

When Film Bureau Directly Reports to Publicity Department (Part 2)

Directed by Chen Guoxing, “Roaring Across the Horizon” (1999) produced by the Beijing Film Studio depicts China's race to develop atomic weapons. One of the storylines in the film is about Lu Guangyong, an American-educated Chinese physicist held under custody while waiting for a trial of treason charge. When push comes to shove, General Feng, responsible for nuclear testing, put his own life on the line to defend Lu’s innocence. As much as it is an emotionally overwhelming scene, a government official did not find it endearing. He thought, “It sounds unreasonably cruel for an outstanding student from Princeton who gives up everything to return home to serve his country only to end up in jail. This would harm the image of the Party.”

Director Chen Guoxing insisted that this storyline stay in the film, not only because it was the most emotionally triggering scene, but also a true story based on the life of nuclear physics expert Deng Jiaxian. The said government official was absent from the second round of film inspection due to health concerns. “Roaring Across the Horizon” was highly commended by other inspectors. But that wasn’t the end of the story. The film might have been banned should the said government official had known that the storyline had stayed. It would have been a case of disrespect. In the end, “Roaring Across the Horizon” was inspected by the Standing Committee at Zhongnanhai, the leadership compound for the Communist Party, with outstanding reviews. And out came the “Roaring Across the Horizon” exempted from future worries.

A main-melody film, “Roaring Across the Horizon” had to climb mountains to get released. What does the future hold for other films which couldn’t possibly reach top-level leaders at Zhongnanhai.

A “leader” could easily have a film banned by pulling the “guanxi” card when the Film Bureau was a bureau-director level administrative unit. Now that the Publicity Department is taking direct control over the Film Bureau, the elevation in administrative level will ease some of the administrative complications from non-standardized guidelines.

The Film Industry Promotion Law, Film Administration Regulations and Provisions on the Archival Filing of Film Scripts (Abstracts), and Regulations on the Administration of Movies are the current three sets of rules and guidelines relevant to film. The Film Industry Promotion Law has added provisions to the previous regulatory framework. One interpretation is: the decentralization of censorship grants authority to provincial administrations, which in turn gives higher autonomy to provincial governance and provincial publicity departments. A screenplay which deals with “general” themes will only need to pass the inspection from a provincial government. It will no longer be subject to approval from the central government. From a positive perspective, a provincial government may slightly ease restrictions on censorship for the sake of the development of local economy and local cinema. The higher the output, the greater the authority, the higher the possibility of easing censorship standards.

Film censorship is a system all directors tend to resist. Iran is known for its even tighter censorship rules, but that doesn't stop quality productions from rolling out continuously.

The new measures unveiled will be under observation to determine its effectiveness.