

# Restorative media practices and affective identification: marketing breakthroughs and audience construction of marginal art films

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**Abstract.** In the 2025 Chinese film market, art films featuring A-list stars suffered dismal box office performance, while marginal art films with no star cast and low capital investment faced even more severe structural squeezing of screening slots. Taking *Mr. Pingshi* as the core case and comparing it with films such as *Cuihu*, *The Verse of Us* and *Song of the Phoenix*, this paper proposes an analytical framework of "restorative media practice". The research finds that marginal art films achieve audience construction from material reach to emotional resonance through hands-on geographic roadshows and emotional connections driven by moral premises, transforming the "obligation-reciprocity" relationship into ritual interaction. This bottom-up communication pathway reveals the formation mechanism of moral-emotional communities between creators and audiences beyond algorithmic distribution and theater chain logic.

**Keywords:** marginal art films, roadshows, emotional identification, restorative media practice

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## 1. Introduction

The overall Chinese film market continued to grow in 2025, yet against this backdrop of prosperity, the box office performance of art films showed a profound divergence. A-list-starred art films such as those starring Shu Qi, Chen Kun and Huang Xiaoming collectively flopped at the box office: *The Girl* directed by Shu Qi grossed only 4.142 million yuan in total, *The Bystander* starring Chen Kun earned less than 2 million yuan, and *Sunshine Club* starring Huang Xiaoming took in just 5.923 million yuan. These works, which had gained attention at international film festivals, failed to secure corresponding market space in promotion, release and scheduling. In stark contrast, *Silent Love* raked in 144 million yuan, breaking the box office ceiling for films featuring hearing-impaired themes. This indicates that the traditional star-driven promotion model is becoming ineffective in the art film sector.

Meanwhile, *The Wild Era*, directed by Bi Gan and starring Jackson Yee, set a "ceiling" for the art film market by virtue of star power: the film's pre-sale box office exceeded 120 million yuan, its opening day box office surpassed 70 million yuan, and it grossed a total of 191 million yuan. However, these figures precisely expose a paradox: the involvement of star aura and capital not only failed to help marginal films break through but also intensified the squeezing of screening space for marginal works. When "star appeal" loses its efficacy

in some low-budget art film sectors and marginal art films face structural squeezing under theater scheduling logic, how can starless, low-capital "marginal art films" reach audiences through atypical pathways?

Existing research has paid limited attention to this issue. Yan Chuqing points out that the market dilemma of domestic art films stems from the combined influence of cast, narrative style and marketing efforts [1]. However, such analyses mostly focus on films with the involvement of large-scale marketing or star-studded casts. For instance, *B for Busy* (2021) grossed 260 million yuan thanks to its star cast including Xu Zheng and humorous narrative, while *The Eleventh Chapter* earned 73.973 million yuan with star casts such as Chen Jianbin and Zhou Xun. Yet academia still lacks sufficient theoretical attention on how starless, low-capital "marginal art films" achieve "breakout success".

Taking the 2025 biographical film *Mr. Pingshi* as the core case and comparing its promotion and release practices with those of *Cuihu*, *The Verse of Us* and *Song of the Phoenix*, this paper explores how marginal art films construct audiences from "material reach" to "emotional resonance" through alternative hands-on promotion and release. Theoretically, this paper draws on the theory of "moral premise" to explain the possibility of emotional connection and categorizes such promotion and release practices as a form of "restorative media practice"—that is, amid the growing monopoly of attention by digital platforms and algorithmic distribution logic, "physical presence" has become a profound act of resisting "virtual connection". This framework seeks to provide a new theoretical perspective for understanding audience construction of marginal art films.

## 2. The marginalized position: market marginalization and scheduling oppression of marginal art films

### 2.1. Multiple sources of "marginality"

*Mr. Pingshi* is a narrative biographical film directed by Gan Xiao'er, produced by Wang Hongwei and headlined by Tse Kwan-ho, released on August 15, 2025, in mainland China. Set against the true historical background of the westward relocation of South China institutions of higher learning—including National Sun Yat-sen University and Lingnan University—to Pingshi, northern Guangdong, during the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression in 1938, the film focuses on the wartime stories of educational pioneers such as Huang Ji, the founder of modern Chinese mathematics education and a master of parallel prose. The film's "marginality" manifests in three dimensions.

The first is the marginality of its subject matter. Director Gan Xiao'er candidly admitted in an apology letter: "Unfamiliar figures, forgotten history—these inherently lack commercial appeal". The film recounts the history of National Sun Yat-sen University and other institutions relocating to Pingshi Town, northern Guangdong, and persisting in education amid bombings and scarcity during the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression—a forgotten past that "even a university teacher like me is unaware of, merely eighty years later". The second is the marginality of economic capital. As a medium-low budget production, the film mainly relied on self-raised funds and special provincial and municipal support. Gan Xiao'er acknowledged, "We decided from the very beginning to shoot the film with self-raised funds" and "several core crew members contributed their savings and property to form the production team". The third is the marginality of distribution space. According to Maoyan Professional Edition data, the film's screening ratio on its release day was only 0.3%, dropping to less than 0.1% by the fourth day of release.

Per Maoyan Professional Edition data, *The Stage*, released in 2025, recorded an opening-day screening ratio of 13.5% and a prime-time screening ratio of 21.0%; *Wandering Life* posted an opening-day screening

ratio of 13.7%. In comparison, *Mr. Pingshi's* opening-day screening ratio of 0.3% meant it was almost entirely excluded from the mainstream screening channels of the scheduling system. A 2025 industry report by *Xinhua Finance and Economics* showed that the average attendance per screening across cinemas nationwide lingered between 2 and 4 people at the time, with the empty screening rate approaching 40%—amid such low overall cinema attendance and mounting operational pressure on cinemas, schedulers tend to concentrate resources on a small number of films expected to generate stable box office, rather than allocating slots to marginal art films likely to attract only niche audiences. This data comparison indicates that the scheduling squeeze endured by *Mr. Pingshi* constitutes structural systemic exclusion, rather than an accidental judgment on a single film's commercial prospects.

These three layers of marginality—subject marginality, capital marginality and scheduling marginality—form a mutually reinforcing closed loop in an academic sense: the more marginal the subject matter, the harder it is to attract capital and commercial screenings, and the lack of screening space further pushes the film to the margins.

## 2.2. Commercial theater screening logic and scheduling oppression mechanism

Cinema scheduling follows a mature commercial logic. Xia Qinfang explicitly points out in *An Analysis of Key Factors in Cinema Scheduling* that scheduling must adhere to the principle of "prioritizing key releases over secondary ones, new releases over subsequent screenings". Key releases mainly refer to films characterized by "massive investment, strong promotion and prominent selling points", with larger auditoriums allocated primarily to flagship films, and genre films interspersed to enrich diversity [2]. Marginal art films are typically low-investment, unpromoted and lacking strong selling points, putting them at an inherent structural disadvantage in the scheduling process.

Crucially, scheduling logic also follows the principle of "dynamic scheduling": adjustments are made in real time based on attendance, with underperforming films pulled from screens. Marginal films face low attendance due to off-peak screening slots, falling into a cycle of short screening windows—once pulled, their screening windows shrink further, creating a vicious circle.

As per Maoyan Professional Edition data, *The Wild Era* grossed over 120 million yuan in pre-sales, 79.5076 million yuan on its opening day, recorded a screening ratio of 31.4% and a total box office of 191 million yuan, all thanks to Jackson Yee's star power. This represents the "ceiling" attainable by art films in the market environment. However, these figures reveal a paradox: lacking commercial elements such as action and suspense, marginal art films are inherently disadvantaged in mainstream theater competition, while the involvement of star aura and capital not only fails to help marginal films break through but also intensifies the squeezing of screening space for marginal works, trapping marginal art films in a vicious cycle of "low screening ratio, low attendance and short screening windows".

## 2.3. The paradox of "critical acclaim but poor box office" and its critique

The audience feedback from *Mr. Pingshi's* roadshows was overwhelmingly positive and emotionally intense, creating a stark contrast with the film's awkward scheduling situation. On one hand, core viewers expressed deep resonance and emotional engagement after watching the film; on the other hand, the screening ratio approached zero, leaving the vast majority of potential viewers unable to "encounter" the film in cinemas.

This paradox directs the analysis to a key question: Is the "critical acclaim but poor box office" status of marginal art films due to an insurmountable divide between their artistic expression and public aesthetic taste, or a structural "barrier" between creators and audiences?

The following are comments from netizens:

I chased this film from Guangxi to Guizhou, then from Guizhou to Hunan, like a persistent and awkward "film detective", checking ticketing apps in every city—only to see "no screenings available". A friend asked: "Did you see it?" I replied: "Still on the way to find a cinema screening... Finally! Back to Nanhai, Foshan, I caught it at a cinema in Shunde, 10km away! At that moment, I almost knelt at the ticket counter and shouted: 'Finally found you, thank goodness I didn't give up!'"—Xiaohongshu, September 11, 2025.

I had no idea the screening ratio was so low during the release period. I planned to buy tickets today but found no screenings left. Such a pity! I'd been looking forward to watching it since the promotion started. It was filmed in my hometown, and it's such a meaningful patriotic and national salvation story!—Xiaohongshu, August 26, 2025.

In Shanghai, a city of 24 million people, there's only one cinema screening it once a day from today to next Tuesday. I can't understand how such a great film could be neglected.—Xiaohongshu, August 16, 2025.

Location: Zhaoqing. Not a single cinema in the city has screenings for *Mr. Pingshi*! I'm furious! How can such a valuable film about Lingnan history have no screenings? I'm so upset... (Curious, I checked screening ratios elsewhere in Guangdong, and they're also extremely low... But I can't travel to Guangzhou or other cities right now, I'm really out of options.)—Weibo, August 20, 2025.

I've been looking forward to its theatrical release since seeing the trailer, but aside from the release day on August 15, there were almost no screenings. The few available slots were either too far or scheduled completely inconveniently for office workers on weekdays.—Weibo, September 2025.

Market observations provide a crucial theoretical framework for understanding this paradox. Producers cling to isolated narrative logic focused on personal expression or film festival recognition, ignoring the basic laws of market communication, while the genuine demand of numerous viewers who "want to watch" but lack access is submerged in the averaged figures of overall market data. Examining *Mr. Pingshi*'s predicament through this framework leads to a key conclusion: the core reason for the film's "critical acclaim but poor box office" status is not aesthetic barriers or narrative disconnects, but a "physical blockage" between creators and potential audiences caused by film distribution mechanisms.

As early as 2023, Zhang Hongsen, then Director of the Film Bureau of the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television, delivered a sharp diagnosis on the structural contradiction in the supply of art films. He pointed out that the most precious and essential part of cinema lies in confronting contemporary life, embracing all living beings, and engaging with the subtle yet eternal relational bonds between people—yet such films have become the "mid-tier" of the supply chain, struggling to survive and facing a dismal end. "The top tier is dominated by big-budget sci-fi and tech-driven productions, the bottom tier is expanding rapidly, while the mid-tier is becoming increasingly weak". Zhang Hongsen's assertion reveals a striking fact: amid the so-called "supply-demand mismatch", the structural failure of supply relative to demand stems not from poor film quality, but from the systematic filtering of a category of films by the distribution, scheduling and consumption chains. These chains operate efficiently and smoothly for commercial films, but encounter inherent, almost automatic exclusion and neglect when faced with marginal works that are neither "big-budget sci-fi" nor "traffic-driven" [3].

*Mr. Pingshi*'s case offers a perspective with "reverse corrective" significance for the above judgment: its narrative complexity and viewing threshold are no higher than the market average for art films, yet the scheduling difficulties it faces are almost identical to those of many art films proven to have "critical acclaim but poor box office". This implies that the distribution predicament of marginal art films is largely structural rather than aesthetic. It is not because they are "separated by a wall" from a broader audience in terms of abstract artistic expression or avant-garde experimentation, but because the superimposed effects of scheduling data, theater choices, capital preferences and scheduling logic in the market distribution system

have erected an invisible "wall" during screenings, forcibly separating creators from a large number of potential audiences. It is on this basis that this paper argues that, at the primary reflective level, *Mr. Pingshi's* distribution predicament reveals a more debatable question: this "critical acclaim but poor box office" situation is largely formed not by the failure of a single link, but by a combination of the profit-driven commercial rationality of schedulers, the disconnect between expression and market dimensions, and the implicit exclusion of marginal works by the entire theater scheduling system—this is the more intrinsic and hidden aspect of the long-standing "critical acclaim but poor box office" paradox in the art film market.

However, merely identifying this structural barrier is insufficient. Given that the crux lies not in "aesthetic disconnects" but in "physical blockages", the breakthrough pathway for marginal art films must be sought at the "physical level": at the structural gaps in the scheduling system, can creators replace "missing screenings" with their own physical presence? Beyond algorithmic distribution and theater filtering, can emotion become a new form of connection? *Mr. Pingshi's* "apology letter" and national roadshows represent a conscious response to this question—transforming the audience construction of a film from the transactional logic of "waiting to be seen" to the hands-on narrative and emotional connection between creators and audiences. This is precisely what the following two chapters elaborate on in detail.

### 3. Hands-on geographic roadshows

#### 3.1. From "traditional distribution" to "self-distribution": a conceptual framework

When discussing the communication difficulties of low-budget domestic art films, academia has noted that due to the lack of a mature commercial promotion and distribution system, many art films are forced to turn to self-distribution. Research indicates that to improve the predicament of "low screening ratio, low attendance, short screening window and poor box office performance", low-budget art films need to restructure their communication strategies to amplify their voice. *Mr. Pingshi's* distribution path exhibits "hybrid" characteristics—combining traditional theatrical release with extensive roadshows relying on "physical presence" to reach audiences. This shift from "traditional distribution" to "self-distribution" is essentially a strategic response by marginal art films to structural difficulties.

Gan Xiao'er and the core crew conducted roadshows in more than ten cities, including Beijing, Shanghai, Nanjing, as well as Shenzhen, Dongguan, Foshan, Zhongshan, Jiangmen, Zhuhai, Shantou and Shanwei. On the release day, the director made a "breakthrough" by launching an account on Xiaohongshu, writing an open letter to the audience and participating in live-streaming sessions to "promote the film". The director himself likened this behavior to "street performers who used to travel far and wide to make a living", "physically reaching their audience". Faced with scheduling pressure, the core crew chose to engage with the public on social media with a humble and emotionally charged expression, forming the starting point for word-of-mouth dissemination. On the release day, Gan Xiao'er, who had not posted on Moments for over a decade, hesitated before "exceptionally" launching a Xiaohongshu account and personally writing an open letter, joining the core crew in live-streaming with the goal of "letting more audiences know about the film". This move leveraged Xiaohongshu's strong reach among art film audiences as a "grassroots recommendation" platform. In the open letter, Gan Xiao'er candidly acknowledged that the film features "unfamiliar figures, forgotten history, and inherently lacks commercial appeal", directly conveying the film's core strength—the "perseverance and sentiment of intellectuals"—to core audiences, quickly uniting potential emotional allies.

Beyond this "breakthrough" move, the core trigger of the incident was a cross-city audience film review discovered on Xiaohongshu. Gan Xiao'er subsequently wrote the widely shared "apology letter" on social media, using the word "obligation" and completing an identity reinvention from "creator" to "sincere service

provider". In film marketing, fully leveraging word-of-mouth culture, tapping into the guiding role of interpersonal relationships in promotion, respecting people's need for emotional identification, timely adjusting marketing content based on audience engagement levels, and emphasizing collaborative linkage between stakeholders, audiences will be willing to accept and appreciate the film, immersing themselves in the novelty of plot and character identification, thereby achieving both material consumption and spiritual nourishment through the film.

Notably, following the director's apology, through joint efforts, the film secured special additional screenings on August 24 in ten cities nationwide, including Guangzhou, Foshan, Beijing, Shanghai, Hangzhou, Nanjing, Wuhan, Zhengzhou, Tianjin and Jinan. This demonstrates that roadshows and emotional expressions on social media interact to open a bottom-up channel for word-of-mouth cohesion beyond theater scheduling logic.

*Cuihu* follows a highly analogous breakthrough path. With a persistent screening ratio of around 0.1%, director Bian Zhuo embarked on nationwide post-screening Q&A sessions after winning the Golden Goblet Award for Best Film in the Asian New Talent Unit at the Shanghai International Film Festival, turning himself into a "roadshow machine". Since its release on January 24, he has traveled extensively to small and medium-sized cities such as Zhuhai, Shantou, Shanwei and Jinhua, completing over 130 roadshow sessions. "We will attend even if only 20 people are present at a screening", Bian Zhuo stated. On certain days, roadshow screenings accounted for 70% to 80% of the entire cinema's daily box office [4].

*The Verse of Us* adopted a "crowdfunded screening" model, covering 205 cities nationwide, with 1,349 crowdfunding initiators organizing 1,000 film screenings, becoming the first film driven by audiences to enter theaters. However, Maoyan Professional Edition data shows that the post-release screening ratio remained below 0.1%. Comparative research reveals that the hands-on roadshow model cannot fundamentally resolve structural scheduling difficulties, yet it fulfills a task that theatrical scheduling cannot achieve: forging direct emotional bonds between creators and their most resonant audiences. As the Elephant Screening team's pioneering internet model demonstrates, its core lies not in "waiting for screenings", but in "letting audiences who want to watch *The Verse of Us* initiate screenings independently, choose cinemas freely, and arrange their own screenings".

### 3.2. Ritual performance: "director's presence" as a scarce experience

Unlike the director roadshows of blockbuster commercial films, which are largely centered on celebrity packaging, the roadshows of marginal art films create a unique experience of "director's presence". Directors personally watch the film with the audience and hand-deliver handwritten calligraphy scrolls ("The director has nothing to offer but a short verse"), transforming film viewing from a consumer act into a ritualistic "encounter". Cinemas, as ritual spaces, have been described by scholars as venues where people escape the rigid routines of daily life and engage in spiritual exchange—"In the dark of the cinema, people collectively enter a state of spiritual communication and resonance; this space shields viewers from the formalized, rigid order of daily conventions". The roadshows of marginal art films extend this ritualistic attribute beyond the screen, making "director's presence" itself a scarce, irreplicable cultural experience.

*Cuihu* director Bian Zhuo also highlights the unique significance of offline communication. He adopted a "self-devoted" approach, traveling nationwide for post-screening Q&A sessions, even covering travel expenses out of his own pocket. He candidly stated, "The value of offline communication lies in forging emotional connections with the audience—a deep level of communication difficult to achieve through other channels". When creators personally hand a scroll to an audience member, when a director sits in the front row of the

auditorium to watch the film with viewers, and when post-screening discussions last late into the night until the cinema closes, these moments construct not a "product delivery" but a "human encounter".

Stanley D. Williams's theory of the "moral premise", outlined in *Word-of-Mouth and Box Office: The Moral Premise of Hit Stories*, provides a profound explanation for the emotional connection formed in these rituals. Williams argues that all successful stories possess an inherent core element—the moral premise. When the natural laws and order depicted in a film align with the audience's cognition, viewers subconsciously retain an "effective" memory and develop an active willingness to recommend the film to others [5]. This paper extends this concept from narrative text to communication practice: during roadshow rituals, the creators' moral acts—apologizing, writing scrolls, accompanying viewers—constitute a second layer of "moral premise" beyond the film's narrative, with a bonding intensity potentially surpassing the film's own narrative.

Gan Xiao'er's "apology" incident exemplifies this mechanism. Four days after the release, upon learning that some viewers traveled from Tianjin to Beijing just to watch the film and that many regions had no screenings at all, Gan Xiao'er apologized on social media "to all viewers who love *Mr. Pingshi*", expressing a sense of "obligation". In his apology letter, he attributed the situation to: "Please forgive our naivety, lack of experience, and insufficient understanding of the market, which prevented eager viewers from watching the film smoothly... As Huang Ji says at the end of the film, we have only two words for everyone—obligation".

This apology transcends the scope of promotional public relations. The posture it conveys is that the emotional community between creators and audiences is not built on the commodity logic of "equivalent transactions", but on the moral-emotional relationship of "obligation and reciprocity". Following the apology, Gan Xiao'er went further, personally writing calligraphy scrolls for audiences during roadshows, translating this moral emotion into concrete ritual acts—"How can we repay you? The director has nothing to offer but a short verse". This vividly validates the "emotional identification-behavioral motivation" chain in Williams's moral premise theory: when viewers are emotionally "bonded", their participation in roadshows shifts from passive "consumption" to active "co-presence".

Comments online following Gan Xiao'er's apology regarding scheduling:

A friend commented on my post suggesting using the "Qiandao Group" mini-program on WeChat to establish local viewing groups. Once enough people join, we can approach cinemas to arrange private screenings. I wonder if this can help friends in Tianjin—Xiaohongshu, August 18, 2025.

The market is harsh, but I'm still deeply grateful for the director and crew's efforts. I've also invited friends to watch, and I'll reimburse their tickets with proof of purchase. It's such a struggle.—Xiaohongshu, August 18, 2025.

Once emotional identification is established, how do viewers transform from passive consumers to active "seekers"? Traveling from Tianjin to Beijing to watch *Mr. Pingshi* is not an isolated case. During *Cuihu*'s release, director Bian Zhuo frequently received private messages from viewers stating, "I saw positive reviews on social media and wanted to buy tickets, but there are no screenings at local cinemas". When screenings are scarce, viewers instead become active "seekers", undertaking cross-city viewing migrations across geographic spaces. Scholars point out that the absolute number of art film audiences is "sufficient to support these films, but the problem lies in their dispersion"—roadshows are precisely the process of gathering dispersed audiences into visible communities through emotional cohesion. Viewers' active search and the "moral bonding" during roadshows create a mutual journey: on one side, creators of marginalized films are actively "stepping out"; on the other side, audiences driven by the same emotion are also "doing everything possible to find the film".

A memorable moment from *Cuihu*'s roadshow illustrates this: a viewer who watched the film twice shared, "I still feel deeply moved; the plot constantly reminds me of similar family relationships in my own life".

Another viewer shared that, like the younger generation in the film, she had experienced the loss of a loved one and healed by writing diaries—a feeling she resonated with deeply while watching *Cuihu*. These post-screening exchanges reveal a profound truth: the audience of marginal art films is not a predefined "market demographic", but a community continuously awakened and united through emotional resonance.

### 3.3. From melodrama to restoration: paradigm shift in emotional mobilization

The promotion and release journey of *Song of the Phoenix* serves as a tragic yet extreme reference case for the alternative breakthrough of marginal art films. The posthumous work of Wu Tianming, a leading director of the Fourth Generation, it recorded a screening ratio of just over 1% upon release. Amid a continuous decline in screening slots, Fang Li, the film's producer, appeared on a live-streaming platform on the evening of May 12, 2016, knelt down and kowtowed to the camera, tearfully begging cinema managers to allocate prime-time screenings. The immediate effect of this act was striking: *Song of the Phoenix's* screening ratio rose from 1% (May 13, 2016) to 4.3% (May 14, 2016), its single-day box office exceeded one million yuan for the first time on May 13, and the highest screening ratio later reached 11.3% (May 19, 2016), with a cumulative box office of 86.722 million yuan, achieving a rare box office milestone for art films in China at that time.

However, this box office miracle born from "one kneel worth a fortune" sparked profound ethical controversy. On one hand, accusations of "moral coercion" and "market disruption" emerged. *People's Daily Online* commented that while the kneeling was tragic, cinemas also had practical operational considerations, and using such methods to "beg for screenings" amounted to moral coercion. On the other hand, *People's Daily* criticized that "kneeling betrays the dignity of cultural practitioners", pointing out that "commercial films and art films inherently follow different market logics", and the act "discarded the inherent pride of Chinese cinema". These criticisms highlight a critical question: how can marginal art films build effective emotional connections with audiences without resorting to extreme melodramatic strategies [6]?

Gan Xiao'er's apology and handwritten verses, Bian Zhuo's self-devoted companionship as a "roadshow machine", and *The Verse of Us'* "kneel-free crowdfunding"—while these approaches also appeal to emotional identification, they do not center on sacrificing dignity or creating melodrama as core strategies, but seek to build relatively equal emotional connections between creators and audiences.

There exists a fundamental paradigm difference between the "one kneel" model in *Song of the Phoenix's* case and the roadshow practices of *Mr. Pingshi* and *Cuihu*—this is not merely a difference in strategy, but a structural shift in emotional mobilization.

The emotional mobilization of the "one kneel" model is rooted in direct challenges to the system and the one-way imposition of external moral pressure: it appeals to the audience's sympathy for the "posthumous work", with the emotional end goal being short-term acquisition of screening space rather than sustained community connection. Roadshow-driven emotional logic, by contrast, emphasizes the generation of reciprocal moral emotions through in-depth communication "here and now, with these people". It does not exploit the audience's moral guilt, but inspires their willingness to "reciprocate" through the creator's sincere presence. The former imposes moral pressure, while the latter rebuilds emotional bonds.

From the initiator's perspective, the "one kneel" model anchors the emotional identification mechanism in an extreme, sudden moment and a single performance by a key figure, with uncertain sustainability of its effects. Hands-on roadshow practices ritualize, normalize and sustain emotional identification—dispersed across dozens to over a hundred post-screening sessions, each an independent, low-cost, sincere moment of emotional encounter, forming a network of cultural identity through the accumulation of continuous micro-rituals. In this sense, "emotional mobilization" is no longer a marketing tool, but a compensatory alternative to

the structural scarcity of screening resources, and a response to the ontological issue of audience "absence" in the era of digital connection.

It is precisely this paradigm shift—from a single extreme act of melodramatic pressure to sustained ritualistic presence—that constitutes the fundamental characteristic distinguishing marginal art films from commercial logic. Driven not by "begging" but by the reciprocal ethics of "obligation-reciprocity", they quietly complete the transition from material reach to emotional resonance through micro-interactions at every roadshow session.

## 4. From "seeking" to "constructing": theoretical reflections on marginal art films

### 4.1. Dual-track logic of audience construction

The path of marginal art films is not a passive mode of "waiting to be seen", but an active construction of their audience through roadshows and emotional communication. Audience connections often exhibit cluster effects—certain niche groups overlooked in commercial marketing systems (e.g., university teachers and students concerned with historical education, descendants of families that experienced the inheritance of cultural heritage amid wartime turmoil) may discover one another during roadshows. This shifts the analysis from the pragmatic framework of "promotion and release strategy" to a more theoretically compelling reflection: marginal art films do not "distribute" a finished product, but collectively "generate" "reachability" through ritual interactions with audiences—that is, the film's "being seen" is the joint outcome of the interplay of initiative between creators and audiences.

Following *Mr. Pingshi's* release, director Gan Xiao'er's narrative identity as a "teacher" resonated widely, with spontaneous group screenings and promotions organized by viewers, covering university teachers, students and broader cultural and educational groups, and evoking deep resonance during the Shantou Chenghai roadshow in Tse Kwan-ho's hometown. This means marginal art films do not market to an abstract "mass audience", but engage in "emotional dialogue" with specific social groups: university teachers and students see echoes of educational beliefs in the contemporary era, primary and secondary school teachers witness the inheritance of national sentiments in education, and local cultural groups feel emotional identification with regional cultural heritage. This shifts the analysis from the pragmatic framework of "promotion and release strategy" to a more compelling reflection: marginal art films do not "distribute" a finished product, but collectively "generate" reachability through ritual interactions with audiences. This "generation" process encompasses three layers: first, reaching core audiences most likely to resonate through roadshows; second, completing initial emotional bonding and "moral suturing" in post-screening exchanges; third, achieving secondary dissemination through audience social sharing—these three interconnected layers form a bottom-up closed loop of audience construction.

In summary, the audience construction process driven by marginal art films' roadshows can be condensed into the following causal chain:

Roadshows (hands-on physical presence) → Ritual performance (post-screening exchanges, sincere expressions of "the director has nothing to offer", emotional declarations of "obligation and reciprocity") → Moral suturing (extending Williams's moral premise from narrative to communication practices) → Emotional identification (audience empathy and a sense of being valued and respected) → Behavioral motivation (audience active search for screenings, participation in private screenings, social media recommendations, secondary dissemination, etc.).

A key link in this chain—the transition from "moral suturing" to "behavioral motivation"—requires clarification of its mechanism: it is not that "understanding the film's theme drives behavior", but that "viewers feel valued and needed in ritual interactions, generating a moral desire to respond". Manifestations of this moral desire may include viewers writing detailed reviews on Xiaohongshu and other social media platforms, organizing private screenings at their own expense, traveling cross-city to cinemas with screenings, or re-watching the film at the director's next roadshow venue. These five behavioral patterns collectively form a causal evidence chain linking emotional connection to actual consumption, confirming that roadshow rituals can indeed inspire viewers to transform from "passive recipients" to "active disseminators".

#### 4.2. Restorative media practice: resisting algorithmic distribution through "physical presence"

Theoretically, this paper categorizes the alternative promotion and release of marginal art films as a form of "restorative media practice". This concept emerges from a reverse reflection on the current media environment: amid the growing monopoly of attention by digital platforms and algorithmic distribution, interpersonal "face-to-face encounters" have become a scarce act of resisting "virtual connection". When a film is deemed "commercially valueless" by algorithms and relegated to the margins of the scheduling system, the creator's physical presence—personally attending events, apologizing in person, writing scrolls by hand, engaging in direct dialogue—is not a second-best option for low-cost promotion, but an ontological practice with restorative functions.

The term "restoration" here refers to the mending of three layers of rupture: the first is media disruption—under algorithmic distribution logic, marginal art films are screened out to near invisibility by the scheduling system, with the physical connection between creators and audiences blocked by theater mechanisms; the second is emotional disruption—without star aura or commercial marketing support, the film's emotional value struggles to reach potential audiences through intermediate channels, resulting in a "last-mile" blockage in emotional transmission; the third is social disruption—the lack of screening space prevents groups sharing common emotional experiences from gathering, risking the loss of inheritance for local memories and historical narratives borne by the film. "Restorative media practice" is precisely an attempt to address all three ruptures simultaneously through "human presence": it mends the physical blockage of media channels via roadshows, restores interrupted emotional transmission through on-screen and off-screen emotional connections, and rebuilds fragmented audience communities through collective film viewing and post-screening exchanges. In this sense, "restoration" does not imply a utopian "return to the past", but an active resistance to "absence" in the era of digital connection.

From a broader perspective of media theory, "restorative media practice" can be situated at the intersection of two academic traditions. First, British communication scholar Nick Couldry's theory of "media ritual" provides a critical reference: Couldry defines media ritual as "a formalized activity organized around core categories and boundaries related to media, whose performance directly or indirectly signals its connection to broader values associated with media" [7]. In daily experience, media rituals such as live television broadcasts and celebrity interviews direct audience attention to the "media center", reinforcing the power structure of media as an intermediary. In contrast, the roadshow practices of marginal art films do not centripetally absorb audiences into a "media center", but centrifugally invite them to deviate from the routines of daily audio-visual consumption and enter small-scale ritual spaces centered on "director's presence". Roadshows position directors as key figures in the ritual, yet this role is not that of a "media power holder" in Couldry's sense, but more like a sincere inviter and companion—their appeal is not to create authority, but to rebuild the intimacy of face-to-face communication.

Second, Joshua Meyrowitz's "media situational theory", outlined in *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior*, posits that the fundamental impact of electronic media is not altering audiences through content, but reshaping social behavior by changing the "situational geography" of social life [8]. If electronic media and algorithmic distribution increasingly blur the boundaries between private and public spaces, erasing the distinction between "being present" and "being absent", roadshows operate in reverse: they reanchor film viewing to specific physical temporal and spatial scenarios. The director's physical presence, the collective darkness of the auditorium, and the real-time dialogue of post-screening exchanges together create a media scenario irreplicable by algorithms. In this sense, "restorative media practice" is a deliberate compensation for the "disappearance of place"—not to return to an idealized pre-electronic media era, but to resist the pervasive experience of "absence" in digital connection through physical presence.

## 5. Conclusion

Taking *Mr. Pingshi* as the core case and comparing its promotion and release practices with those of *Cuihu*, *The Verse of Us* and *Song of the Phoenix*, this paper systematically examines the alternative audience construction path of marginal art films under structural scheduling pressure. The research findings are as follows: first, the core reason for marginal art films' "critical acclaim but poor box office" status is not aesthetic disconnects, but "physical blockages" caused by distribution mechanisms; second, hands-on geographic roadshows achieve the transition from material reach to emotional resonance through ritual performances of "director's presence" and moral-emotional declarations of "obligation-reciprocity"; third, this path can be categorized as "restorative media practice"—resisting the "absence" experience of algorithmic distribution and digital connection through physical presence, and mending three layers of rupture: media, emotional and social.

These findings indicate that the audience construction of marginal art films is not a passive process of "waiting to be seen", but a jointly generated "reachability" by creators and audiences through ritual interactions. Distinct from the top-down distribution logic of commercial films, roadshow-driven communication pathways exhibit bottom-up characteristics of moral-emotional community construction, with the core mechanism being the extension of moral premises from narrative to communication practices, rather than marketing strategies.

This conclusion offers two implications for subsequent research and practice. Theoretically, the framework of "restorative media practice" provides a new analytical tool for understanding the circulation of marginal cultural products in the digital age, shifting research focus from "content distribution" to media rituals of "physical presence". Practically, it suggests that for creators of low-budget art films, actively engaging with audiences and building deep emotional connections may be more effective than waiting for screenings, given limited theater scheduling resources. However, vigilance is required: this path is highly dependent on creators' physical stamina and sincerity, and the boundary with "melodramatic marketing" can easily blur in practice.

Limitations: This paper relies on secondary public data, lacking primary interviews or questionnaire verification of audience psychology and the "obligation-reciprocity" mechanism; case selection may suffer from "survivorship bias", failing to systematically explore the boundary conditions for roadshow failure (e.g., directors being accused of grandstanding, apologies criticized as feigning misery); insufficient discussion on the sustainability of the roadshow model, lacking a full assessment of its physical and mental toll on creators and the potential formation of new "scheduling thresholds"; the operationalization of the "marginality" concept remains superficial, lacking typological analysis of different marginality combinations. Future research may

combine fieldwork and quantitative methods to further test the emotional conversion efficiency and ethical boundaries of roadshows.

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