

A Retrospective of Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area Films in the Global Context: Evolution of Genre · Independent Representation · Documentary Shaping

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Abstract

A review of Chinese cinema history reveals a close and intertwined relationship between its development and the Lingnan region, from figures such as Lai Man-wai, Zheng Junli, and Chu Yuan, to films ranging from *Chuang Tzu Tests His Wife* to *The House of 72 Tenants*. From the signing of the Mainland and Hong Kong Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement (CEPA) by the central government and the Hong Kong SAR government at the beginning of the new century, to the cultural development concept of "Jointly Building a Humanistic Bay Area" put forward in the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area Development Plan issued by the CPC Central Committee and the State Council in February 2019, Hong Kong and mainland China's film cultures have converged, intertwining with each other. In the past, the film industry in Guangdong leveraged its geographical and policy advantages to flourish. Looking ahead, as the largest ticket box in the Chinese film market for consecutive years, the Lingnan film market centered on Guangdong still holds potential for development. This paper explores the topic from a globalization perspective, starting with the signing of CEPA in the new century. It traces the development of films in Hong Kong and Guangdong and discusses the new characteristics of film culture integration and development in this context.

1. Introduction

In February 2019, the "Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area Development Plan Outline" introduced the concept of "building a cultural bay area together." This sparked a gradual increase in academic research on "Greater Bay Area cinema" in mainland China. In the discussion of "The History and Current Situation of Film and Television in the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area," prominent scholars Jia Leilei and Ding Yaping highlighted the importance of studying Greater Bay Area cinema within the context of regional film studies in China. Geocultural film research emphasizes the interplay between culture, politics, economics, history, and other factors tied to geography (Jia, Ding, Rao, et al., 2021). The discussion also

covers the naming of concepts like "Southern Cinema," "Lingnan Cinema," and "Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macau Greater Bay Area Cinema." The former stresses the proper naming from the perspective of Cantonese culture, while the latter defines the core meaning of regional cinema in terms of industrial synergy. However, fundamentally, they all stem from the same cultural origin and belong to a regional cultural concept.

Research on "Greater Bay Area cinema" in China predominantly concentrates on the internal dynamics of the region, while the examination of it as a regional and outward-oriented phenomenon also warrants attention, given the limited existing literature. Meanwhile, the Hong Kong film industry, once dubbed the "Hollywood of the East," is now facing a decline. However, the recent success of two legal films has resulted in a box office miracle, solidifying Hong Kong cinema's role as a key player in the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macau Greater Bay Area film industry. At this juncture, the future direction of Hong Kong cinema becomes a critical question: should it focus on the Greater Bay Area market, expand globally, or continue promoting "cultural preservation" locally? Given these critical issues, it is vital to reassess the film and cultural industry of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macau Greater Bay Area from a globalization perspective.

Wallerstein's classic 1974 work *The Modern World-System* marked the emergence of world-systems theory (Wallerstein, 1974). This theory offers a crucial framework for understanding cultural phenomena in globalization, highlighting the division of the world economy and society, as well as the dynamic relationship between the core and periphery. Wallerstein's world-system theory offers a globalization perspective for studying "Greater Bay Area cinema," but it falls short of addressing the multi-dimensional issues in regional and global cultural exchanges. Consequently, the discussion of "Greater Bay Area cinema" must integrate several dimensions of cultural flows proposed by Appadurai, such as ethnoscaples, mediascaples, finanscaples, and ideoscaples. (Arjun Appadurai, 2012)

These dimensions offer a more nuanced and comprehensive perspective on the complexities of regional and global cultural exchanges. Additionally, this paper will examine the interaction between Lingnan cultural traits in "Greater Bay Area cinema" and the global film landscape from an industrial cultural viewpoint. Specifically, it will begin by analyzing and critiquing cultural identity, while incorporating Hall's "encoding/decoding model" to enhance understanding of this phenomenon (Wang, 2009). Stuart Hall's cultural critique perspective offers a critical theoretical framework for this study, revealing the dynamic expression and construction of local culture in the context of globalization.

This paper explores the synergy within the cultural industry, regional similarities and differences, and shared creative traits, integrating Stuart Hall's principles of identity and difference in cultural critique. It proposes three dimensions—genre, independence, and documentary—in the development of "Greater Bay Area cinema" to analyze the new cultural integration traits in films from the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macau Greater Bay Area and their impact and status within the global film industry.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Domestic and International Research Overview

The academic study of Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area (GBA) films has recently emerged as a focal point in the fields of film studies, cultural studies, and sociology. From a domestic perspective, scholars such as Jia Leilei and Ding Yaping have underscored the importance of GBA films as a critical case study in exploring Chinese regional cinema. Their

research highlights the interplay between cultural, political, economic, and historical factors in shaping the development of cinema within the framework of geocultural studies. Similarly, Zhao Weifang delves into the unique "Hong Kong flavor" aesthetics of GBA films, identifying their regional characteristics in industry collaboration, cultural commonality, and creative styles, while suggesting pathways for innovation and breakthroughs in the new era.

From an international perspective, Lingnan cinema, particularly Hong Kong cinema, has consistently attracted attention in the global context for its distinctive aesthetic style and narrative strategies. Directors such as Ann Hui and Wong Kar-wai have become iconic figures in global cinema. Meanwhile, Western scholarship has predominantly focused on topics like Hong Kong's commercial genres, migrant culture, and identity. However, theoretical exploration of the holistic development of GBA cinema remains relatively scarce, warranting more systematic research.

2.2 Research Gaps and Significance

Despite extensive case studies on Hong Kong and Guangdong cinema, few scholars have systematically explored the collaboration and integration of regional cinema within the broader cultural ecology of the GBA. These research gaps include: **Dynamic Characteristics of Cultural Integration.** How Lingnan culture, Hong Kong aesthetics, and mainland narratives intertwine and complement each other in cinematic creation. **Industrial Collaboration Models.** How the GBA film industry achieves resource optimization to advance regional film industrialization. **Relationship Between Genre Evolution and Identity.** How GBA films express contemporary societal identity issues and real-life dilemmas through genre and independent filmmaking.

This study aims to address these gaps by examining the characteristics of GBA cinema across cultural commonality, industrial collaboration, and artistic expression, providing new perspectives for the future development of Chinese cinema.

3. Research Methodology

To comprehensively investigate the cultural characteristics and developmental trajectory of GBA cinema, this study employs five research methods: literature analysis, case study, historical retrospection, comparative analysis, and a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches. Each method is elaborated below.

3.1 Literature Analysis

3.1.1 Comprehensive Literature Collection

Searches were conducted in databases such as CNKI, Web of Science, and ProQuest, using keywords like "GBA cinema," "Lingnan film culture," "Hong Kong cinema," and "regional film industry." Authoritative sources such as academic journals, conference papers, and government reports were prioritized.

3.1.2 Interdisciplinary Perspective

Given the interdisciplinary nature of film studies, this research incorporates perspectives from cultural studies, economics, and sociology. From a cultural studies viewpoint, it examines how films in the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macau Greater Bay Area (GBA) reflect and shape local and global identities, drawing on Hall's concept of representation. Economically, the study explores the impact of policies, such as the Outline Development Plan for the Guangdong-Hong-Kong-Macau Greater Bay Area, on the growth and internationalization of GBA cinema. Sociologically, the research investigates how GBA films portray social issues,

identity struggles, and transformations within the region. By combining these approaches, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of how economic, cultural, and social forces shape the GBA's film industry.

3.2 Historical Retrospection

Historical retrospection focuses on the temporal dimension, examining the historical trajectory and cultural heritage of GBA cinema. Specific steps include:

3.2.1 Tracing Lingnan Film History

From the inception of Lingnan cinema in the late Qing Dynasty to the rise of the Pearl River Film Studio and the Hong Kong New Wave, the study tracks the development of GBA cinema. For instance, it analyzes the role of the Pearl River Film Studio in shaping GBA film culture during China's film industry reforms.

Table 1 Timeline of Historical Development in GBA Cinema

Time Period	Key Events/Phases	Research Focus
1900s	Establishment of Tonglingtai Cinema in Guangzhou, marking the beginning of Lingnan cinema culture	Origins of cinema and Lingnan cultural influence
1920s	Lai Man-wai founded the Sun Motion Picture Company and produced <i>Sun Yat-sen Northward Journey</i>	Rise of Hong Kong cinema and early Chinese film development
1960s	Founding of Pearl River Film Studio and the rise of Hong Kong commercial films	Divergence between state-owned studios and Hong Kong aesthetics
1970s-1980s	Hong Kong New Wave and Pearl River Studio's realist creations	Exploration of realism reflecting societal changes
1997	Hong Kong's return to China and the impact of the Asian financial crisis	Cultural integration and economic challenges for the film industry
2003	Signing of CEPA, promoting Hong Kong film entry into the mainland market	Policy-driven regional film industry collaboration
2010s	Success of the <i>Ip Man</i> series and rise of Lingnan animation films	Cluster development in genre films and animation
2019	<i>Outline Development Plan for the GBA</i> proposed "Jointly Building a Humanistic Bay Area"	Policy-driven cultural integration and industrial upgrades
2020s	Rise of realist films and internationalization of the Guangzhou Documentary Festival	Innovations in realism and the industrial value of documentary platforms
Future Prospects	Pearl River Studio revitalization and development of film bases	Potential for GBA cinema's internationalization and resource integration

3.2.2 Policy Impact Analysis

Historical contexts are used to evaluate the influence of major policies on the film industry. For instance, the CEPA agreement's impact on the commercial integration of Hong Kong films into mainland markets is explored.

3.2.3 Cultural Continuity and Transformation

The study examines how the representation of Lingnan culture in cinema evolves over time, from the everyday depictions in *The House of 72 Tenants* to the realism in *I Am What I Am*.

3.3 Comparative Analysis

3.3.1 Cross-Regional Comparison

Comparing the GBA with the San Francisco Bay Area in the U.S., such as the technological strength and talent cultivation conditions in San Francisco, reveals the disadvantages and shortcomings in the development of the Greater Bay Area's cultural industry. Comparing GBA films with South Korean films, such as the environmental conditions for the growth of the South Korean film industry and the current state of Hong Kong's film industry, as well as the success of Korean legal dramas compared to Hong Kong's Lawyer.

This comparison reveals the direction of GBA film development and the potential for innovation in the legal drama genre in Hong Kong.

3.3.2 Internal Regional Comparison

Differences within the GBA, such as between Hong Kong's commercial genre films and Guangdong's realist creations, are analyzed. For example, Hong Kong's internationalized action films contrast with Lingnan animation's localized storytelling.

4. Genre Evolution: Inheritance, Expansion, and Realism Exploration

The development of films in the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area (GBA) has anchored on commercialization. From a historical perspective, its origins align closely with the birth of Chinese cinema. For instance, in 1908, a Chinese-American businessman established the Tonglingtai Cinema near Qingfeng Bridge (Guangzhou City Film Company, 1993), marking the beginnings of film exhibition in the region. Additionally, early efforts by Lai Man-wai, founder of Hong Kong's Minxin Film Company, demonstrate the parallel emergence of film production and exhibition in the GBA with the broader trajectory of Chinese cinema.

By the 1960s, Pearl River Film Studio (commonly known as "Zhu Ying") became a significant hub for film production in the Pearl River Delta. Representative works from this period include *The House of 72 Tenants* (1963), biographical films such as *Liao Zhongkai* (1983) and *Sun Yat-sen* (1986). Meanwhile, across the border in Hong Kong, commercial genre films flourished. Zhao Weifang, the Director of the Film and Television Research Institute at the China Academy of Art and Vice President of the China Film Critics Association, has already conducted a comprehensive and systematic study of Hong Kong cinema from a historical perspective^①. This study has explored the subject in great depth. In this analysis, the focus will shift to the intersection of the cultural industry, with particular emphasis on the cities of Hong Kong and

^① Zhao Weifang explored the persistence of "Hong Kong flavor" in post-integration local Hong Kong cinema (2017) and examined the balance between artistic sensibilities and genre individuality in contemporary Hong Kong and Taiwanese films (2021).

Guangzhou. The research will examine the evolution of commercial genres and the transformation of the animation film industry in these regions.

4.1 Continuity and Iteration of Commercial Genres

Based on its historical and geographical characteristics and the keen commercial sensibilities of its filmmakers, Hong Kong cinema has always prioritized the commercial market during its production process. As early as the 1950s, Southeast Asia was an important overseas market for Hong Kong cinema. At that time, Malaya imported many Hong Kong films: 228 in 1955, 276 in 1956, and 277 in 1957. By the 1970s, Shaw Brothers' influence expanded globally to Korea and Japan, and they established theaters in London, Vancouver, Hawaii, and San Francisco (Zhang, 2020). During its peak, Hong Kong cinema represented Chinese-language films and secured a stable position in the European, American, and even global film markets. The reason for this was the "pan-Asian" nature of Hong Kong cinema production during its heyday. In other words, from the inception of production, the overseas market was a key factor in the creative process, including considerations of the overseas Chinese community's preference for the film and the extent to which local audiences in other countries understood and accepted the culture. This "pan-Asian" consciousness refers to the ethnoscaapes and ideoscaapes in the cultural flow proposed by Appadurai.

Wallerstein defined the three components of the world-system hierarchy: the "Core", which includes the most developed societies; the "Periphery", consisting of the least developed societies; and the "Semi-Periphery", which consists of societies positioned between the core and periphery (Zhang, 2021). If we define the level of cultural information acceptance in "developed societies" by the scope of Chinese-language film distribution, and analyze the Chinese and overseas Chinese communities living in Southeast Asia, Europe, and America as a whole, they actually belong to the "Semi-Periphery" and "Periphery" positions in Wallerstein's world-system perspective. The semi-periphery, in turn, plays a crucial role in stabilizing the entire system.

With the signing of CEPA in the new century, the commercial success of Lau Wai-keung's police action film *Infernal Affairs* (2002) once again brought Hong Kong commercial genre films to a peak. An increasing number of action films have successfully broken into domestic and international markets, either through outstanding production quality or the excellent performances of veteran actors, such as the classic martial arts action film *Ip Man* (2008) series. Furthermore, the 2013 film *The Grandmaster*, directed by Wong Kar-wai and selected as the opening film of the Berlin Film Festival, clearly illustrates the strong influence of martial arts films overseas.

From the perspective of the overall market, since the new century, the mainstream commercial films in Hong Kong have largely been dominated by police action films, martial arts action films, or variations of these genres. This trend can be traced back to the narrative models discovered by filmmakers representing the Hong Kong New Wave, and even earlier, including directors such as Hu Jinquan, Chang Cheh, Chu Yuan, as well as Bruce Lee, Tsui Hark, John Woo, and Jackie Chan. Hong Kong cinema's long-standing practice of these narrative forms deserves further exploration and offers valuable lessons for filmmakers in mainland China.

Although Hong Kong cinema has always been somewhat reserved regarding the idea of "films as vehicles for moral messages," it has consistently emphasized the humanistic care for individual lives. This humanistic approach is at the core of Hong Kong cinema's aesthetic, which retains its unique "Hong Kong flavor." From the broader perspective of "Greater Bay Area cinema," this respect for and adherence to humanity also represents the core fabric of Lingnan culture's inclusiveness. It aligns with the "ideoscaapes" proposed by Appadurai, where these ideological landscapes are constructed from elements that shape enlightenment worldviews,

including a series of concepts, such as freedom, welfare, rights, sovereignty, representation, and the most dominant form of democracy (Appadurai, 2012).

The outstanding production standards and unique "Hong Kong flavor" aesthetic, represented by directors like Tsui Hark, have been brought to mainland China since the new century. This has significantly influenced the production of mainland mainstream films and the later rise of new mainstream cinema, with examples such as *The Taking of Tiger Mountain* (2014) and *Operation Mekong* (2016). However, Hong Kong's local film market is also facing challenges, such as the loss of talent and resources, which has led to a gap in creative production. Although the release of *The Siege of Kowloon City* (2024), which achieved a record one hundred million Hong Kong dollars at the local box office, surpassing the attendance record of *A Guilty Conscience* (2023)², marks a slight improvement, the gradual withdrawal of senior directors and actors from the creative forefront, and the failure of the younger generation in Hong Kong to take up the "baton" in a mature way, remains a dilemma that needs urgent resolution.

Table 2 Top 5 Highest-Grossing Hong Kong and Non-Hong Kong Films in H1 2024.

Top 5 Hong Kong Films (HK\$)		
Film Name	Release Date	Cumulative Box Office (as of June 30, 2024)
Kowloon Walled City: Siege	01/05/2024 - Ongoing	105,169,330
Table for Six 2	09/02/2024 - 24/04/2024	37,359,450
The Moon Thief	09/02/2024 - 15/06/2024	27,547,277
12 Thieves	28/03/2024 - 15/06/2024	22,311,405
Rob & Roll	09/02/2024 - 27/04/2024	21,224,185
Top 5 Non-Hong Kong Films (HK\$)		
Dune: Part Two	29/02/2024 - Ongoing	35,985,002
Godzilla x Kong: The New Empire	28/03/2024 - 12/06/2024	25,179,709
Spy x Family: Code White (Movie)	01/02/2024 - Ongoing	18,268,939
Kung Fu Panda 4	28/03/2024 - Ongoing	15,819,944
Planet of the Apes: Kingdom of Terror	09/05/2024 - Ongoing	14,513,997

From the perspective of the overall market of Greater Bay Area cinema at the internal level, the animation film industries of Guangzhou and Hong Kong in the Guangdong-Hong-Kong-Macau Greater Bay Area have taken shape since the new century. However, this region also faces limitations in distribution, mainly evidenced by the difficulty most works have in effectively entering overseas markets, with the exception of a few classic intellectual properties. Examples include the Pleasant Goat and Big Big Wolf movie series produced by Guangdong Original Power Culture Communication Co., the *Zhu Zhu Xia* series, the *Boonie Bears* movie series by Huashang Fantawild Animation Co., and the Hong Kong-produced

² Data Source: Hong Kong Motion Picture Industry Association, Overview of the Hong Kong Film Market in the First Half of 2024 (2024-07-02)

<https://www.mpia.org.hk/content/press.php?month=2024-07&call=1>

animation *Old Master Q*, which had comic versions in languages such as Malay, Indonesian, Hindi, and Thai. However, after being adapted into films, the response was relatively lukewarm.

The reason lies in the strong ideological expression present in the *McDull* series. The various stories that the protagonist, *McDull*, goes through are deeply connected with the contradictions between "the local" and "the other." As a child character, *McDull* more authentically reflects the profound impact of the post-colonial context of Hong Kong's return on ordinary Hong Kong families and even society as a whole (Tang, 2017). Similarly, animated films like *Pleasant Goat and Big Big Wolf*, *Zhu Zhu Xia*, and *Boonie Bears* focus more on children's education and target younger audiences. While these films are popular with young children in the domestic market, they also reveal the shortcomings of a market with a narrow distribution chain.

4.2 Re-exploration and Transcendence of Realism

At the end of the 20th century, the global film industry continued to expand, while at the same time, Hollywood's dominance in the global market strengthened, deeply influencing the film industries of other countries. It was under such an international context that South Korean cinema found an opportunity for rise, successfully revitalizing its domestic film industry, pushing Korean blockbusters into the international market, and gaining recognition in both commercial and artistic terms. The success of South Korean cinema, both in terms of policy support and industrial structural adjustments, offers valuable lessons for the development of Greater Bay Area cinema.

The specifics are as follows. In terms of policy, the South Korean government places significant emphasis on protecting Korean cinema, with film censorship, film quotas, and economic support for the film industry. The easing of ideological constraints has largely facilitated the global circulation and spread of Korean films. In terms of industrial structure, the South Korean film industry has undergone vertical integration, achieving the fusion of the "distribution-exhibition" system (Ge, 2024). This is something Hong Kong cinema had already developed during its peak period. In terms of genre and production models, South Korea has fully adopted and absorbed Hollywood's mature genre narrative models, while combining them with its own cultural characteristics to form an expression that is both unified and differentiated. Among these, the narrative strategy of adapting real-life events stands out the most. Directly incorporating real events adds more social critique to the films, which is why films like *Memories of Murder*, *The Voice of That Guy*, and *The Children* all feature open-ended conclusions (Chen, 2023).

From a comparison before and after the new century, we can observe that Hong Kong's mainstream commercial action films have quietly shifted toward narrative strategies that are more aligned with contemporary reality. From a historical research perspective, Hong Kong cinema has always had an affinity for realist themes in commercial genres. This began with comedies like *The Last Message* (1975) by the Shaw Brothers, represented by the actor/screenwriter, and continued with the Hong Kong New Wave films like *The Seconds Secret* (1979) and *Father and Son* (1981), directed by Ann Hui and Patrick Tam, respectively. Since the new century, some local commercial films have achieved outstanding box office results, many of which structure their narratives using genre shells while incorporating current real-life contexts, such as *CJ7* (2008), a sci-fi film about father-son relationships in a real family setting; *Echoes Of The Rainbow* (2010), a family film about the romantic story of a shoemaker; and *Port of Call* (2015), which was adapted from the real-life Hong Kong "Wang Jiamei case" that caused a significant stir on April 27, 2008. These films directly confront societal contradictions, either drawing upon real-life news events or addressing current social issues fraught with potential crises.

In recent years, legal drama films have gradually gained popularity in the Hong Kong local film market. From *The Sparring Partner* (2022) winning the Best Film award at the Hong Kong Film Awards and setting the highest box office record for a Category III film, to *A Guilty Conscience* (2023) "setting the all-time highest box office record in the Hong Kong Chinese-language film market," legal dramas have begun to make an impact in both the artistic and commercial film sectors of the Hong Kong film market. Although Hong Kong's mainstream commercial cinema has yet to establish a mature genre narrative strategy compared to South Korea's mature film industry system and its rich and diverse genres, in the future, legal-themed films may provide a new breakthrough for the transformation of Hong Kong genre films.

5. Independent Representation: Local Narratives and Identity Recognition

Stuart Hall, a leading figure of the Birmingham School, deeply absorbed the theoretical essence of scholars such as Saussure, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Louis Althusser, and Jacques Derrida, transforming the philosophical epistemological concept of "representation" into the concept of "representation" that integrates structuralist semiotics and cultural studies. Through this concept, Hall explored the origin of cultural meaning, arguing that things themselves do not possess inherent meaning. Meaning is produced and constructed through language and other cultural symbols operating at the level of language(Hao, 2008).

Hall believed that there are two different modes of thinking about cultural identity, and these two modes form the principle of identity and difference in cultural identity. At the same time, Hall argued that there is no absolute difference or identity; therefore, the principle of "identity in difference" is fundamental to his theory of cultural identity. To some extent, one of the characteristics of Lingnan culture is embodied in this way, and it is most prominently expressed in film art. Therefore, introducing Hall's concept of "representation" to interpret "Greater Bay Area cinema" is key to understanding its core structure.

Due to its coastal location and historical development, activities such as "business" and "immigration" in Lingnan have become key areas for exploring Lingnan culture. In modern Lingnan culture, Chinese overseas culture and Hong Kong-Macau culture occupy an important position(Hua, 1991). Since the new century, many films from the Guangdong-Hong-Kong-Macau Greater Bay Area have emerged, set against the backdrop of Lingnan's local cultural environment, representing a series of independent expressions. These films either focus on the life writing between individuals and groups within specific regions of Lingnan, or they explore the identity confusion between individuals and groups due to geographical or social changes, thus embarking on a journey of self-exploration and introspection.

Here, the author categorizes such films with independent expressions as "differentiated" identity recognition, linking the creator's local awareness with the central theme of the text.

5.1 Local Consciousness in Lingnan Cinema

The representation of cultural identity is first reflected in the "identity" portrayed in Lingnan films, which is rooted in locality. This identity arises from a strong identification with one's own culture. Letting differences dissolve within identity is the goal of modern cultural identity theory(Wang, 2009). This identity is most typical in films that explore urban youth life issues, reveal social issues, or focus on marginalized social groups.

It is specifically expressed in the use of Cantonese dialogue throughout the film or even exclusively. There is also a strong regional urban landscape, as seen in *My Prince Edward* (2019), which depicts the confusion and despair faced by Hong Kong youth in their marital lives. The

film presents numerous Hong Kong-specific settings, such as narrow streets and crowded living spaces, which are typical representations of Hong Kong's regional culture.

Alternatively, it can be seen in the extreme portrayal of marginalized individuals, such as the detailed depiction of a gay individual in Stanley Kwan Kam-Pang's *Lan Yu* (2001), Ann Hui's transition from commercial to art films in *The Way We Are* (2008), which portrays marginalized lower-class individuals, or Wong Kar-wai's depiction of the loneliness and alienation of urban youth in *2046* (2004). This anxiety and sense of crisis regarding social issues are related to the independent and self-aware consciousness gradually formed by filmmakers since the Hong Kong New Wave.

In recent years, emerging directors in Guangdong have brought their reflections on Lingnan culture to the big screen, garnering recognition at international film festivals. For instance, Li Yunbo's *Breathing Normal* (2016), which was nominated for the debut feature award at the San Sebastián International Film Festival, captures the love and life of three young people in Guangzhou. Using semi-improvisational and semi-documentary methods, the film showcases the unique atmosphere and essence of Lingnan culture through its urban landscapes. Li's later work, *Pearl* (2020), continues this exploration by focusing on a single woman's life in Guangzhou's old district, Liwan.

Other notable examples include Wong Zi's debut feature film *All About ING* (2019), which depicts a family's upheaval following the father's late-stage liver cancer diagnosis. The film's rich Cantonese dialect and detailed portrayal of Guangdong family life earned it nominations at the 23rd Shanghai International Film Festival. Gao Ming's *Damp Season* (2020), set in Shenzhen's urban villages, explores the loneliness and ambiguity of young couples, winning the Jury Prize at the 21st Jeonju International Film Festival.

The strong local characteristics in these films can be attributed to the directors' deep connection to Lingnan culture. Many are either long-time residents or natives of the region, which influences their work's expression of Lingnan's rural nostalgia or urban vitality, often blending the two. A common motif in these films is the architectural depiction of Guangzhou's "old three districts" (Liwan, Yuexiu, and Haizhu), where traditional arcade buildings—the most iconic representation of Lingnan culture—are preserved.

5.2 Cross-Regional Metaphors of Identity Recognition

Hall first discussed the concept of differentiated cultural identity in his article *The Smallest Self*. He pointed out that the key to identity lies in the stable point of intersection formed when the subject encounters history and cultural narratives, thus the self should refer to cultural narratives to determine its position of identity.

After Hong Kong's return to mainland China in 1997, the Asian financial crisis, and the signing of the CEPA agreement, society in Hong Kong gradually underwent subtle changes. One of these changes was that, following this period, an increasing number of independent films produced by Hong Kong filmmakers began to openly explore issues of identity. This sense of identity originates from a "differentiated" understanding at this specific historical juncture, encompassing both the identification with the return to the motherland, the exploration of the identity of immigrants in other countries, and the self-reflection on the local cultural identity of Hong Kong under the "One Country, Two Systems" framework.

Among veteran directors, Ann Hui stands out. Her film *The Way We Are* situates its narrative in Yuen Long, a peripheral residential area in Hong Kong. It replaces the city's usual bustling backdrop with quiet, ordinary family life, depicting the diminishing familial bonds caused by urbanization. (Zhan, 2023) While younger directors address identity recognition more explicitly.

In Bai Xue's *The Crossing*, Peipei, a Hong Kong-born protagonist with Hong Kong citizenship, struggles to integrate into local life due to her frequent trips to Shenzhen.(Zhai, 2021) Her inner conflicts reflect the identity struggles of a new generation of Hong Kong youth. Similarly, Tsai Jie's *Borrowed Time*(2023), which received nominations at the Rotterdam and Busan International Film Festivals, follows Ting, a young woman from Guangzhou who travels to Hong Kong to find her estranged father. Ting's search metaphorically reflects the deep-rooted cultural connections between Lingnan and Hong Kong-Macao cultures. Another example is Zhu Ziyang's self-written, directed, and acted film *Wishful Thinking* (2023), which portrays the poverty and identity dilemmas faced by two sisters who migrated from Hunan to Hong Kong. "This ambiguous, unstable state of navigating multiple identities and cultures traps many drifters and immigrant groups in profound diasporic predicaments" (Ma, 2024).

These films illuminate the struggles of identity recognition and cultural integration, providing nuanced perspectives on the intertwined narratives of place, culture, and self-discovery within the GBA.

6. Documentary Shaping: Realistic Characteristics and Industrial Upgrades

"Lingnan culture is characterized by its inclusiveness, encompassing not only the integration of Chinese and Western cultures through Guangzhou's role as one of the earliest open trading ports but also the blending of Nanyue culture with inland regional cultures" (Liu, 1997). From an artistic perspective, documentaries in Guangdong, within the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area (GBA), have emerged as a critical area of study in the new century.

6.1 Realistic Characteristics in Rugged Visuals

Representative films in this category include Li Yifan's *We Were Smart* (2019), documenting the once-popular "shamate" subculture among young Chinese workers; Zhou Hao's *The Transition Town* (2002), which captures the real-life experiences of migrant workers in Dongguan's Houjie Town; and *Using* (2007), focusing on a drug dealer in Guangzhou. Zhou's *The Police Station 1* (2010) and *The Police Station 2* (2011) depict events at Guangzhou Railway Station during the Spring Festival travel rush. Other notable examples include Yu Haibo's *China's Van Gogh* (2016), following farmers in Shenzhen's Dafen Village who replicate famous paintings for global markets; NHK's *Sanhe Job Market* (2018), a portrayal of the lives of unemployed "Sanhe Gods" in Shenzhen's Longhua District; Jia Yuchuan's *The Two Life of Li Ermao* (2019), documenting the struggles of a transgender individual in Shenzhen's urban villages; and Ou Ning's experimental documentary *Sanyuanli* (2003), which examines life in a Guangzhou urban village undergoing urbanization.

Other significant works include Gao Ming's *Pai Gu* (2005), which depicts young rural DVD sellers navigating life in Shenzhen; Fan Lixin's *Last Train Home* (2009), focusing on a migrant couple's conflict with their daughter while working in Guangzhou; and Jiang Nengjie's *Yun Jie* (2018), following a rural child's journey to Guangzhou in search of her migrant-worker parents. Zhou Hao's documentaries, in particular, stand out for their unfiltered, observational style.

Taking the documentary works of director Zhou Hao as an example, his early career in journalism has profoundly influenced his creative approach. Zhou worked as a photojournalist for over a decade, contributing to prominent media outlets such as *Guizhou Daily*, the Guizhou Branch of Xinhua News Agency, and *Southern Weekly*(Zhang & Wei, 2014). This professional background endowed him with a distinctive observational lens for perceiving the surrounding environment and a raw, unembellished style of expression. In his films *The Police Station* and

Using, Zhou consistently gravitates toward the lives of ordinary individuals engaged in low-wage labor in Guangzhou, such as migrant workers. He employs the Direct Cinema technique, maintaining a non-intrusive stance akin to a fly on the wall. This approach allows the audience ample space for reflection and imagination, unmediated by the filmmaker's interference.

These documentaries often share a common focus on migrant workers—ordinary people from across China who bring their lifestyles to Lingnan, sometimes clashing with local cultures, other times assimilating and putting down roots. Through narratives centered on individuals or urban spaces (such as urban villages), these films emphasize realism and grassroots storytelling. The directors' humanistic perspectives and their ability to draw dramatic tension from everyday life exemplify the inclusiveness and richness of Lingnan culture.

In Hong Kong, the history of documentaries dates back to pioneering works by “the father of Hong Kong cinema,” Lai Man-wai, whose revolutionary films, such as Sun Yat-sen's Inauguration as President and Sun Yat-sen's Journey North, remain invaluable historical materials. More recently, independent productions have offered unique insights into Hong Kong society, often gaining international acclaim. Cheung King-wai's *KJ: Music and Life* (2009), a poignant portrayal of a piano prodigy, won multiple Golden Horse Awards. Tammy Cheung's *Rice Distribution* (2002) and *Secondary School* (2003) employ a direct cinema approach to capture the daily lives of Hong Kong residents, influencing later works such as Zhou Hao's *Senior Year* (2005)(Chen, 2010).

Recent years have seen an increase in documentaries focusing on notable Hong Kong artists. *Keep Rolling* (2020) chronicles the legendary career of Ann Hui, a cornerstone of the Hong Kong New Wave, while Hui herself directed *Poetry* (2023), a documentary celebrating figures from Hong Kong's literary scene.

6.2 Industrial Transformation and Festival Evolution

From an industrial perspective, Guangzhou has leveraged its cultural heritage to build a robust documentary ecosystem. Since its rebranding in 2005 from the “Guangzhou International Television Documentary Conference” to the “China (Guangzhou) International Documentary Festival,” and its upgrade in 2011 to the “China (Guangzhou) International Documentary Festival,” the city has established itself as a global hub for documentary art. Innovations such as the “Golden Kapok Award” (2012) and the “China Stories” International Pitching Conference (2016) have created platforms for international collaboration and cultural exchange(Zhang, 2024).

Through this platform, domestic films like *Tough Out* (2020) and *China's Van Gogh* have reached global audiences, while international works like *My Octopus Teacher* (2020) and *Gregor and Petra: Come with Me to the Cinema*(2022) have gained domestic visibility.

Another example, the film documentary *Chasing the Light for Miles*, directed by Zhang Tongdao and co-produced by the Guangdong Provincial Propaganda Department, Guangzhou Pinrui Cultural Communication Co., Tencent Pictures, and Pearl River Film Studio, traces the stories of Guangdong-born filmmakers such as Lu Yan, Bruce Lee, Huang Liushuang, Cai Chusheng, and Li Minwei. Its aim is to bring Lingnan culture back into the international spotlight. Although this is a meaningful attempt, the film still has room for improvement in its use of audiovisual language and the depth of its content exploration.

When comparing the film industry of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macau Greater Bay Area with other global bay areas, its development still struggles to compete with the three major bay areas in the world. The China (Guangzhou) International Documentary Festival, with only 20 years of history, has played a certain role in empowering the cultural dissemination of the Greater Bay Area, but it still has significant shortcomings. First, the China (Guangzhou) International

Documentary Festival's main disseminators have yet to break through the limitations of their circles, resulting in a relatively limited influence. Secondly, the platforms for Greater Bay Area cultural dissemination are still relatively singular, lacking diversified media and channels(Zhang, 2024). Furthermore, most of the works at the documentary festival are focused on traditional social issues and historical events, lacking innovative and forward-looking themes and forms. This also results in the relatively limited appeal and influence of Greater Bay Area culture among younger audiences.

Talent, as a core driving force, plays a crucial role in the process of regional development. Taking the San Francisco Bay Area in the United States as an example, it not only has a solid technological foundation but also clusters high-level universities, coupled with a more favorable visa system, which has enabled the area to attract a large number of talented individuals. In contrast, the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macau Greater Bay Area lags behind in terms of talent supply and educational advantages(Zhao D., Feng M., Wang X., 2024).

7. Conclusion

In summary, as a key area for the future of Chinese cinema, the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area (GBA) holds immense potential for development. However, significant challenges remain. From a production perspective, institutions like the Pearl River Film Studio in Guangdong have been shaped by reforms in the Chinese film industry, emphasizing ideological and social functions of cinema while neglecting its economic and market-driven aspects. From an industrial standpoint, the global influence of GBA film festivals, such as the Hong Kong International Film Festival and Macau International Film Festival, lags behind that of international counterparts like the New York Film Festival, San Francisco Film Festival, and Tokyo International Film Festival. Similarly, the China (Guangzhou) International Documentary Festival primarily attracts documentary enthusiasts, with limited awareness among general domestic audiences.

Hong Kong, once the epicenter of Asian cinema, now faces issues such as talent drain, the decline of its local film industry, and challenges in preserving the unique “Hong Kong flavor.” Under the broader blueprint for the GBA, revitalizing the industry will require constructing a mature production ecosystem, establishing robust film bases and industrial clusters, and cultivating new generations of talent. For Hong Kong, the path forward involves finding its unique position within the GBA while learning from the mature cinematic ecosystems of South Korea and mainland China to transform and regain its former glory.

A historical reexamination of the GBA’s regional development can help revive the cultural community concept of GBA cinema, fostering greater awareness of its strengths while identifying new drivers for industrial growth. This approach could consolidate Guangdong’s position as China’s largest film market, enhance the distinctiveness of Hong Kong cinema, and integrate its artistic and cultural heritage with industrial aesthetics. Such collaborative efforts across the region could create a new dynamic of complementary strengths, enabling Chinese cinema to navigate the complexities of the global film landscape with greater confidence and resilience, while better addressing emerging risks and challenges.

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