

When Film Bureau Directly Reports to Publicity Department (Part 1)

The Publicity Department of the Communist Party (Publicity Department) taking regulatory responsibility for the Film Bureau came as a shock to many for such a change deviates from China's regular governance structure. A ruling party taking direct supervision of the film industry is altogether new and unprecedented.

The astounding boom experienced by China's film industry over the past 16 years, whether in terms of annual output or box office growth, has the world flipped on its head. The rapid development has been evident domestically and internationally. The overseas box office, although quite average, has seen a massive hundred-fold increase.

One may wonder if President Xi is as much of a fan for motion pictures as he is for football, hence making the Publicity Department the curator of film production.

As Vladimir Lenin once said, "that of all the arts the most important for us is the cinema."

Sometime in the early 1960s, this quote was on a poster flamboyantly displayed in the concourse of the then largest cinema in Guangzhou. The Chinese Communist Party, upholding Marxism-Leninism as its ideological foundation, prioritizes the teachings of this revolutionary leader. Interestingly enough, filmmaking had only debuted for a little more than a decade when Lenin said this. The man with vision saw the promising future of the film market even though silent films were all he watched.

To extract the film sector from the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT) and put it under the direct supervision of the Publicity Department not only shows the heightened priority the Party bestows upon the administrative function of the cinema, it is also an act to fully implement the Film Industry Promotion Law made effective in March 2017. The Law streamlines administration to stimulate creativity in the film market. It also aims to standardize industrial development and market order through expanding regulation scope and improving regulation measures.

Once the new governance structure enters into force, the Film Industry Promotion Law will be further strengthened to provide a legal basis for the Chinese cinema. At the same time, the administrative level will be raised from a bureau-director level under the SAPPRFT to be in line with the SAPPRFT. There are also rumours of establishing district film bureaus to boost the development of provincial cinemas, foster film industry talents, and cultivate quality production crews. Provincial governments will help with filmmaking and production by obtaining more financing channels. One swallow does not make a summer. A flourishing Chinese cinema should be comprised of work from regions throughout the nation, and not from Beijing alone—the output imbalance will be solved.

In 1986, the Film Bureau, previously under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Culture, was put under the leadership of the Ministry of Radio, Film and Television (RFT). However, this state-level institutional restructuring was not carried out at the provincial level. Many organizational and managerial glitches resulted. Ten years after in 1996, provincial-level film production was put under the RFT, but distribution and screening remained under the Ministry of Culture. A torn system emerged.

In addition to the institutional disorganization, the notorious motion picture rating system was a complete mess—arbitrary, unwritten and vague. Worst of all, the SAPPRT did not have the final say. Other government departments could interfere on the basis such as, “the film could harm the image of this department”; or they would purely go against the SAPPRT and had the “backstage boss” step up. As a result, many main-melody films ended up getting banned. The SAPPRT, therefore, simply shifted the responsibility to other departments. Films related to the police would be examined by the police department; those related to the Liberation Army would be inspected by the People’s Liberation Army General Political Department. A mess it was!

(To be continued)