Cruise's character in the original 1986 film appeared to have been replaced with neutral symbols. As the change preceded the sequel's release, it was widely interpreted as a form of pre-emptive self-censorship intended to avoid potential difficulties in the Chinese market.

2) Co-productions

Films recognised as official Chinese co-productions are generally treated as domestic productions rather than foreign imports. They can therefore benefit from exemption from the revenue-sharing import quota, giving international studios an incentive to work with Chinese production companies.

Obtaining that status involves specific production and regulatory requirements. Industry accounts of the China Film Co-Production Corporation's framework describe conditions that have included at least one-third of financing from Chinese partners, a cast that is at least one-third Chinese, and at least one scene filmed in China. Specific requirements depend on the legal form of the co-production. Chinese partners also help ensure compliance with domestic regulatory and ideological expectations, including the promotion of 'excellent traditional Chinese culture' (see Box 1 in our previous article).

These arrangements can strengthen Chinese production companies' credibility as international partners and open access to wider distribution networks. They also reflect the approach often described as 'borrowing someone else's boat to go to sea' (借船出海): drawing on the resources and reputation of foreign partners to circulate cultural narratives associated with China.
The creation of the China-Europe Film Fund in November 2015, a Sino-European initiative focused on film co-productions, illustrates the extension of this approach to the European market.

3) Chinese Investment in Overseas Studios

Chinese companies have also acquired stakes in, or established financial relationships with, Western film studios. Major Hollywood companies, including Paramount, Disney, Universal and Warner Bros, have worked with Chinese financial partners such as Tencent Pictures and Huayi Brothers. Such relationships do not necessarily entail direct intervention in scripts, but they can create commercial incentives to avoid sensitive subjects and may influence decisions about content and distribution.

China's influence over the audiovisual sector therefore extends beyond the control of its own productions to the conditions under which some foreign content is financed, produced and distributed.

4) The Limits of China's International Cultural Reach

Despite substantial investment, the international performance of Chinese cinema remains uneven. China now produces high-budget films with production values comparable to those of major Hollywood releases. Yet their audiences and revenues remain concentrated in the domestic market, while distribution in Europe and North America is often limited.

The science-fiction film The Wandering Earth (2019), for example, grossed around US$630 million in China, compared with approximately US$6 million in North America.

II • New Formats and Emerging Sources of Cultural Influence

China's audiovisual market has expanded rapidly over the past two decades. Producers and platforms have invested in different genres, formats and storytelling techniques to reach audiences beyond traditional feature films. Some newer formats have demonstrated considerable appeal at home and abroad.

1) Ne Zha 2: China's Growing Capabilities in Animation

Yu Yang's animated film Ne Zha 2 (2025) illustrates the technical capabilities developed by Chinese studios. Despite more limited recognition in Western markets, the film became the highest-grossing animated feature worldwide, generating more than US$2 billion at the global box office and attracting over 200 million cinema admissions in China.

Its commercial performance is consistent with Beijing's efforts to develop a domestic animation industry capable of competing internationally.

The film combines large-scale battle sequences, detailed visual effects and changes in narrative tone. Its production involved more than 2,400 shots, including nearly 1,900 visual-effects shots. These figures point to the increasing technical capacity of Chinese animation studios, alongside the development of a distinctive visual style.

The challenge now lies in translating domestic box-office success into broader and more sustained international recognition.

2) C-dramas: Storytelling as a Vehicle for Cultural Influence

C-dramas, or Chinese television series, can introduce international viewers to Chinese culture through accessible narratives. Their themes range from historical fiction and imperial court drama to stories set in contemporary society.

Imperial settings, traditional costumes, palace intrigue and historical romances familiarise overseas audiences with elements of Chinese cultural heritage, often without an explicit political message.

Contemporary series, meanwhile, portray cities, careers and everyday lifestyles that can broaden perceptions of China beyond images of authoritarian governance and political confrontation.

Chinese dramas are increasingly distributed internationally through platforms such as YouTube, Netflix, iQIYI and Rakuten Viki, under a variety of free and subscription-based models. Beyond their commercial value, this international circulation contributes to the visibility of Chinese culture and contemporary lifestyles. Their distribution can therefore serve both commercial and reputational objectives, without necessarily following a single state-directed strategy.

The international reach of Chinese television drama is growing. According to figures from China's National Radio and Television Administration, cited by China Daily, television dramas accounted for approximately 80 per cent of Chinese audiovisual content distributed overseas in 2023. The historical drama Love Like the Galaxy, for example, has reportedly accumulated around 4.73 billion views across streaming platforms.

3) Micro-dramas: The Rise of Mobile-First Entertainment

Micro-dramas (duanju, 短剧), which began expanding in China from around 2018, consist of brief episodes designed primarily for smartphones. Their pacing and distribution are well suited to short-video platforms and on-demand streaming. The DreameShort app, which targets audiences in North America, Japan, South Korea and Europe, claims to have attracted more than six million downloads outside China and over one million monthly active users. According to the company, its leading original series regularly attract more than 50 million views.

By compressing plot developments into short episodes, micro-dramas are reshaping audiovisual consumption patterns and demonstrating how fast-paced storytelling can engage mobile audiences.

These formats provide another source of growth for China's audiovisual sector. Their international appeal extends to South and Southeast Asian markets, including India, Indonesia, Vietnam and Thailand, while distribution is also expanding in North America and elsewhere.

Conclusion

China's audiovisual strategy reveals a fundamental tension. Through market access, co-productions and investment, Chinese authorities and companies can exercise influence over the international film industry. Yet the ability of Chinese productions to attract sustained overseas audiences remains more limited, particularly in parts of Europe and North America.

China's audiovisual strategy reveals a fundamental tension. Through market access, co-productions and investment, Chinese authorities and companies can exercise influence over the international film industry. Yet the ability of Chinese productions to attract sustained overseas audiences remains more limited, particularly in parts of Europe and North America.

China therefore possesses considerable structural leverage, while the international appeal of its cultural productions remains uneven. Animation, C-dramas and micro-dramas offer additional channels for reaching audiences through formats that are more accessible, digitally distributed and less closely associated with traditional cultural diplomacy.

A similar approach is emerging in the video games industry, where interactive narratives offer another means of engaging international audiences. Video games thus provide China with opportunities to shape perceptions of its history and culture, turning entertainment into a vehicle for cultural influence. This will be the focus of the next article in this series.

Institut Jacques Delors

Penser l'Europe • Thinking Europe • Europa Denken
17 rue d'Antin 75002 Paris, France
www.delorsinstitute.eu • info@delorsinstitute.eu