

# A New Perspective on China's Children's Film Industry from the Perspective of Knowledge Production Models

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**Abstract:** *Children's films in China play a significant role in today's society and have a profound impact on children's growth and development. As a form of media, children's films not only provide young audiences with opportunities for entertainment and recreation but also bear the responsibility and mission of conveying values and education. The children's film industry is a complex sector that brings together knowledge and skills from multiple fields; it provides vital educational and cultural resources for children's growth and development, while also serving as an effective channel for dialogue among the cultural industry, the education sector, and society at large. The rapid development of China's children's film industry against the backdrop of marketization has brought about a series of challenges, imposing new demands on the sector. Drawing on the framework of knowledge production models and integrating it with the development of the children's film industry, this paper attempts to analyze the current state of the industry through the lenses of "Mode I" and "Mode II" of knowledge production. It aims to offer new perspectives and insights for China's children's film industry through an interdisciplinary approach, thereby facilitating greater innovation and better service to society, as well as fostering international cooperation and dissemination.*

**Keywords:** Children's Films; Knowledge Production; Industrial Development.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Generally speaking, gaining a comprehensive understanding of the current state and development landscape of the children's film industry facilitates the exploration and development of new perspectives related to this sector. By analyzing the relationship between these new perspectives and the industry's development, we can gain a holistic understanding of China's children's film market—a necessary step toward a deeper understanding of research in this field. Content creation, key players, aesthetics, education, knowledge, release schedules, cinema chains, and word-of-mouth are all key terms that cannot be bypassed when examining China's children's film market; they also provide a concrete perspective for our current research on the film industry. In recent years, with the rapid development of China's children's film industry and the government's guidance toward an educational orientation, children's films are increasingly viewed as bearing the responsibility and guiding role of knowledge production for the child audience. Due to the unique nature of its audience, children's cinema faces distinct responsibilities, requirements, and challenges compared to films intended for all age groups. Examining the issue through the lens of knowledge production models "I" and "II" can help us identify solutions for children's cinema and provide insights for more accurately grasping the increasingly mature Chinese children's film market. As a theoretical framework in the social sciences and research, the knowledge production model, viewed through an interdisciplinary lens, may help us better understand the rapidly evolving development of China's children's film industry.

## 2. THE TRANSITION OF CHINA'S CHILDREN'S FILM INDUSTRY FROM STATE-OWNED TO MARKET-ORIENTED

China's animation industry has undergone a transition from a state-owned model to a market-oriented one, driven by both external competition from various entities and internal reforms within the film system. During the planned economy era, animated films were fully funded by the government and subject to centralized purchasing and distribution. In the last century, one of the primary producers of Chinese animated films was the Shanghai Animation Film Studio (SAFS), which is hailed as a pioneer in Chinese animation production and once led the industry to achieve remarkable global success. Prior to the early 1990s, SFA operated primarily under a state-owned model, selling films to the government at cost plus 20 percent, without the need for commercial

marketing or market development. Following the reform and opening-up, China moved away from the planned economy toward a more open, market-oriented economic model. In the late 1990s, the government ceased its guaranteed purchase of SFA's productions. Faced with the end of the state-owned operational model, SFA continuously explored new approaches such as diversified development and collaboration. This shift had a profound impact on the development of China's children's film industry. Since the beginning of the 21st century, against the backdrop of a market-oriented economy, China's children's film companies have experienced rapid growth, and the market-driven children's film industry has become the dominant force [1]. The number of companies involved in China's animation industry has continued to grow, rising from just over 20 in the 1980s to more than 390 animation production companies (including related enterprises) by the end of the 20th century—a sixfold increase. China's film industry has also placed greater emphasis on market orientation and audience demand in order to maximize the industry's value [2].

### **3. CHINA'S CHILDREN'S FILM INDUSTRY IN THE CONTEXT OF MARKETIZATION**

#### **3.1 The Rapid Growth of China's Children's Film Industry in a Market-Oriented Environment**

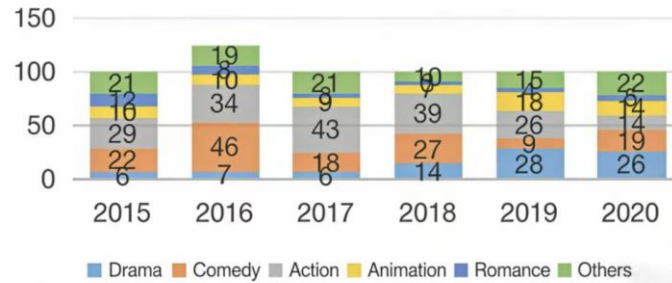
In recent years, against the backdrop of marketization and driven by supportive policies, China's film industry has made significant progress. From General Secretary Xi Jinping's call in early 2014 to "build a culturally strong nation and focus on enhancing the country's cultural soft power," to the joint issuance by seven ministries on June 19 of the "Notice on Several Economic Policies to Support Film Development," and then to the National Symposium on Film Work held in Beijing in July, the development of China's film industry has been elevated to an unprecedented level. From the "Guiding Opinions on Strengthening Film and Television Education in Primary and Secondary Schools" released in 2018 to the "Opinions on Comprehensively Strengthening and Improving Aesthetic Education in Schools in the New Era" issued by the General Offices of the CPC Central Committee and the State Council in 2020, the cultural and economic sectors have gradually merged into a cohesive entity since 2000. This convergence has led to the commercialization of culture and the simultaneous expansion of economic and cultural sectors, resulting in a growing demand for cultural enterprises and public cultural service systems. Amid this shifting landscape, the children's film industry has flourished and made significant strides. In terms of film genres, action and comedy films have accounted for the largest share of the domestic film market since 2015. Animated films experienced rapid growth in 2015 and 2016, but their performance was lackluster in 2017 and 2018, with relatively low market shares. 2019 marked the most successful year for China's animated film industry, with a market share reaching 18%. With the introduction of the "Double Reduction" policy in 2021, the establishment of seven new film universities in China, and the 14th Five-Year Plan for the film industry, the National Film Bureau is committed to achieving the goal of building a cultural powerhouse by 2035. The successive release of these policy documents not only demonstrates the government's commitment to the potential of young people and the next generation of creators, but also underscores its emphasis on children's film and television education [3].

The contemporary children's film industry is currently facing new opportunities for growth. As one of the world's most populous countries, China has a vast population of children. This provides the Chinese children's film industry with a vast market demand and significant room for development. With rapid economic growth and social progress, the spiritual needs of Chinese children are also constantly evolving. They yearn to watch creative and educational films, hoping to find emotional resonance and insights for personal growth within them. With the advancement of urbanization and rising household incomes, an increasing number of families are able and eager to provide their children with opportunities to watch movies. At the same time, the content of children's films has become more diverse, appealing to audiences of different age groups and further expanding the audience base. As the children's film market has grown, the related industrial chain has expanded rapidly. With the rapid rise of China's streaming industry, film distribution channels are no longer limited to traditional cinema chains. The online film industry is booming, attracting top domestic original content creators and bringing new development opportunities to the film and television sector. At the same time, China's animation industry chain is becoming increasingly sophisticated, and business models for developing derivative products from original animations are maturing.

According to an analysis by a relevant industry research institute on the current state of China's children's film market in recent years, the market is expected to maintain a relatively rapid growth rate. It is projected that by 2023, the industry's total revenue will reach 61.4 billion yuan, with a compound annual growth rate exceeding 30%. This forward-looking forecast indicates that China's children's film market possesses enormous potential and room for

growth [4].

**2015-2021 Annual Revenue Structure of Chinese Films (by Genre)**



**Figure 1:** Structure of China's film box office revenue, 2015-2021

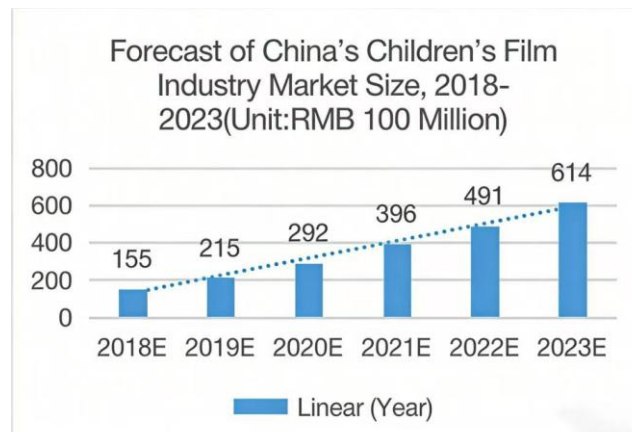
**Table 1:** Distribution of Chinese Animated Films Across Ten Years

The Ten-Year Distribution of Chinese Animated Films		
Years	Total box office revenue (in billions)	Highest box office (in 100 million)
Previous - 2014	10	2
2015-2018	10-20	5
2019-2023	20	10

**Table 2:** Distribution of Chinese Films Over Ten Years

The Ten-Year Stages of Chinese Cinema			
Years	Total box office revenue (in billions)	Number of works exceeding 10 million	Number of works exceeding 100 million
2023	24.73	4	2
2022	20.65	14	3
2021	25.79	16	5
2020	16.93	5	1
2019	67.89	11	4
2018	14.32	16	4
2017	13.02	16	4
2016	12.1	11	2
2015	16.23	13	2
2014	9.7	15	2
Total	221.36	121	29

Due to the impact of the pandemic, the film market performed less than ideally in 2022. According to statistics from the National Film Bureau, the total box office revenue for the year was 30.067 billion yuan. According to data from Maoyan Professional Edition, a total of 46 animated films were released in China in 2022. As of January 2023, the highest-grossing film was \*Boonie Bears: Back to Earth\*, which was released on February 1, with a cumulative box office of 977 million yuan. Among the 81 production companies involved, 16 produced animated films that grossed over 100 million yuan [5].



**Figure 2:** Forecast of China's Children's Film Industry Market Size, 2018-2023

### **3.2 The Rise of Multiple Entities: The Transformation of China's Children's Film Industry**

With the rise of the children's film economy and industry, the monopolistic position of state-owned film production companies has been challenged by a diverse range of entities, leading to a shift in the industry's creative landscape from government-led to market-led. In the past, the Shanghai Animation Film Studio played a pivotal role in China's children's film sector, while the subsequent emergence of private film production companies—such as Beijing Enlight Media Co., Ltd., Beijing Perfect World Pictures Co., Ltd., and Shanghai Century Production Co., Ltd.—has further promoted the industry's diversification. Independent filmmakers working as individuals or in small teams have also actively participated in the creation and production of children's films. With greater creative freedom and unique artistic styles, they have infused the genre with new vitality and innovative thinking. Furthermore, as the children's film market has grown, an increasing number of investment firms have entered the sector to provide financial backing for film projects, and their participation has driven the rapid development of China's children's film industry. Today, the development of China's children's film industry relies on the collaborative efforts of various stakeholders. The emergence and participation of these diverse entities have enriched the industry's ecosystem, providing more creative resources, financial support, and marketing channels for the sector. Each brings distinct strengths and characteristics, collectively driving the vigorous growth of China's children's film industry.

### **3.3 New Breakthroughs in the Market-Oriented Model of Incubating Local Chinese IPs**

Against the backdrop of steady growth in the global children's content industry, China's domestic children's content sector is currently experiencing rapid development. Well-known brands such as Disney have successfully incubated numerous popular IPs by leveraging film and television content and implementing comprehensive online and offline promotional strategies, setting an industry benchmark. At the same time, with the rise of new media such as short videos and the younger generation's return to offline social interactions, China's domestic film market is also forming a new IP incubation model. In addition to incubating IPs for animated films, this model also encompasses game and app IPs, toy and merchandise IPs, literary IPs, and offline exhibition IPs, creating synergies between IPs and fostering new business models [Yin Hong et al. Causes, Current Status, and Future Development Trends of the Rise of IP Adaptation [J], *Contemporary Cinema*, 2015(8):22.] This new model offers opportunities and possibilities for breakthroughs in China's domestic IPs. By meeting the needs of young audiences through innovative approaches, it not only enriches their entertainment and learning experiences but also enhances the brand value and market competitiveness of children's films, increasing their influence and commercial value, and further driving the development and transformation of China's children's film industry.

### **3.4 Increased Collaboration: A Driving Force for the Dissemination and Innovation of Children's Films**

The standardization of production, the commercialization of marketing operations, and the diversification of market development are three key aspects of the children's film industry. Against the backdrop of marketization, and with advancements in technology and the growth of digital media, collaboration within China's children's film industry is on the rise. This collaboration extends beyond the content creators and producers to include various cinemas, television broadcast platforms, and online media platforms, enabling audiences to enjoy and interact with children's films through a variety of channels. Through various forms of collaboration—such as partnerships with market research firms, brand collaborations, and promotional campaigns—the industry not only gains insight into audience needs but also transforms children's films into commercially viable and appealing brands, thereby attracting a larger audience and achieving strong box office results. Furthermore, international cooperation injects new creativity and technology into China's children's film industry, broadening its market reach and influence. In 2018, to advance film cooperation under the “Belt and Road” initiative and achieve the leap toward becoming a leading film nation, the China Children's Film Studio signed a cooperation agreement with the internationally renowned Iranian director Majid Majidi, writing a new chapter in the exchange between Chinese and Persian civilizations. In 2022, the LEGO Group and the Shanghai Animation Film Studio collaborated to create the LEGO Wukong series and a creative promotional short film for “The Monkey King”. By combining traditional Chinese culture with an internationally renowned brand, they inspired Chinese children's sense of heritage and heroism through a dialogue that transcends time and space. While promoting the dissemination and innovation of children's films, this initiative also helps enhance the international influence of Chinese children's cinema and fosters international cultural exchange and cooperation.

#### 4. CHINA'S CHILDREN'S FILM INDUSTRY AND KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION MODEL

Against the backdrop of marketization, China's children's film industry has experienced rapid growth over the past decade, achieving remarkable success and producing numerous classic works. It has also become an integral part of China's broader economic and cultural development. With social progress and a growing emphasis on children's education, the value of children's films is increasingly recognized.

On November 21, 2018, the Ministry of Education and the Publicity Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China jointly issued the "Guiding Opinions on Strengthening Film and Television Education for Primary and Secondary School Students." This demonstrates that the Party Central Committee views children's film and television as an integral part of educational work and regards film as one of the key forms of education. This initiative further underscores the importance that the Party and the state place on children's film education, recognizing it as a vital means of cultivating students' aesthetic sensibilities and fostering sound values. According to the "Opinions on Comprehensively Strengthening and Improving Aesthetic Education in Schools in the New Era," issued by the General Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the General Office of the State Council in 2020, the goal of aesthetic education in schools is to enhance students' aesthetic and humanistic literacy, integrate aesthetic education into the talent development process at all levels and types of schools, and incorporate it into every stage of school education. General Secretary Xi Jinping has emphasized that aesthetic education in schools must be comprehensively strengthened and improved, and that it should be integrated into the cultivation of students' cultural and aesthetic literacy. To implement this important directive, we must prioritize and revitalize aesthetic education in schools, treating it as a fundamental component of high-quality education. Aesthetic education is at the core of aesthetic education; it not only cultivates aesthetic abilities but also encompasses moral and spiritual education, playing an irreplaceable role in moral education and talent development. As a vital component of aesthetic education, children's films must not merely pursue entertainment and commercial value; rather, they should be child-centered, undertaking the responsibility of moral, humanistic, and social education for children, while also serving as a vehicle for aesthetic education and new media literacy education. They fulfill an educational and guiding role in the domains of children's aesthetic development, moral character, humanities and social studies, and new media literacy, and bear the responsibility of knowledge production.

The concept of knowledge production modes originally emerged in the fields of contemporary social sciences and research. Gibbons et al. argue that a new form of knowledge production, known as "Mode II," is emerging alongside "Mode I." In "Mode I," knowledge production is typically confined to a specific discipline, involves a relatively homogeneous group of producers, and relies on peer review for quality control [7]. In "Mode II," knowledge production is characterized by interdisciplinarity and diverse collaborative models, involving a broader range of professionals and practitioners. Furthermore, "Mode II" is context-specific and market-driven, with a focus on the environment and problem-solving. Finally, quality control in "Mode II" is comprehensive and multidimensional, encompassing both social and technical standards. Its impact on government technology policy is to make traditional research institutions more permeable and collaborative; to support networks and alliances; to facilitate cooperation; and to integrate relevant policies across education, research, industry, and business.

As the pace of economic reform accelerates and the market opens up, China's children's film industry has experienced rapid growth and engaged in collaborative development with various partners. At the same time, however, it faces competition from a wide range of film genres both domestically and internationally. Traditional children's films face competition not only from other children's films but also from the preferences of family and teenage audiences for other genres, such as foreign animated films and Hollywood blockbusters. This has created significant pressure and challenges for the development of China's children's film industry.

First, today's audiences have higher expectations for high-quality, creative, and educational children's films, which requires filmmakers to continuously innovate in terms of content. While commercial considerations and market demand must certainly be taken into account, if the Chinese children's film industry blindly pursues production speed and focuses excessively on box office revenue and commercial value while neglecting the quality and artistic aesthetics of its films, it will create a tension between creative content and commercialization. Prioritizing market and economic interests over content has led to a tendency for Chinese children's films to be overly superficial and has fostered a homogenization of artistic aesthetics within the industry. This fails to stimulate the imagination of young audiences and results in a lack of inherent innovation within the industry, thereby undermining the global competitiveness of Chinese children's films.

Second, the rapid expansion of China's children's film industry has led to a shortage of talent and lagging team structures. The production of children's films requires a wealth of professionals with specialized technical expertise. The shortage of relevant professionals in the field may lead to insufficient research on the psychological and educational development characteristics of children, resulting in a neglect of children's capacity for value judgment and appreciation. Consequently, the guidance methods and value transmission in children's films may appear rather rigid, deviating from the educational responsibility that children's films should fulfill, and creating a contradiction between adult-oriented content and a child-centered approach. Additionally, there is a need for professionals specializing in marketing and promotional strategies. The promotion and marketing of children's films require the development of appropriate strategies tailored to audiences of different age groups in order to capture their attention and interest.

Finally, there are a series of issues arising from collaborations between the children's film industry and various stakeholders. Producers, investors, distributors, and television stations all hope to maximize their returns from these collaborations, which involve resource sharing and profit distribution among different stakeholders. Furthermore, disagreements may arise among these stakeholders regarding the film's creative direction, story content, and character development, potentially leading to creative conflicts. In addition, the collaboration involves the protection of copyright and intellectual property rights, safeguarding the legitimate rights and interests of collaborators. Ensuring the originality and uniqueness of the film while preventing unauthorized use and infringement by collaborators presents a significant challenge.

After years of development, China's children's film industry has achieved a series of successes, with locally inspired characters and classic stories flooding the screen to meet the expectations of an ever-growing number of young viewers. However, when compared to the production quality and advanced standards of leading international children's film industries, this places higher demands and expectations on the development of China's children's film industry, requiring it to develop new creativity, new knowledge, and new technologies. By examining the rapid development of China's children's film industry under marketization through the lens of knowledge production models—and the coexistence of “Mode I” and “Mode II”—we can help reconfigure and recombine professional knowledge into useful knowledge, thereby fostering the creation of even more valuable knowledge. This perspective on knowledge production models offers a fresh viewpoint for the Chinese children's film industry, helping it evolve toward greater professionalism and refinement.

## **5. FROM MARKETIZATION TO KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION UNDER MARKETIZATION**

First, China's children's film industry must seek to harmonize three key values: commercial, social, and aesthetic. In any period of social and historical development, the value of the children's film industry lies in meeting specific needs, and these needs vary significantly across different historical eras and social contexts. Knowledge Production Model “II” emphasizes the need to address the broad range of demands from the commercial, governmental, and social sectors; the industry should not be driven by a single factor alone, but rather must achieve a harmonious integration of these three core values. Building upon commercial value and social responsibility, the industry should deeply explore resources such as traditional Chinese culture, folk tales, and myths and legends, skillfully integrating them into original works to preserve and promote the essence of Chinese culture. At the same time, creators should be encouraged to boldly break free from the constraints of traditional culture and explore the broader possibilities of contemporary Chinese culture. This will enable the creation of children's films rich in Chinese style and the spirit of the times, helping to instill in children a unique Chinese aesthetic and set of values while strengthening their cultural confidence. In summary, exploring the integration of these three core values—commercial, social, and aesthetic—not only significantly enhances and advances Chinese children's films in terms of commercial viability, social impact, and artistic expression, but also generates multifaceted positive effects on children's culture, the cultural industry, social values, and cultural outreach. This approach better promotes national culture and paves the way for Chinese children's films to reach a global audience.

Second, we must promote a multidisciplinary understanding of children's films among diverse stakeholders and strengthen the development of a multidisciplinary talent model for the sector. The development of China's children's film industry—whether in screenwriting or in areas beyond the cinema—cannot proceed without professional talent. The perspective of knowledge production places higher demands on the development of the children's film industry; it requires not only professionals in film but also talent in fields such as art, education, and operations management. Talent serves as a vital pillar of the film industry and is also a key participant in every

stage of knowledge production. Talent development within a single discipline can no longer meet the needs of today's children's film industry. Collaboration between society and higher education institutions is essential to cultivate professionals who systematically master theoretical knowledge, skills, and experience in the film field, who are familiar with child psychology and developmental patterns, understand national cultural policies and laws, and possess profound cultural and artistic literacy along with a sincere sense of public cultural responsibility. These interdisciplinary talents will become outstanding producers in the field of children's cinema, conscious disseminators of social aesthetic education, and vital pillars of cultural development. They will promote the sustainable development of the children's film industry on its path toward marketization and gradually establish an independent and comprehensive children's film education system with Chinese characteristics in the future.

Third, encourage new research in the field of China's children's film industry. From the perspective of knowledge production models, research serves as the core mechanism for generating knowledge, nourishing and empowering industry development. Research on children's films extends beyond scriptwriting, filming, post-production techniques, and market-oriented operational models; rather, it involves constructing a series of narratives and methodologies that are rooted in China and embody Chinese characteristics. By leveraging effective and diverse distribution channels, such research facilitates mutual learning within the industry, generate new knowledge and products based on research, and facilitate better cultural exchange with the international community. This will help establish the international identity, culture, and discourse of Chinese children's films, thereby promoting the sustainable and healthy development of the children's film industry.

Finally, policies and laws should be utilized to refine the scope of cooperation and rights and interests between China's children's film industry and its partners, ensuring that the legitimate rights and interests of all parties are protected. Under market-driven conditions, the children's film industry has developed rapidly, reaching a massive scale with a complex structure that involves multiple stakeholders, including domestic and international producers, creators, children and their parents, the government, and capital. By refining the institutional and legal frameworks governing domestic and international entities as well as cross-border cooperation, promoting the establishment of clear cooperation agreements and standardized regulations, advancing children's film rating and review systems, and further strengthening intellectual property policies and laws regarding children's films, related IP, and derivatives—while continuously refining the interests, rights, and responsibilities of all stakeholders—China's children's film industry will establish long-term, stable cooperative relationships with all stakeholders. This will further expand the market and drive innovation and development across all stages of creation, production, and promotion. Furthermore, through a series of policies encouraging research on children's films and refining corresponding competition mechanisms, the industry will foster innovation and vitality in its development. With these institutional improvements in place, the children's film industry is well-positioned for deep integration with education, culture, and other sectors. China's children's film industry will continue to focus on and support film and television education for children, contributing to the cultivation of creative and artistically talented youth.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Against the backdrop of China's rapidly developing market economy, the Chinese children's film industry faces a series of current challenges and issues. Government policies have set forth new requirements and responsibilities for the industry's development and its role in educational guidance, making it imperative to adopt a more interdisciplinary perspective and employ in-depth research methods to study its development. A children's film industry that possesses the capacity and responsibility for knowledge production will pave the way for a creative, educational, and sustainable future for China's film industry. In summary, the knowledge production model serves as a crucial interdisciplinary framework for examining the development of China's children's film industry. It offers novel perspectives and provides reasonable explanations for emerging phenomena and challenges, thereby enabling a multidimensional understanding of the industry's growth from a fresh vantage point. By leveraging the roles of diverse actors and relevant stakeholders within the knowledge production model, we can collectively drive the vigorous development of China's children's film industry, enhance its quality and influence, meet audience needs while pioneering new avenues for growth, and nurture the healthy development of the industry through a more diverse cultural lens.

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