

The Evolution of Narrative Focus and Value Expression in Legal-Themed Films during China's New Era

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ABSTRACT

In response to the demands of rule-of-law development and cultural communication, legal-themed films in China's New Era have undergone significant innovation. They can be classified into three predominant types: courtroom-centered narratives, law enforcement documentaries, and social issue-driven narratives. These films engage with public concerns, balance legal principles with human emotions, and incorporate diverse genre elements. By situating individual fates within broader social conflicts, they reflect collaborative governance among multiple actors. The underlying value foundation has also evolved from an instrumental view of the "legal system" to a systemic conception of the "rule of law," with growing emphasis on legislative refinement and judicial dynamism. This evolution is driven by advances in national legal capacity, shifting audience expectations, and evolving creative approaches. These films not only construct a distinctive legal-cultural identity but also foster a rule-of-law consensus through cinematic storytelling, serving as a cultural mirror of China's legal progress.

KEYWORDS

Legal-themed films; Rule of law; Social governance; Culture communication

1 Introduction

The rule of law, a cornerstone of a well-developed society, is a principle of governance that prioritizes political stability, peace, and universal justice^[1]. The image of Chinese cinema is also constructing itself^[2]. Chinese legal-themed cinema has actively responded to the demands of rule-of-law construction and cultural dissemination in the new era, achieving innovations in genre development, thematic relevance, and value expression. Notable works such as *Red Paper Crane* (2022) and *Article 20* (2024) have demonstrated both social impact and artistic appeal, while also serving as important cultural vehicles that reflect the progress of legal governance and foster social consensus. However, current academic research remains inadequate in examining the shifts in narrative focus and value expression within legal-themed films. Against this backdrop, an in-depth analysis of the narrative transformations and value expression in New Era legal cinema is highly relevant for understanding how rule-of-law culture is represented on screen and what contemporary significance it conveys.

2 Types and Characteristics of Chinese Legal-Themed Films in the New Era

2.1 Categories of Chinese Legal-Themed Films in China's New Era

Based on legal-themed films produced between 2013 and 2025, Chinese legal-themed films in the New Era can be categorized into the following three types according to their narrative focus and representation of legal elements.

2.1.1 Courtroom-Centered Narratives

Courtroom-focused films center on judicial proceedings, highlighting the rigor and dialectical nature of the law. In the new era, courtroom films delve deeper into the conflict between emotion and law, moving beyond mere contradictions between power and legality^[3]. These works not only depict clashes of procedure and evidence but also explore the complex logic and human sentiments underlying legal principles. For instance, *Silent Witness* (2013) employs multi-perspective narration to vividly portray the confrontation between prosecution and defense in court, revealing the tension between "procedural justice" and "outcome justice." Meanwhile, *12 Citizens* (2015) dramatizes the operation of the reasonable doubt principle through intense jury deliberations, skillfully adapting a classic model to the local context. Through intense ideological and verbal confrontations, courtroom-focused films propel the narrative forward, embody the dialectical nature of law, and encourage audiences to contemplate the limits of legality and the essence of social justice.

2.1.2 Law Enforcement Documentaries

Law enforcement documentary-style films transform the investigative procedures of judicial agencies into gripping

narrative arcs, allowing audiences to experience key operational stages such as detection, evidence collection, and arrests firsthand. These works showcase the application and challenges of the rule of law in complex real-world contexts. For example, *Z Storm* (2014) centers on the Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) combating crime, clearly depicting anti-corruption enforcement while enabling viewers to appreciate the resolve behind integrity building. *Operation Mekong* (2016) expands to international law enforcement, portraying a high-stakes transnational drug operation that highlights China's major power image, demonstrating efficient coordination among enforcement agencies in complex international environments and underscoring the legal authority and national resolve behind their actions. Similarly, *Against the Dark* (2021) delves into the life-and-death struggle between an investigation team and criminal forces along with their "protective umbrellas," examining vulnerabilities in power oversight and the decisive role of evidence chains in law enforcement. By integrating action and suspense, these films enhance their entertainment value and tension, powerfully conveying the arduousness of enforcement procedures and the ultimate credibility of justice.

2.1.3 Social-Issue-Driven Films

Social-issue-driven legal films focus on social governance, often addressing legal concerns in specific domains to acutely capture the connection between public concerns and institutional reform. These works demonstrate penetrating realism by integrating legal provisions with complex social realities, triggering in-depth public discourse and action. For instance, *Dying to Survive* (2018) directly confronts generic drug dilemmas, exposing the gap between patent rights and the right to life. Its public discourse influenced legislative revisions, showing cinema's power to drive social change. Similarly, *Red Paper Crane* (2022) turns its lens on victims of domestic violence, drawing attention to vulnerable groups and resonating with society, while emphasizing how legal aid safeguards their rights. These social-issue-driven films break free from the constraints of courtroom settings and avoid overemphasizing law enforcement. Instead, they root questions of rule of law deeply within everyday social spaces, such as streets, hospitals, and homes, functioning as a lens to dissect social-legal challenges and stimulate public deliberation. In doing so, they fulfill a dual function: as a catalyst for social introspection and as a record of the evolving public legal consciousness in contemporary China. Furthermore, *Article 20* (2024) draws creative inspiration from the nationwide debate on the boundaries of justifiable defense triggered by the "Kunshan Counterattack Case." It interprets and illustrates Article 20 of the Criminal Law of the People's Republic of China on justifiable defense within specific contexts. By amplifying social issues, the film engages the public in a collective exploration of justice, ethical courage, and the human dimension of the law.

2.2 Stage Characteristics of New Era Legal-Themed Films

2.2.1 Addressing Public Concerns

A significant trend in New Era legal-themed films is their strong connection to reality. Many works draw inspiration from major real-life cases and social events, such as *Operation Mekong* (2016), based on the "Mekong River Massacre," and *Red Paper Crane* (2022), which reflects issues of domestic violence. Through artistic adaptation of real materials, these films not only recreate widely concerned issues such as pharmaceutical patent disputes, domestic violence, and anti-corruption campaigns but also delve into the interaction between social order, legal practice, and the medium of film. The artistic reconstruction of real events concretizes abstract social problems within cinematic narratives, enabling audiences to connect personal experiences with public issues during viewing. This effectively raises public awareness and prompts deeper reflection on the progress of social rule of law, demonstrating the role of legal-themed films as both a mirror and an influencer of society.

2.2.2 Dialectical Unity of Legal Principles and Human Sentiments

New Era legal-themed films emphasize the dialectical unity of legal logic and human emotions in their narrative expression. For example, *Silent Witness* (2013) uses the core plot of a father fabricating evidence to protect his daughter to profoundly reveal the intense conflict between familial ethics and legal rules. Similarly, *Article 20* (2024), while handling cases of justifiable defense, strictly adheres to fundamental legal principles such as "presumption of innocence" and "procedural justice" to maintain the seriousness and authority of the law. At the same time, it intricately portrays the complex emotions of involved parties and law enforcers, including family ethics, pursuit of justice, and professional dilemmas. Through its warm realist narrative, *Article 20* offers audiences an emotionally resonant aesthetic experience and ideological comfort^[4]. These elements acknowledge the role of human factors, maintaining professionalism and rigor while avoiding mechanistic narratives through nuanced emotional portrayals. The organic integration of legal principles and human sentiments not only enhances dramatic tension and emotional impact but also deeply resonates with audiences, guiding them to reflect on the relationship between the rigid boundaries of the law and the complex needs of humanity. This significantly elevates the ideological depth and artistic appeal of the works.

2.2.3 Diversified Genre Integration

New Era legal-themed films exhibit a distinct “law + X” composite genre structure, with many films serving multiple functions such as legal education, law enforcement portrayal, and dissemination of legal culture. For instance, *The Longest Day in Chang’an* integrates crime and suspense around a national treasure theft case, constructing a thrilling narrative. *Dying to Survive* employs comedy to directly address issues within the pharmaceutical system, offering social realism through its approach. *Zou Bihua* combines biographical elements to focus on the life and practices of a judicial reformer. By blending various genre elements, New Era legal-themed films expand their expressive scope and discursive dimensions. This not only enriches their artistic expression but also broadens their audience reach. Different genre elements cater to diverse viewing expectations, providing channels for audiences who prefer suspenseful stimulation, social reality concerns, or character-driven stories. This injects continuous innovative vitality and market competitiveness into legal-themed films.

3 Manifestations of Transformation

3.1 Shift in Narrative Focus

Prior to the New Era, Chinese legal-themed films primarily focused on individuals rather than the law itself^[5]. However, since entering the New Era, the development trajectory of legal-themed films in China has shown a shift in narrative focus from individual-centric stories to societal collaboration, placing greater emphasis on the social impact of the law itself. Early representative works, such as *The Story of Qiu Ju* (1992) and *Judge Mother* (2001), centered on individualized appeals, focusing on isolated struggles against power structures or direct interpersonal mediation. In contrast, New Era legal-themed films represented by *Dying to Survive* (2018) and *Against the Dark* (2021) exhibit distinct collective contextual characteristics. Their narratives are no longer confined to the realization of rights for a single entity but instead integrate individual destinies into broader social contradictions. For example, *Dying to Survive* (2018) explores the widespread public anxiety over prohibitively high medical costs, which sparked debates about the healthcare system, while *Against the Dark* (2021) delves into the campaign against organized crime triggered by the erosion of grassroots governance. Correspondingly, the narrative logic has also shifted from sigel legal relationships to depicting solutions to collective social issues. These films often showcase multiple actors, including lawyers, news media, government regulatory bodies, and even ordinary citizens, collaboratively driving the development of legal stories under the impetus of specific social issues.

3.2 Deepening of Value Foundation

The value expression in legal-themed films has evolved from showcasing the “legal system” as a tool to embodying the “rule of law” as a comprehensive system. The “legal system” focuses on the construction and operation of legal norms, emphasizing the efficiency of rule-making and enforcement, while the “rule of law” underscores the core role of law in social governance, the constraint of public power, and society’s widespread reverence and conscious adherence to rules. Early films such as *The Accused Uncle Shan Gang* (1994) or *Judge Mother* (2001) primarily emphasized legal order maintenance, depicting criminal processes, investigative details, or judges resolving case conflicts within frameworks. They focused on “legal system” enforcement and implementation challenges. Their deeper value lay in exposing enforcement deficiencies to prompt systemic reflection. In contrast, New Era films have begun embracing the connotations of the “rule of law,” not only portraying law enforcement processes but also integrating legislative refinement and judicial activation into their narrative cores. For example, *Dying to Survive* (2018) explores the conflict between individual fate and the drug management system, ultimately driving real-world discussions and revisions of relevant clauses in the Drug Administration Law. This case demonstrates how public opinion influences the legislative process with a critical aspect of the rule of law. Similarly, the core value of *Article 20* (2024) extends beyond the fair adjudication of a single case. By addressing controversies in the application of the “justifiable defense” clause in judicial practice, the film directly highlights the linkage between legislative intent and grassroots enforcement, reflecting the dynamic balance among legislation, judiciary, and societal feedback within the rule of law system. This shift in narrative focus has redirected the value emphasis from early pursuits of individual justice, to shaping and disseminating consensus on the “rule of law.” New Era legal-themed films meticulously portray the complex dialectical relationship between individual rights and public interests, emphasizing the process through which societal actors seek common ground within the framework of the rule of law. They demonstrate that the core value of the rule of law lies in the full protection of individual rights and the enhancement of collective well-being: not as opposing forces but as symbiotic elements achieved through sound laws and good governance. This cinematic evolution mirrors the broader theoretical framework of the “Chinese modernization of rule of law”—a process with distinct socialist characteristics that represents a new form

of rule of law civilization^[6]. The shift from a focus on the “legal system” to a systemic conception of the “rule of law” in these films exemplifies this profound transition, showcasing how legal-themed narratives both reflect and contribute to China's unique path of legal development.

4 Cultural Value of Transformation: Breakthroughs in Rule of Law Communication and Narrative Innovation

4.1 Construction of Cultural Identity in Legal Films

To effectively tell China's stories, Chinese cinema must establish a cultural identity^[7]. Historically, the public's understanding of legal films was shaped by Western “courtroom dramas,” where the courtroom was an arena for prosecution-defense battles. Early Chinese legal films were heavily influenced by Western narrative paradigms, such as the portrayal of heroic individual lawyers and courtroom debates emphasizing procedural justice, or they were limited to fragmented depictions of real-world dilemmas, failing to develop a distinct local legal cultural expression. As Stephen McIntyre^[8] notes, Chinese films do not simply mimic Western conventions when portraying the courtroom, but draw upon a centuries-old, indigenous tradition of court case melodrama. New Era films, by rooting themselves in local social issues and real legal problems, and through narratives centered on “social governance” and traditional cultural genes, such as the concept of harmony and community values emphasizing collective effort, have achieved significant construction of legal cultural identity. These films are no longer mere transplants of foreign models but actively translate the state's philosophy of “co-construction, co-governance, and co-sharing” in social governance into concrete cinematic practice. For example, *The Bottom Line* (2017) showcases multi-dimensional dispute resolution scenarios involving courts, communities, and mediation organizations. This narrative strategy, centered on local governance wisdom, distinctly differs from the Western legal film tradition of “individual rights-based” narratives. It signifies a subjective leap toward the autonomous construction of cultural discourse, effectively narrating China's rule of law stories and underscoring the uniqueness of China's rule of law path with cultural confidence.

4.2 Dialogue Between Legal Films and Social Consensus

Changes in narrative modes have bridged the gap between legal professionalism and public understanding. New Era legal films address complex public issues through social collaboration within legal frameworks, such as prosecutors in *The Procurator* engaging in targeted legal education within communities to educate specific at-risk groups. Abstract legal provisions and policy principles are concretized into perceptible governance practices and social interactions. The “social governance” narrative approach guides audiences away from viewing the law merely as a tool for individual rights protection toward understanding it as a cohesive force that maintains basic order, mediates multi-interests, and fosters collective consensus. Simultaneously, this narrative grounded in local governance practices promotes audience recognition and understanding of the operational logic and cultural foundations of socialist rule of law with Chinese characteristics, facilitating dialogue between legal spirit and social consensus.

4.3 Multidimensional Expression of Mainstream Values in Legal Films

New Era legal films transcend the traditional top-or-down binary opposition model. Early works often relied on sharp individual-institutional conflicts to drive plots and convey value critiques^[9]. In contrast, New Era films generally adopt more complex structures of issue emergence, multi-collaboration, and systemic resolution. For instance, in *A Guilty Conscience* (2023), lawyer Lin Liangshui collaborates with journalists, informants, and other forces to correct a wrongful conviction and prompt judicial reflection. By showcasing legal practice oversights and multi-stakeholder coordination, these films highlight collective wisdom and institutional self-correction capabilities, aligning with mainstream value expression. The complexity of issues and lengthy resolutions ensure narrative tension and realist depth, emphasizing collective wisdom and institutional synergy in solutions, reflecting the advantage of concerted efforts for major tasks^[10]. Without shying away from the real problems, these films successfully embed the idea that “social challenges require institutional collaboration to resolve” into their storylines. They showcase China's local rule of law practices while expanding the artistic expressiveness and persuasiveness of realist cinema, providing an innovative path of reference for telling China's rule of law stories effectively.

5 Conclusion

The evolution of New Era legal-themed films is a cultural manifestation of China's rule of law construction. Through a

deepened value foundation, from “legal system” to “rule of law”, and diverse genres, these films bridge the dialogue between law and society. They depict individual destiny turbulence in the rule of law process, reveal the need for multi-stakeholder collaboration, and turn legal provisions into perceptible social practices. This transformation has not only strengthened the distinct cultural identity of legal narratives but also fostered social consensus on fairness and justice through artistic storytelling, emerging as a vital force in deepening public faith in the rule of law. Only in this way can legal-themed films better tell China’s rule of law stories and contribute cultural power to the ongoing journey of legal civilization.

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