

Main-Melody Cinema, Policy Alignment, and Market Outcomes in Contemporary China: A Quantitative Analysis (2019-2024)

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Abstract: *This article examines whether main-melody (主旋律) cinema in contemporary China functions as an institutionally defined marker of policy alignment and whether such alignment corresponds to systematic differences in market outcomes and audience engagement. Drawing on an original film-level dataset of 370 Chinese feature films theatrically released between 2019 and 2024 (172 main-melody; 198 non-main-melody), the study operationalises main-melody status as a categorical variable and applies a three-stage quantitative strategy. Pearson's chi-square tests assess whether main-melody classification co-varies with policy-alignment attributes and institutional/industrial indicators (including ownership type, release timing, awards, and funding/support year). Independent-samples t-tests compare market and engagement outcomes (box office revenue, screenings, admissions, ratings, and online comment volume) across film types and ownership groups, and one-way ANOVA evaluates whether funding/support-year cohorts differ in market outcomes. Results show strong institutional differentiation: main-melody status is closely associated with policy-alignment indicators and is also significantly related to ownership structure, with state-owned entities more represented among main-melody productions. However, main-melody status does not correspond to consistent differences in conventional market indicators; the most visible divergence appears in online comment volume, suggesting that policy alignment relates more to discursive engagement than to aggregate market scale. Overall, the findings refine debates on cultural governance by demonstrating institutional differentiation without uniform market divergence in China's film industry.*

Keywords: Main-melody cinema; Cultural policy; Policy alignment; Institutional classification; Chinese film industry; Audience engagement; Political economy of media.

1. INTRODUCTION

Main-melody (主旋律, Zhuxuanlü) film has re-emerged as a focal point of debate in China since the early 2000s. While once associated with Mao-era socialist realist aesthetics and overt ideological mobilisation, it has been reshaped by marketisation, globalisation, and media convergence (Berry & Farquhar, 2006; Y. Zhang, 2004). Since China's WTO accession in 2001, film production has been increasingly integrated into market mechanisms under sustained state guidance—often described as “marketisation without depoliticisation” (Keane, 2013; Zhao, 2008). Within this hybrid regime, main-melody films are expected to deliver explicit political-cultural objectives while competing for attention in a commercialised exhibition environment.

Recent policy discourse has foregrounded alignment with national narratives, core socialist values, and governance priorities, encouraging commercially legible storytelling around themes such as national rejuvenation, collective memory, technological modernisation, and heroic sacrifice (Association, 2023; Council, 2010). In this framing, main-melody cinema operates less as a bounded genre than as a policy-oriented mode of cultural production within symbolic governance (Sun, 2018).

A substantial literature has analysed main-melody films' ideological functions, narrative strategies, and aesthetic shifts, including national identity construction (X. Zhang, 2003), historical memory mediation (Pickowicz & Zhang, 2006), audience responsiveness (Chen et al., 2021), and the use of blockbuster production values and genre hybridisation to enhance market appeal (Su, 2014; Zhu & Nakajima, 2010). However, these accounts have largely prioritised textual and policy interpretation over systematic empirical tests of institutional differentiation and market outcomes.

Quantitative evidence remains limited on whether main-melody films are institutionally differentiated from non-main-melody productions, and whether any differentiation maps onto market and participation outcomes. Accordingly, this study asks: (1) Is main-melody classification associated with policy-related attributes, including explicit national narratives and alignment with officially endorsed keywords? (2) How does main-melody status

relate to production organisation, particularly the roles of state-owned versus non-state-owned companies? (3) Does main-melody status correspond to systematic differences in box office revenue, screening scale, admissions, ratings, and online comment activity?

These questions matter in a context where cultural governance increasingly relies on incentives, symbolic resources, and evaluative frameworks rather than command alone (Mazzucato, 2013; Schmidt, 2008). Testing whether policy-designated cultural forms produce distinct market and audience effects is therefore analytically consequential and policy-relevant.

Using a dataset of 370 Chinese films released between 2019 and 2024, this study operationalises main-melody status as a categorical variable and tests its associations with policy, organisational, and market indicators. Chi-square tests assess relationships with categorical attributes (e.g., explicit national narratives, policy keywords, company ownership, release timing, and award recognition). Independent-samples t-tests compare performance and engagement outcomes (box office revenue, screenings, admissions, ratings, and comment volume) across main-melody versus non-main-melody films and across state-owned versus non-state-owned producers. One-way ANOVA further examines whether government funding year is associated with differences in market outcomes.

The study contributes in three ways. First, it operationalises main-melody cinema through empirically testable attributes rather than purely discursive labels. Second, it locates main-melody films within China's production ecology by examining how ownership structures shape policy-oriented cultural production. Third, it provides quantitative evidence on whether policy alignment corresponds to distinguishable market performance and audience participation patterns, complementing existing interpretive scholarship.

Overall, the article clarifies whether policy alignment operates as a mechanism of differentiation in China's contemporary film market and whether it is associated with measurable differences in audience engagement. It thereby speaks to debates in film studies, cultural policy, and political economy on how governance priorities, industrial organisation, and market outcomes interact in postsocialist cultural industries.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Main-Melody Cinema as a Policy-Oriented Cultural Form

Early scholarship treated main-melody cinema primarily as a vehicle of socialist ideology embedded in the party-state's cultural apparatus, especially in the Maoist and early reform periods (Pickowicz, 2013; Y. Zhang, 2004). Since the late 1990s and early 2000s, however, research has documented its reconfiguration under marketisation: rather than receding, main-melody films have incorporated popular genres, star systems, and blockbuster aesthetics, consolidating a hybrid form shaped by both political imperatives and market logics (Berry & Farquhar, 2006; Su, 2014; Zhu & Nakajima, 2010).

Contemporary main-melody cinema is increasingly identified less by overt propaganda than by alignment with officially sanctioned national narratives and symbolic repertoires (patriotism, collective sacrifice, national rejuvenation, and technological modernity), embedded in institutional classification and evaluative frameworks (Chen et al., 2021; X. Zhang, 2003).

Yet, while existing studies provide rich interpretive accounts of how main-melody films articulate national narratives, they rarely specify how such alignment is operationalised in practice. Concepts such as "policy orientation" or "national narrative" are often treated as self-evident, rather than empirically testable attributes. This limitation makes it difficult to assess whether main-melody classification functions as a consistent institutional category across the film industry, or whether it produces observable structural or market-level effects.

2.2 Cultural Policy, Institutional Classification, and Film Production

To address this gap, it is necessary to situate main-melody cinema within broader debates on cultural policy and institutional governance. Cultural policy scholars have increasingly emphasised that contemporary states govern culture not only through direct regulation or censorship, but through classificatory systems, funding mechanisms, and discursive frameworks that shape what kinds of cultural production are recognised, supported, and valorised (O'Connor, 2015; Schmidt, 2008).

In China, film policy has increasingly operated through “guidance” mechanisms within a market-oriented industry structure (Keane, 2013). Instruments such as project approval, funding allocation, awards, and promotional endorsement function as classificatory signals that confer symbolic legitimacy and differential access to policy resources (Zhao, 2008). Accordingly, main-melody status operates as institutional differentiation: it structures production incentives and participation, and may be associated with ownership forms, especially state-owned or state-affiliated companies, more closely embedded in policy networks (Su, 2014).

Empirical research on China’s cultural industries has consistently shown that state-owned enterprises continue to play a disproportionate role in policy-oriented cultural production, even as private capital has expanded rapidly in the market (Keane, 2004). However, few studies have tested this relationship at the level of film output, leaving open the question of whether main-melody cinema is empirically concentrated within state-owned production structures, or whether non-state actors are equally involved in producing policy-aligned content.

2.3 Market Performance, Audience Reception, and Cultural Governance

A further unresolved issue concerns the relationship between policy alignment and market outcomes. Popular discourse often assumes either that main-melody films benefit from policy support at the expense of market appeal, or conversely, that state-backed films enjoy structural advantages that translate into superior box office performance. Academic research, however, offers a more nuanced picture.

Box office revenue in China is shaped by interacting internal attributes and external visibility signals, including pre-release online attention and star-mediated publicity dynamics (Peng et al., 2019; Xiao et al., 2017). In this context, ideological orientation alone is unlikely to determine commercial success, particularly as patriotic themes have become more normalised within mainstream cinema (Chen et al., 2021).

At the same time, recent research in media and cultural studies has drawn attention to the growing importance of audience engagement as a dimension of cultural value. Metrics such as online reviews, ratings, and comment volumes are not merely reflections of audience satisfaction, but indicators of discursive participation, controversy, and social visibility (Lobato, 2019; Napoli, 2011). From this perspective, audience engagement may respond differently to policy-oriented content than traditional market indicators such as box office revenue.

Despite this shift, empirical studies that systematically compare main-melody and non-main-melody films across multiple market and engagement indicators remain scarce. Existing research has tended to focus either on individual blockbuster cases or on aggregate box office trends, without disentangling the specific contribution of policy classification to different dimensions of market performance.

2.4 Analytical Framework and Research Expectations

Building on the above literature, this study conceptualises main-melody cinema as an institutional category situated at the intersection of policy alignment, production structure, and market outcomes. Rather than treating main-melody status as a purely discursive or aesthetic label, the analysis approaches it as a categorical variable that can be empirically examined across three analytical dimensions.

First, at the level of policy alignment, the study examines whether main-melody classification is systematically associated with concrete, observable attributes, including the explicit articulation of national narratives and alignment with officially endorsed policy keywords. If main-melody cinema functions as a meaningful institutional category, such associations should be statistically significant.

Second, at the level of production structure, the analysis investigates the relationship between main-melody status and company ownership, with particular attention to the role of state-owned versus non-state-owned enterprises. This dimension addresses whether policy-oriented cultural production remains organisationally differentiated within an increasingly marketised film industry.

Third, at the level of market outcomes, the study assesses whether main-melody classification corresponds to systematic differences in box office revenue, screening scale, audience attendance, audience ratings, and online discursive participation. Rather than presuming either advantage or disadvantage, the analysis adopts an open empirical stance, recognising that different indicators may capture distinct dimensions of market and audience response.

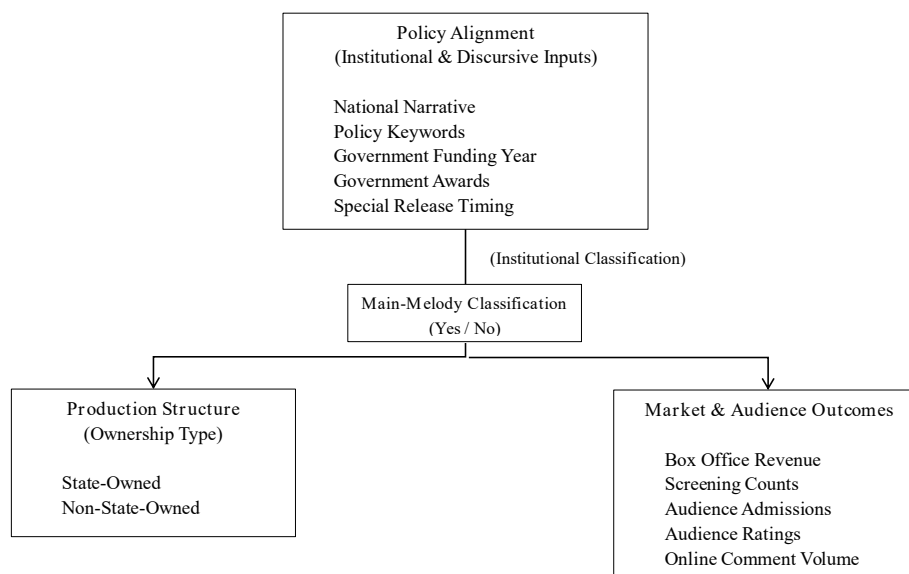


Figure 1

Figure 1 summarises the framework: policy alignment is hypothesised to structure institutional classification, which differentiates production participation and may (without presuming direction), be associated with distinct market and audience outcomes.

3. DATA AND RESEARCH DESIGN

3.1 Data Sources and Sample Construction

This study uses an original dataset of 370 Chinese feature films theatrically released between 2019 and 2024. This period captures both heightened policy attention to film governance and major market disruptions associated with COVID-19, enabling assessment of institutional continuity alongside short-term market variation.

Film-level indicators were compiled from publicly accessible industry databases and major online film information services, including box office revenue, screenings, admissions, ratings, production-company metadata, release dates, and award recognition. Online engagement (user comment volume) was collected from leading Chinese film review platforms where post-release reception is substantially mediated through audience interaction (Lobato, 2019; Napoli, 2011).

After excluding short films, documentaries, and titles with incomplete information, the final analytical sample consists of 172 films classified as main-melody productions and 198 films classified as non-main-melody productions. This distribution enables balanced comparative analysis while reflecting the continued prominence of policy-oriented cinema alongside commercially oriented productions within the contemporary Chinese film industry.

3.2 Operationalising Main-Melody Cinema

To render a historically discursive concept empirically testable, this study operationalises main-melody status as a binary variable based on institutional and content-related criteria consistently referenced in policy discourse and scholarship (Su, 2014; X. Zhang, 2003).

A film is coded as main-melody if it meets at least one criterion: (1) it is officially labelled or widely recognised in policy/industry discourse as main-melody; (2) it foregrounds nationally endorsed narratives (e.g., revolutionary history, national defence, collective sacrifice, national rejuvenation); or (3) its themes and promotional framing align with officially promoted policy keywords and priorities. Films meeting none of these criteria are coded as non-main-melody.

This approach reflects recent scholarly efforts to move beyond purely textual or ideological definitions of main-melody cinema and instead emphasise its institutional embeddedness within systems of cultural policy and

governance (Meyer-Clement, 2017). By treating main-melody status as an operational variable rather than a normative judgement, the study enables systematic comparison across production structures and market outcomes.

3.3 Variables and Measurement

3.3.1 Policy Alignment Variables

Policy alignment is captured through categorical measures. National narrative articulation is coded as a binary indicator of whether a film foregrounds nationally significant themes, events, or collective identities emphasised in official discourse. Policy keyword alignment codes whether a film's thematic framing and promotional discourse align with officially endorsed keywords prevalent during the study period, reflecting legitimacy signalling within discursive governance (Schmidt, 2008).

Two additional indicators capture symbolic endorsement: release during politically significant dates and receipt of government-recognised awards. Because their relationship to main-melody status is frequently assumed but empirically unsettled, they are included for direct testing.

3.3.2 Production Structure Variables

Production structure is measured via company ownership (state-owned vs non-state-owned), reflecting persistent institutional divisions in China's cultural industries (Keane, 2013; Zhao, 2008). The analysis tests whether main-melody output is organisationally concentrated in state-owned entities or whether non-state firms participate to a comparable degree.

3.3.3 Market Outcome and Audience Engagement Variables

Market performance is measured using five continuous variables: box office revenue, screening counts, audience admissions, audience ratings, and online comment volume. Together, these indicators capture multiple dimensions of a film's market presence and reception.

Revenue, screenings, and admissions capture market scale and realised consumption, while ratings indicate evaluative reception. Comment volume proxies discursive engagement and social visibility in platformised reception environments (Napoli, 2011; Su, 2022).

The inclusion of multiple outcome variables is intended to avoid reducing market performance to a single metric and to recognise that different indicators may respond differently to policy alignment and institutional classification.

3.4 Analytical Strategy

The analysis follows three steps aligned with the framework: (1) institutional differentiation, (2) outcome comparisons, and (3) temporal variation in policy support.

First, chi-square tests of independence are used to examine the association between main-melody classification and categorical variables related to policy alignment and production structure. This step assesses whether main-melody cinema functions as a statistically meaningful institutional category, rather than a loosely defined label.

Second, independent-samples t-tests are conducted to compare market performance and audience engagement indicators between main-melody and non-main-melody films, as well as between state-owned and non-state-owned production entities. This approach allows for the identification of systematic mean differences while maintaining analytical transparency and interpretability (Field, 2024).

Third, one-way ANOVA tests whether the government support year (as coded in the dataset) is associated with differences in market outcomes, capturing potential temporal variation in policy emphasis.

Analyses adopt $p < .05$ and report effect sizes where appropriate to indicate substantive magnitude alongside statistical significance.

4. METHODS

4.1 Analytical Overview and Reporting Standards

Consistent with the framework, the analyses proceed in three steps: (1) chi-square tests for categorical associations (policy alignment and organisational attributes), (2) independent-samples comparisons of market and engagement outcomes across film categories and ownership types, and (3) one-way ANOVA for funding/support-year group differences in market outcomes.

Inference uses $p < .05$, but interpretation emphasises effect sizes and substantive meaning; effect-size reporting follows recommended practice (Lakens, 2013).

4.2 Chi-square Tests of Independence for Categorical Associations

Pearson's chi-square tests assess whether main-melody status is associated with policy-alignment indicators (e.g., national narratives; policy keywords) and institutional attributes (e.g., ownership type) in contingency tables (Agresti, 2017).

Assumptions and diagnostic checks

Each film enters once (independent observations), and expected cell counts are checked; where sparsity occurs, categories are collapsed on substantive grounds (Agresti, 2017).

Effect size for contingency tables

Association strength is reported using Cramér's V (with N as sample size and k as the smaller table dimension) (Cramér, 1999).

4.3 Independent-Samples t-Tests for Mean Differences

Independent-samples t-tests compare mean differences in market outcomes (e.g., box office, screenings, admissions) and audience reception/engagement (e.g., ratings, comment volume) across main-melody vs non-main-melody films, and across state-owned vs non-state-owned producers.

Variance heterogeneity and robust testing

Variance homogeneity is assessed with Levene's test (Brown & Forsythe, 1974). When heteroscedasticity is indicated, Welch's t-test is reported; otherwise the pooled-variance t-test is used (Welch, 1947).

Effect size for mean differences

Effect sizes are reported as Cohen's d , interpreted as heuristics rather than strict thresholds, alongside confidence intervals where relevant (Cohen, 2013; Lakens, 2013).

4.4 One-way ANOVA for Funding-Year Group Differences

To test whether films associated with different funding/support years exhibit systematic differences in market outcomes, the study applies one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA). One-way ANOVA tests whether market outcomes differ across funding/support-year groups.

Post-hoc comparisons and effect sizes

When the omnibus F is significant, Tukey HSD (or an appropriate familywise-error-controlled procedure) is used for post-hoc comparisons, and η^2 /partial η^2 is reported as the effect size (Field, 2024; Lakens, 2013).

4.5 Assumption Checks, Distributional Issues, and Robustness Practices

Normality and large-sample considerations

For t-tests and ANOVA, normality is assessed via Shapiro–Wilk tests and Q–Q plots (Shapiro & Wilk, 1965). Given the comparative aim and sample size, robustness to plausible deviations is prioritised over strict normality.

Skewed market variables

Because market outcomes are often right-skewed, robustness is addressed where needed through $\log(1+Y)$ transformations, variance-robust testing (e.g., Welch), and effect-size/CI-focused interpretation, with all adjustments reported in the Results (Field, 2024; Lakens, 2013).

Multiple testing discipline

Given multiple tests, claims are limited to results that are both statistically supported and substantively meaningful, emphasising effect sizes to avoid over-interpretation (Lakens, 2013).

5. RESULTS

5.1 Descriptive Overview of the Sample

The final analytical sample consists of 370 Chinese feature films released between 2019 and 2024. Among these, 172 films (46.5%) are classified as *main-melody* productions, while 198 films (53.5%) are classified as *non-main-melody*. This distribution reflects the continued coexistence of policy-oriented and commercially oriented films within China’s contemporary theatrical market.

The sample includes both state-owned and non-state-owned producers, and outcome variables exhibit substantial dispersion consistent with skewed film-market distributions.

5.2 Institutional Differentiation of Main-Melody Cinema: Chi-square Test Results

5.2.1 Policy Alignment and National Narrative Attributes

Chi-square tests indicate that main-melody classification is strongly associated with policy-alignment indicators. Films coded as main-melody are significantly more likely to foreground nationally endorsed narratives ($\chi^2 = 366.003, p < .01$) and to align with officially endorsed policy keywords ($\chi^2 = 362.053, p < .01$), supporting the view that main-melody status functions as a policy-oriented institutional category in this sample.

5.2.2 Production Structure and Organisational Attributes

Main-melody status is significantly associated with ownership structure ($\chi^2 = 33.543, p < .01$), with main-melody films more likely to be produced by state-owned entities than non-main-melody films.

By contrast, main-melody status is not associated with release during politically significant dates ($p = .506$) or with receipt of government-recognised awards ($p = .242$), suggesting that release timing and award recognition do not systematically differentiate film type in this sample.

5.2.3 Temporal Distribution by Funding Year

Main-melody classification varies significantly by funding/support year ($\chi^2 = 18.923, p < .01$), indicating non-uniform temporal distribution in the sample period.

5.3 Market Outcomes by Film Type: Independent-Samples t-Tests

Independent-samples t-tests show no significant differences between main-melody and non-main-melody films in box office revenue, screenings, admissions, or audience ratings (all $p > .05$). The only significant difference is comment volume: non-main-melody films attract higher average online comment activity ($p = .032$), indicating stronger discursive participation despite broadly comparable market scale and evaluative reception.

5.4 Market Outcomes by Ownership Structure: State-Owned vs. Non-State-Owned Companies

Comparing ownership groups, films produced by non-state-owned companies show significantly higher screenings, admissions, and comment volume, suggesting broader circulation and stronger audience interaction. Differences in box office revenue and audience ratings are not significant, implying that ownership relates more to distribution scale and engagement intensity than to revenue totals or evaluative reception.

5.5 Funding Year and Market Performance: One-Way ANOVA Results

One-way ANOVA tests whether funding/support year is associated with differences in market and engagement outcomes.

Across outcomes, omnibus F tests are non-significant (all $p > .05$), suggesting no systematic differences in market performance or audience reception across funding-year cohorts despite temporal variation in main-melody counts.

5.6 Summary of Key Findings

Overall, main-melody films are institutionally differentiated through policy-alignment indicators and, to a lesser extent, ownership structure. However, main-melody status is not associated with consistent differences in conventional market outcomes, with the most visible divergence appearing in online discursive engagement.

6. DISCUSSION

6.1 Main-Melody Cinema as an Institutionally Strong but Market-Neutral Category

The results show that main-melody status is strongly associated with policy-alignment indicators, particularly nationally endorsed narratives and policy-keyword alignment. This supports qualitative accounts that treat main-melody cinema less as a conventional genre than as a policy-oriented institutional category embedded in cultural governance (Su, 2014; X. Zhang, 2003).

In practice, main-melody classification appears to function as a recognisable marker of policy alignment, consistent with symbolic governance in which discursive criteria and classificatory frameworks steer cultural production (O'Connor, 2015; Schmidt, 2008). Yet this institutional strength does not translate into systematic market advantage or disadvantage: market outcomes remain broadly comparable across film types, reflecting the coexistence of strong state guidance and competitive dynamics in China's cultural industries (Keane, 2013; Zhao, 2008).

6.2 Production Structure and the Role of State-Owned Enterprises

The association between main-melody status and state ownership indicates that organisational proximity to policy networks continues to shape participation in policy-aligned film production.

This accords with political economy accounts that position state-owned cultural organisations as intermediaries linking policy objectives to market operations (Meyer-Clement, 2017; Zhao, 2008). Rather than crowding out market actors, they can operate as policy carriers that absorb political risk and ensure compliance within commercial distribution systems.

However, it is equally notable that a substantial proportion of main-melody films are produced by non-state-owned companies. This finding reflects the increasing integration of private and mixed-ownership firms into policy-oriented cultural production, a trend that has been documented in studies of cultural industry reform and state-market collaboration (Keane, 2013; Su, 2014). The results therefore point to a hybrid production ecology, in which institutional differentiation persists, but organisational boundaries are increasingly permeable.

6.3 Why Market Scale and Ratings Do Not Differ Significantly

The absence of significant differences in revenue, distribution scale, admissions, and ratings suggests that policy-oriented films are neither systematically privileged nor penalised in aggregate market indicators.

One explanation is the normalisation and hybridisation of patriotic narratives within mainstream commercial cinema: “new main-melody” productions increasingly adopt star-driven casting, blockbuster aesthetics, and intensive marketing, making policy-aligned elements less distinctive as a separate category in routine audience consumption (Yang, 2023).

Market outcomes are shaped by multiple commercial determinants (genre, marketing intensity, star power, and platform visibility), that can outweigh ideological orientation (Shen & Hao, 2024). The resulting market neutrality need not imply policy failure; it may indicate that policy-oriented content has been integrated into competitive market logics.

6.4 Audience Engagement and the Significance of Comment Volume

In contrast to the neutrality observed in conventional market indicators, the study finds a statistically significant difference in online comment volume, with non-main-melody films generating higher levels of audience commentary. This result highlights the importance of distinguishing between market consumption and discursive engagement as analytically distinct dimensions of cultural reception.

Comment volume can register not only interest but also controversy, affective investment, and participatory discussion, particularly in platformised reception environments (Lobato, 2019; Napoli, 2011). In China, comment spaces may also operate as arenas for negotiated expression, including irony and identity performance (Sun, 2018).

Lower engagement around main-melody films may reflect a more stabilised interpretive environment with less contestable meaning, whereas non-main-melody titles may afford greater ambiguity that stimulates discussion even when market scale is comparable. This divergence indicates that policy alignment may shape participatory visibility more than revenue or ratings.

6.5 Temporal Variation without Market Volatility

The pattern suggests an asymmetry between policy rhythm and market stability: production emphasis on main-melody content shifts across years, while aggregate market indicators remain relatively stable.

This aligns with accounts of governance through selective emphasis rather than systemic disruption (O'Connor, 2015; Schmidt, 2008). Main-melody cinema appears to operate as a flexible policy instrument responsive to commemorative or strategic cycles without generating market volatility.

6.6 Implications for Cultural Policy and Film Studies

Overall, the findings challenge binary accounts that frame main-melody cinema as either economically inefficient propaganda or a uniformly privileged beneficiary of intervention. For cultural policy research, the results support governance models centred on classification, discourse, and organisational embedding rather than direct economic steering (Mazzucato, 2013; Schmidt, 2008). For film studies, they demonstrate how quantitative evidence can complement interpretive frameworks to reassess assumptions about ideology, reception, and market outcomes in contemporary Chinese cinema.

7. CONCLUSION

This article examined whether main-melody cinema functions as an institutionally defined marker of policy alignment and whether such alignment corresponds to differences in market outcomes and audience engagement. Using 370 films released between 2019 and 2024, the analyses show strong institutional differentiation but limited, indicator-specific market divergence.

7.1 Summary of Findings

First, main-melody classification is closely associated with policy-alignment attributes, particularly nationally endorsed narratives and policy-consistent keywords, supporting its interpretation as an institutional category of cultural legitimacy. This aligns with recent work showing how nationalist blockbusters mobilise affect and collective identification through narrative and multimodal strategies (Huang & Lams, 2025).

Second, main-melody output remains organisationally differentiated, with state-owned enterprises more strongly represented, consistent with evidence that regulatory and evaluative frameworks shape participation and “social performance” in China’s film sector (Xin et al., 2025).

Third, conventional market indicators (revenue- and rating-related measures) generally do not differ by film type, whereas online comment volume does, indicating that policy alignment relates more to discursive engagement than to aggregate market scale. In China’s attention economy, comment activity is closely tied to post-release eWOM dynamics and can shape visibility trajectories (Chou & Lin, 2025).

7.2 Theoretical Contributions

The study contributes in two ways: it operationalises policy alignment as an empirically testable dimension, demonstrating that main-melody status is institutionally coherent rather than merely discursive (Huang & Lams, 2025). It also refines political economy debates by showing institutional differentiation without uniform market divergence, which is more consistent with accounts of post-pandemic governance refinement and continued market complexity in Chinese cinema (Wang et al., 2025).

7.3 Policy and Industry Implications

For cultural policy, the results suggest that evaluation frameworks should not rely on aggregate box office alone and should treat engagement-sensitive indicators as analytically distinct, given evidence that post-release eWOM can structure visibility trajectories (Chou & Lin, 2025).

For industry stakeholders, the ownership-based differences in circulation and engagement (even when revenue does not diverge) imply that distribution reach and platform engagement should be managed as distinct strategic objectives, particularly under post-disruption market recalibration (Wang et al., 2025).

7.4 Limitations

Three limitations apply. First, key outcomes are right-skewed; future work should extend robustness checks with additional sensitivity analyses and model-based approaches. Second, the design is comparative rather than causal and does not control for genre, marketing spends, star power, or release-window competition. Third, engagement is proxied by comment volume and does not capture sentiment, diffusion networks, or cross-platform spillovers, which are central to platform-driven promotional dynamics (Chou & Lin, 2025).

7.5 Future Research

Future work can extend this study in three directions. First, mixed-method designs could connect quantitative differentiation patterns with close analysis of film text and paratexts (trailers, posters, publicity discourse) to specify how policy-consistent narratives are constructed (Huang & Lams, 2025). Second, platform-facing research could model engagement more granularly by incorporating sentiment/valence, temporal trajectories, and cross-platform dynamics (Chou & Lin, 2025). Third, institutional research could link film-level outputs to regulatory change and firm-level adaptation to clarify how governance reforms reshape incentives and the balance between financial and “social” performance (Xin et al., 2025).

Finally, future research should incorporate international reception ecologies, as English-language review patterns may privilege distinct narrative and aesthetic criteria relative to domestic policy–market dynamics (Tian, 2025).

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