

# Research on the Historical Occurrence and Modern and Contemporary Development of the Concept of Chinese Film Director

**Jiachen Ding**

Freelancer

---

**Abstract:** The director is an important existence in the film knowledge system and the film culture industry. The director system of the film was first introduced from abroad, which was translated and introduced to China by the filmmaker Lu Jie in 1921. After the emergence of the concept of “director”, the director theory of Chinese film development has been gradually transformed from spontaneous to conscious, and the concept of “film” which emphasizes film language and the concept of “performance” which emphasizes drama performance have been differentiated. In the ups and downs of the development of the century-old film history, the concept of Chinese directors has continued to develop, and has gradually been sinicized and modernized. The profound changes in the film industry have also gradually developed and changed with the direction of the director’s status.

**Keywords:** Chinese film; director concept; historical development; modern and contemporary development

---

## 1. Introduction

The role of film director is not a native concept in China. It is accompanied by the emergence of the art form of film, which is introduced from western countries and belongs to exotic. In the early stage of film development, Chinese filmmakers are in a state of exploration on how to organize the shooting of a film and how to call the core creators. It was not until the early 1920s that this key term was established and gradually began to spread widely. In the process of dissemination, the concept of director not only absorbed the western film theory, but also collided with the traditional Chinese drama aesthetics, forming a unique dual concept. Over the past century, the director’s functions have continued to expand with technological innovation and industrial upgrading, from artistic creation to commercial operation, from film scheduling to cross-media narrative, and its role has far exceeded the initial definition. Exploring the historical evolution and contemporary development of the concept of director is not only related to the theoretical construction of film ontology, but also an in-depth observation of the modernization process of Chinese film.

## 2. The translation and dissemination of the concept of film ‘director’

### 2.1 The birth of the translated name

The rise, development and root of the concept of film director in China, a key node is the contribution of the filmmaker Lu Jie. In 1921, Lu Jie translated the word “director” into the word “regisseur” for the first time in his participation in the founding of the magazine “Shadow Play Magazine”. The concept of “director” draws on the existing title of “stage director” in the theatrical world at that time, but gives it new and exclusive meaning to film creation. Lu Jie’s choice is very delicate. The word ‘director’ not only vividly summarizes the core responsibilities of directing actors’ performances, but also implies the key role of controlling the whole film creation process. This concise and powerful translation was quickly accepted and recognized by the film industry as a professional term, laying the foundation for subsequent film creation and theoretical discussion. The emergence of the word “director” marks that Chinese filmmakers have a clear reference to the core creative positions of film art [1].

### 2.2 The eastward spread of Western learning

After the translation of “director” was established, its connotation concept spread rapidly in China, and early film publications played an important role in its dissemination. Journals such as “Film Magazine” and “Film Magazine” not only introduce foreign film trends and director works, but also translate and publish many articles on director skills and responsibilities. These words are a window for film practitioners and enthusiasts at that time to initially understand what the director’s work is and what the director should do. In addition, the practice of film creation itself is a more intuitive way of communication. The operation of early film companies relied on the experience of imitating the Hollywood studio model, which enabled the director system to be established and operated in the actual filming process. The audience watched the

film and the filmmakers participated in the production. In this process, each subject gradually realized the core position of the director in the whole project. The discussion of some early film critics has further deepened the industry's understanding of director art. The interweaving of communication channels promotes the gradual penetration of the concept of director into an indispensable and increasingly rich core concept in the Chinese film knowledge system and industrial system.

### **3. The questioning and theoretical construction of the concept of film 'director'**

#### **3.1 What is the director?**

At the beginning of the establishment of the director's identity, he faced many doubts. Is the director the only core authority of the entire film creation, or one of the coordinators in many creative links? How to deal with its relationship with the screenwriter, whether the framework of the script limits the director's play space? The emergence of star actors has also brought new difficult problems. When the actors are too bright, will the authority of the director be challenged at this time? These debates on director's power boundary, artistic autonomy and creative subject status run through the early theoretical thinking of film practice, prompting the industry to constantly clarify the essence of director's work.

#### **3.2 Shadow play differentiation: the debate of ideas**

With the development of the film industry, the understanding of the director's work has gradually formed a significant distinction in the concept. There is a view that the characteristics of the film as an independent art form, the core function of the director is to use the lens language, picture composition, editing rhythm and other film-specific means of narrative expression, which can be called the director's view focusing on 'shadow'. Another view is deeply influenced by traditional drama, emphasizing the director's guidance of actor performance, the creation of dramatic conflicts, and the control of story narration, which is reflected in the director's view of emphasizing 'play' and 'performance'. The coexistence and confrontation of these two concepts of film differentiation constitute an important part of the theoretical construction of early Chinese directors and affect the formation of different directors' styles.

### **4. The development and change of the concept of film 'director'**

#### **4.1 Generation group characteristics**

Directors in different periods show distinct differences in their understanding of director's work because of their different growth backgrounds, artistic edification and epochal propositions. From the foundation laid by the early pioneers, to the exploration of several generations of directors under specific historical conditions, to the multiple challenges faced by directors in the new era in terms of market, art and traffic, each generation of director groups has shaped and defined the specific meaning of the concept of "director" in China with its unique creative aesthetic pursuit.

#### **4.2 Conceptual practice**

The vitality of the concept of director is rooted in the creative practice of specific directors [2]. Many representative directors interpret and expand the possibility of director's work by displaying works with different styles. Some directors are obsessed with the exploration of the film itself and study the audio-visual language; some directors go deep into social reality, emphasizing the power of narrative, focusing on humanistic care; some directors are pioneering and innovative in the field of genre films. It is these colorful and distinctive creative practices that transform the theoretical concept of director into the real power on the screen and promote the diversified development of Chinese director's concept.

### **5. The modern and contemporary development of the concept of Chinese film director**

#### **5.1 Technological innovation makes the director's role modernize**

With the progress of the times, the film industry continues to develop, and the role and ability of Chinese film directors continue to change. Technological innovation has brought more possibilities for director creation. The popularization of digital photography, virtual shooting and other technical means has enabled directors to achieve visual ideas more freely and promoted film production into the modern stage. The progress of technology has not only changed the way of shooting, but also prompted the director to constantly learn new tools to better adapt to the needs of the industry.

#### **5.2 The change of production method is accompanied by the modernization of director's ability**

The change of production methods also has a profound impact on the director's working mode. Traditional film produc-

tion mostly relies on film, and basically all of them need to be shot on the spot. Nowadays, the promotion and application of green screen technology and the blessing of later special effects make the director need to master a more comprehensive production process. From the pre-planning and post-synthesis, the director's functions are no longer limited to on-site scheduling, but extend to the whole process control. This change requires directors to have stronger coordination ability and rich cross-disciplinary knowledge to adapt to the modern industrial system, which requires directors to keep learning to adapt to the progress of the times.

### **5.3 The diversity of narrative techniques promotes the modernization of director's knowledge**

The diversification of narrative techniques also puts forward higher standards for the director's work. The improvement of the audience's aesthetic level has prompted the director to explore more abundant expressions, and techniques such as non-linear narrative and multi-perspective presentation have gradually become common choices. Directors need to constantly absorb the nutrients of literature, drama and other art forms to build stories with more flexible thinking. This trend makes the director's knowledge reserve must continue to update in order to meet the expectations of contemporary audiences.

### **5.4 The evolution of the film industry is accompanied by the modernization of the director's status**

The evolution of the film industry has further enhanced the status of directors. With the expansion of the market scale, the director is not only an art creator, but also gradually become the core manager of the project. The involvement of investors and producers makes the director need to find a balance between artistic pursuit and commercial considerations. At the same time, the personal brand value of excellent directors has become increasingly prominent, and their influence is no longer limited to the work itself, but extended to the entire industry ecology. This change marks the new orientation of the director's role in the process of modernization. [3]

## **6. Conclusion**

Film is a new type of art and a cultural industry. Looking back at the evolution of the concept of Chinese film director, its development track is like a miniature history of Chinese film - from translation and introduction to theoretical contention, from intergenerational change to technological innovation, the director's functional status has always been in harmony with the times. At present, digital production, streaming media communication and global market are reshaping the creative boundary of directors, and how Chinese directors find a balance between business, art, tradition and innovation will become the focus of future research. The modernization of the concept of director is not only the innovation of technology, but also the awakening of cultural subjectivity. It marks the maturity of Chinese films from "import" to "self-generation", and also provides a unique oriental perspective for world films.

## **References**

---

- [1] Wei Yi, Li Xingyang. Historical occurrence and contemporary trend of the concept of Chinese film director [J].Nanjing Social Sciences, 2024 (6): 108-118.
- [2] Zhang Jingyu. Between the virtual and the real: the vague authenticity in the film works of Chinese New Force directors [J].Contemporary Films, 2023 (7): 143-149.
- [3] San San. The film says: the 'six generations of directors' in the history of Chinese film [J].Artistic Enlightenment, 2025 (4): 57.