

Report  
Rainbow Fong  
Window CNY



When the article was written on Feb 2nd, ten days before Chinese New Year, the highest grossing box office period that regularly makes up 30% of China's annual ticket sales, fierce battle among competing titles was long on. In fact, right after ticket sales opened on Jan 29th, presale figure on the following day hit the RMB 100m (USD16m) mark right away with the leading title "Detective Chinatown 3" which was a holdup from CNY 2020 grossed over RMB50m (USD8m) on day one. Daily reports and analysis are generated and released in high frequency —financial reports from trading institutions and cinema operators on related studio performance, polls from traditional news media and digital platforms desirable movie to watch, plan to catch how many films during the period, updates from ticketing systems on sales and difference between big cities and small, forecast and analysis from media watchers, academic and news from major studios — pour wherever they can, as if the

CNY movies and its box office is larger than the Lunar New Year itself.

Taking a step back, the all-important CNY release window do not have a very long history in China. It all started in Hong Kong from the 1980's when the city experienced its economic golden era. Local HK comedy titles by Michael Hui and later by Cinema City Co. were released during the Chinese New Year which answered to the entertainment need for the long holidays in the city. Their success pushed out not only foreign films but titles of all other genres during the period. It became a practice for cinema operators to program only local comedy for the CNY. In mainland China, however, the blossoming of a CNY release window came only in 2013, signified by Stephen Chow's comedy "Journey to the West: Conquering the Demons" which broke the single title box office record at the time grossing RMB530m (around USD80m at the time). From then on, the CNY release window, thanks to the bullish economy and stable growth of

screens, has since secured its strong hold, becomes the most important release period annually and adopts the single tracked programming mode.

While most titles would do anything to fight for this hot slot, traditionally, only local comedy titles and mega productions with top cast can make the grade. Noted CNY holiday is typically a long 7-10 days' break and quite a few titles would be released anytime during this time, it was usually the title that hit the cinema on the Lunar New Year Day that became the ultimate box office winner of the period (and likely winner of the year). Many factors contributed to that, yet the most prominent three are — the trained eyes of the cinema operators, the application of big data in program scheduling, and the snowballing effect of everyone being film critics online.

For 2021, there are a total of 11 "CNY titles". 7 of them are major titles, and only 3 of them made New Year Day release. There are animated numbers suitable for family audiences and we see fantasy films among the major seven. This overcrowdedness will certainly translate to extraordinary high stake for the players, as most of the titles were expensive productions. As if this was not risky enough, two more made-for-the-season movies are released using the recently introduced pay per view mode through the top three online platforms. Although general belief holds that online title offer is an incremental 'box office', with Covid precaution measures allowing for a 50-75% cinema

occupancy and the government advising people to stay where they are instead of traveling home, it is yet to see what online CNY titles' effect will have on the evolving seasonal release period.

By the time this article is published, results of the total CNY box office and the highest grossing title will be unveiled. Yet, the figure is not as important as the trending. Despite the earlier worry whether we will have yet another record-breaking CNY box office gross, a few things that we can be assured of now are — platforms have gathered the pandemic driven experiences of 2020, and PVD is here to stay. Brand building for CNY "Movie Halls" and themed cinemas on platforms will also take effect.

Noted the leap frogging aptitude in China, the PVD mode in China may not follow the established Hollywood pattern of simultaneous on/offline release for festive holidays, but will take its own shape. On the theatre front, despite the hammering results of the pandemic, the number of new screens built in 2020 was still greater than the summation of the closed down cinemas. Looking ahead, the future of CNY release window is not that grim at all, so is the general cinema going habit. The good news is, the opportunistic window given to PVD titles during 2021 CNY could be a "start". It might open the door for other cross-genre works, imported titles and art films, perhaps not only during festive holidays but also more regularly in the near future.

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