



Cultural events and the city: The migration of FIRST International Film Festival from Beijing to Xining, China

Hui Wang^a, Shih-yang Kao^{b,*}

^a Department of Geography and Planning, University of Liverpool, United Kingdom

^b Department of Urban Planning and Design, Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, China

ARTICLE INFO

Handling Editor: Prof. Andy Pratt

Keywords:

Cultural events
Film festivals
Cities in inland China
Urban development
Chinese film industry

ABSTRACT

In existing studies on the relationship between cultural events and urban transformation, neoliberalism narratives of urban entrepreneurship have been prominently emphasised. As this paper argues, discussions of the cultural economy rarely pay sufficient attention to the agency of the creative class, and often fail to consider that those modes of urban governance may differ. This paper draws on a study of the geographical factors involved in developing the FIRST International Film Festival, which was held in the city of Xining on the Tibetan Plateau. It explores the reasons for the relocation of the FIRST International Film Festival from Beijing to Xining, and the purposes and ways in which Xining employs the FIRST International Film Festival. From these findings, the study suggests that the geographical expressions of cultural industries themselves, as well as the diversity of development interests and considerations in a particular place, are essential to gain a comprehensive understanding of the connections between cultural events and the city.

1. Introduction

Every summer, for about ten days, the city of Xining—the provincial capital of Qinghai situated at the north-eastern edge of the Tibetan Plateau—would be transformed into a host of a festival that celebrates the year's avant-garde, independent films produced in China (Fig. 1).¹ The catalyst of this transformation is the FIRST International Film Festival (FIFF), which many young Chinese filmmakers consider a 'must-attend' event for their career development. For Xining locals, the FIFF has helped the city to move beyond its reputation as 'the gateway to Tibet', which sounds increasingly a cliché nowadays because many cities and towns surrounding the Tibetan Plateau – Chengdu, Kangding, Ya'an, Lhasa, Kathmandu, etc. – have been using the same phrase to brand themselves. The event has brought to the city not only thought-provoking films but also promising filmmakers, state-of-the-art screening equipment, and vibrant public conversations about films and the arts of filmmaking (Fig. 2). FIFF has, in other words, brought Xining into the universe of China's booming film industry, which has its historical roots in the country's coast, specifically the more

economically advanced metropolises of Shanghai and Beijing.²

Xining is, nevertheless, an unusual location for a film festival considering the efforts that the FIFF Committee has to make to ensure the success of the event. The FIFF committee is based in China's capital city, Beijing, which is 1600 km away from Xining (Fig. 3). The lack of film schools in Xining and the city's under-developed film market means that the FIFF Committee must recruit and train volunteers in Beijing and then transport them to Xining, where they also need to be housed and fed. Moreover, in Xining there is no local business or organisation capable of converting films into the Digital Cinema Package (DCP), the delivery format required for today's film screenings. Thus, the Committee has to collect DCP files from filmmakers in advance and, for the sake of safety, carefully protect the shipment of the hard drives from Beijing to Xining. In addition, the projectors and speakers needed for the outdoor screenings are all shipped from Beijing to Xining. Last but not least, technical professionals are also sent from Beijing, who install and operate the equipment, together with a team of stage designers from Beijing who create the award ceremony. Bringing a film festival up to the Tibetan Plateau is a matter that would cost a tremendous amount of

* Corresponding author. EB422, 111 Ren'ai Road, Suzhou Industrial Park, Suzhou, Jiangsu Province, 215123, China.

E-mail addresses: hui.wang3@liverpool.ac.uk (H. Wang), shihyang.kao@xjtlu.edu.cn (S.-y. Kao).

¹ Qinghai is one of the least developed provinces in China. From the demographic point of view, urbanisation in Qinghai was 54.74% in 2018, lower than the national average of 59.8% (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2019).

² According to China Film Producers' Association (2021), there are 196 film production companies in China. Among them, 102 are based either in Beijing or Shanghai. More than half of public companies whose primary business is films were registered in Beijing or Shanghai as well.



Fig. 1. The open-air screening was held at a plaza surrounded by retail stores, restaurants, pubs, and hotels (Photo by Hui Wang on July 25, 2021).



Fig. 2. A small seminar with two directors at the 2021 FIFF (Photo by Hui Wang on July 27, 2021).

effort in planning, preparation, and coordination. Perhaps, there is something unique in Xining that the Chinese filmmakers simply could not find in the more modernised city of Beijing.

Literature that interrogates the relationship between cultural events and the city is dominated by narratives of urban entrepreneurialism (e.g., Ganga et al., 2021; García, 2004; Kana, 2012; Sengupta, 2016; Shin, 2014; Wu et al., 2016), which, as it is commonly understood, arose in the 1970s as a response to emergent challenges associated with the promotion of neoliberal globalisation (in particular, the dismantling of the Fordist production system and inner-city decline). Cultural policies and event programmes were understood as urban regeneration (or, in a more fashionable term, ‘place-making’) strategies carried out by cities and regions to develop the so-called ‘creative economy’ that is now considered by many as the key to ensuring local competitiveness under globalisation (Florida, 2014; Landry, 2000). In the more recent years, this field of study has been further advanced by calls to pay more attention to problems of gentrification and displacement (Davis & Thornley, 2010; Houdart, 2012). In this line of critical reflection, Seo (2020) and Virani (2020) have helpfully explored the potential of various forms of community engagement in fostering cultural events that are more responsive to local needs. Although the existing literature has helped untangle the



Fig. 3. The locations of Xining and Beijing.

increasingly complex connection between cultural events and urban transformation, little attention has been paid to the question of how the creative economy interprets cultural policy and interacts with different modes of urban governance. As a matter of fact, the creative economy has rarely been considered a driving force behind the event, and as a result of which the views and practices of the creative class (artists, curators, filmmakers, etc.) are often relegated to a matter of secondary concerns. This leaves one to wonder how those who take part in the creative economy articulate the relationship between events and geography, and how cities capitalise on their temporal-spatial imaginations.

Drawing on a detailed case study of the evolution of FIFF, this paper argues that event-led urban development in China’s inland regions is embedded within the nation’s uneven geography. The breath-taking construction of urban modernity in China’s coastal regions has turned out to be a source of envy for the people living in inland areas, while being experienced by many living in those coastal regions as a suffocating process that they would want to escape from, even just temporarily. For people in the film industry, the pursuit of high modernism by municipalities in coastal regions – which has been mediated through discourses about ‘social stability’ and expansion of the censorship bureaucracy – has left little room for independent films’ survival. This eventually prompted the migration of the FIFF from its original host city, Beijing, to Xining, where the local government took a relatively laissez-faire stance toward film screening. For officials in Xining, however, by utilising the film festival’s geographic imagination in relation to Xining, they are able to create a showcase of urbanisation with political intent.

The remaining part of this paper consists of four sections. First, it discusses the theoretical and methodological issues that have motivated the research and guided its development. This is followed by an examination of Xining as Chinese filmmakers’ preferred location for a film festival. The third section discusses how the city of Xining has taken advantage of the FIFF to represent the development of its urban areas. The final section summarises the discussion and draws a conclusion.

2. Cultural events and urban development

This research is built on the premise that existing theories from political economists on the geography of the cultural economy can help further advance our understanding of the relationship between cultural events and the city. Specifically, we found inspiration in the work of Amin and Thrift (2007), Lash and Urry (1994), and Scott (2000, 2004), who argue that the development of the cultural economy is a geographical process subject to both the law of economic agglomeration

and local specificities. Thus, we have resisted the common tendency to see events in cities simply as place-making (or, more specifically, city branding) strategies (e.g., [Caves, 2000](#); [Evans, 2001](#); [Getz, 1991](#); [Quinn, 2005](#)). Instead, we interpret them as a geographical expression of the constantly evolving cultural economy. In constructing our case study of FIFF, we therefore place filmmakers at the centre of our analysis. We interrogated their context-specific urban experiences and asked how the experiences have helped shape their imagination of an ideal film festival.

Along the way of pursuing an in-depth understanding of the migration of FIFF from Beijing to Xining, we have developed three propositions that we believe can further deepen ongoing conversations about how to theorise the relationship between cultural events and the city. The first proposition is that cultural events are multifaceted: they have both consumption and production dimensions. Scholarship in the existing field of study (as identified in the Introduction section) often links the creation of cultural events directly to the rise of consumerism, without considering the possibility that for those involved in the creative economy, an event can mean more than just marketing and selling (see similar critiques in [Pratt, 2008](#); [Martin & Grodach, 2020](#)). In our study of FIFF's migration to Xining, urban consumption can hardly be considered a factor, as the size of the city's film market pales in comparison to those of major coastal cities such as Beijing and Shanghai. This paper shows the importance of FIFF in enabling young Chinese filmmakers to create high-quality films: in Xining, relatively out of reach of the expanding censorship bureaucracy, filmmakers are able to exchange ideas more freely with their peers and learn skills, experiences and perspectives from established filmmakers. Such networking opportunities are indispensable to the advancement of their careers in China's fast-transforming film industry.

Second, cultural production as a force that makes an event meaningful can manifest itself at a variety of geographical scales. One of the problems of employing popular existing concepts such as 'urban regeneration' or 'place-making' is that such concepts have often tended to limit the focus of analysis to the local scale (a particular district or community, etc.). However, as existing theory on the geography of the cultural economy has pointed out, culture production is often embedded within complex networked, interpersonal relations that can stretch beyond a particular place. [Power and Scott \(2004\)](#) have also previously argued that events and locational connections are critical for understanding strategies that rely on events for development. In this paper, we argue that by reorienting the analytical focus to a different, broader scale (in our case, the national scale), we may reveal hidden processes shaping the connection between cultural events and the city. More specifically, this research has identified China's deteriorating uneven geography as an important factor that has influenced the location of filmmaking-related activities. New developments taking place in China's more developed coastal metropolises may lead to the creation of new urban milieus in distant inland regions such as the Tibetan Plateau.

Lastly, following the previous proposition, we argue that contexts matter and should be used to improve theories (as opposed to being seen as something negligible and marginal). In our fieldwork in Xining and Beijing, we had difficulty finding traces of urban entrepreneurship. The commitment of Beijing officials to strictly implement the central government's film censorship seems to us to be a departure from the entrepreneurial city model. In Xining, local officials are not interested in creating a local film to promote the place, nor in developing a local film industry. The question posed there was: How can FIFF help Xining win a place in the central government's developmental programs (which are redistributive by nature)? We concluded that while the concept of urban entrepreneurship has good explanatory potential, it is problematic to assume that all cities that have embraced event hosting can be described as 'entrepreneurial', 'post-industrial' or 'neoliberal'. Epistemologically, then, this paper echoes [Robinson and Roy's \(2016\)](#) call to be sensitive to the geography of urban theory production. We contend that urban theory needs to be built from the ground up. This means that

conceptualisation should start by dealing with muddy realities.

3. Methodology

Due to the exploratory nature of the theoretical propositions underpinning this study, which focus on the relationship between cultural events and cities and place emphasis on a particular geographical context, the research adopts a case study approach ([Yin, 2018](#)). A close examination of the FIFF case is warranted because the unique aspects of FIFF's development are closely related to the questions posed by the study. For example, FIFF moved from Beijing to Xining. This provides an empirical basis for understanding the impact of geographical change on cultural events. It is more informative to observe the influence of cultural events on the city from the FIFF, which has been running for over a decade than many other Chinese film festivals that were founded around the same time but have already closed.

Data for the case study was collected through fieldwork and secondary sources. The first author was offered an internship by the FIFF Committee, which allowed the first author to observe the festival in a participatory manner. Specifically, the first author spent two months in Beijing assisting with the preparations for FIFF 2021 and one month assisting with its implementation. The lack of publicly available and validated data on film festivals has always been a barrier to research on film festivals ([Loist, 2016](#)). As an intern, the author was able to gather information about the festival from a qualitative and insightful perspective. In addition to receiving permission from the organisers to access the festival's internal archives, it was easier to gain the trust of others and engage in more in-depth conversations with filmmakers, volunteers, and filmgoers. After the fieldwork, additional information was gathered from news reports, policy strategies and other secondary sources to develop a more structured understanding of the Chinese film industry and Xining's urban development.

4. From Beijing to Xining: The migration of the FIFF toward China's Wild West

While the charming sceneries boost its local tourist industry, the rise of the new cultural forces and the city's unrestrained nature enhance its wide appeal. The emergence of film festival makes Xining another centre for cinema alongside Beijing and Shanghai.

The 13th FIFF Handbook, 2019, p. 290

Alongside the thriving Chinese box office market, China's film festivals have grown over the past decade. Between 2013 and 2019, China's box office market expanded from \$3.547 billion to \$9.212 billion, and its share of the global box office market rose from 9.88% to 21.78% ([China Film Association, 2021](#)). Film festivals are held throughout China, from cosmopolitan cities such as Beijing and Shanghai to unexpected places like Xining in the remote Qinghai province and the ancient city of Pingyao in Shanxi province. The history of film festivals in China is short. The first Changchun Film Festival, opened in Changchun, Jilin, in September 1992, and the first Golden Rooster and Hundred Flowers Film Festival was held in Guilin, Guangxi, in November of the same year; they are the earliest film festivals in China since 1949. Two years later, in 1994, the first Shanghai International Film Festival (SIFF) started, and the first Cross-Strait and Hong Kong Film Festival (discontinued now) took place in Zhuhai, Guangdong. After 2000, in addition to film festivals initiated and supported by governments, such as the Beijing International Film Festival (BJIFF, founded in 2011) and the Hainan Island International Film Festival (HIIF, founded in 2018), unofficial film festivals have also emerged, including the China Independent Film Festival (CIFF, founded in 2003 in Nanjing, now discontinued) and the Chinese College Students Film Festival – the predecessor of the FIFF, the case studied in this article.

FIFF is unique in China's film industry. In the words of independent filmmaker Li Guiming, 'FIFF gives people who do not come from a

professional background the confidence and possibility to make films' (Wang, 2020: p. 39). FIFF only accepts entries that are one of the director's first three films. This rule creates a friendly environment for filmmakers at the beginning of their careers. Early-career filmmakers are drawn to the FIFF for its reputation of delivering promising, creative film directors. The list of successful directors who have once taken part in the FIFF is long and growing: Hu Bo (*An Elephant Sitting Still*, 2018), Wang Jiuliang (*Plastic China*, 2016), Wen Muye (*Dying to Survive*, 2018), Xin Yukun (*The Coffin in the Mountain*, 2014), Zhang Dalei (*The Summer Is Gone*, 2016).³ In addition to holding film competitions, FIFF has extended its reach into the entire film industry chain, helping young filmmakers with everything from film production to film distribution and marketing. For example, the Training Camp, which began in 2011, features instruction by leading directors or producers such as Béla Tarr, Na Hong-jin and Tsai Ming-Liang, and the elected filmmakers are expected to complete short films within ten days of the film festival. Likewise, to support the distribution of completed feature films in the market, FIFF started the industry screening programme in 2017, and film companies and organisations can converse with eligible films and their makers directly. For all these reasons, FIFF has developed a reputation as being a must-attend event among young Chinese filmmakers. Many even regarded FIFF as the 'utopia' for contemporary Chinese cinema (Chen & Wei, 2016; Ge, 2017; Liu et al., 2021).

FIFF would not have developed such a distinctive reputation – as young Chinese filmmakers' 'utopia' – if it did not relocate to the less-developed inland city of Xining. FIFF was founded in 2006 in Beijing to discover and nurture potential filmmakers. It is not difficult to understand why Beijing was the festival's birthplace: the capital city has the nation's best film schools, some of the largest film production companies and a mature audience willing to spend money and time on good films.⁴ However, in 2011, the festival moved to the city of Xining and renamed itself FIFF. According to Teng (2018), FIFF's Committee refused other cities' invitation proposals because they did not follow their visions for holding a film festival. It is argued here that the main concern behind the relocation was Beijing's municipal government's increasingly stringent regulations on films, which made the public screening of young directors' films – many of which would touch upon sensitive topics intentionally or unintentionally – quite difficult.

The late-2000s, as scholars in China studies have discussed, witnessed profound transformations in urban China's political economy. The financial crisis, the slowdown of China's export-oriented growth and unregulated urban expansion led to widespread social discontent and conflicts. In response, the central government has emphasised 'social stability' as one of the primary goals for social development. This is evident in the case of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. The mega-event associated with national prestige was expected to pacify existing discontent and maintain social stability (Shin, 2012; Shin & Li, 2013). Similarly, in the film industry, based on censorship laws that have been implemented, such as *Provisions on the Archival Filing of Film Scripts (Abstracts) and the Administration of Films 2006*, a new regulation, *Notice*

³ Wen Muye's *Dying to Survive* (2018) generated \$453 million at the box office, ranked the third in the year. Hu Bo's *An Elephant Sitting Still* (2018), won 'FIPRESCI Award' at the 68th Berlin International Film Festival, 'Best Feature Film' and 'Best Adapted Screenplay' at Taiwan's 55th Golden Horse Awards, and 'Best Film from Mainland and Taiwan' at the 39th Hong Kong Film Awards. Wang Jiuliang's *Plastic China* (2016) was nominated for 'Best Documentary Film' by the 54th Golden Horse Award and the 2017 Sundance Festival.

⁴ For example, Beijing is the home to most of China's top film schools, such as Beijing Film Academy, The Central Academy of Drama, Communication University of China, and The National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts.

of State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television on the Reaffirmation of Film Censorship Principles 2008, was issued in March of 2008, which repeatedly stressed that content that might 'disturb social order and undermine social stability' is not permitted.⁵

The relocation of FIFF is thought to have been directly influenced because of a film that was thought to violate the above-mentioned law. The film, *Guangrongde Fennu* (2006), narrates how discontent villagers engage in disputes with local bullies and their powerful families. The film won the 'Asian New Talent Special Jury Award' and 'College Students' Favourite Film' at the 2006 Shanghai International Film Festival. However, three years later, in 2009, after awarding 'College Students' Favourite Film' to this film, the Chinese College Students Film Festival was suspended by the Beijing municipal government as the film, in their opinion, had political overtones. The pressure from the government after the incident forced FIFF's Committee to look for a preferable location outside Beijing; even so, the official website of FIFF states that the suspension was 'a pivotal moment in the festival's history'. It can thus be suggested that, while the suspension decided the festival's migration, it also indicates that adopting an uncompromising stance on censorship deserves to be advertised, especially for a film festival that values independence.

A significant factor to mention is the change of the event's Chinese name from *yingxiang jie* to *ying zhan*, which was made after it moved to Xining. In Chinese, *jie* and *zhan* stand for festival and exhibition, respectively. Lichaa (2017) suggests that the different names reflect the differences in legal status. However, such an explanation fails to note that, according to *Provisions on the Administration of Radio, Film and Television Festivals (Exhibitions) and Program Exchange Activities 2004*, film festivals and exhibitions have the same description in law. The comparison between *jie* and *zhan* only relates to those sponsored or supported by the national media regulator, namely the National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA), that could be called film festivals, such as SIFF, BJIFF and HIIFF cited above, whereas others are described as film-themed exhibitions.⁶ Instead of their legal status, the distinction between Chinese cinematic events demonstrated the differing political status.

As far as FIFF is concerned, a less privileged political position is not necessarily bad; on the contrary, it can imply that the control of films and their related activities is less strict. Xining is a remote location. To convince filmmakers that the long trip to the Tibetan plateau is worthwhile, the FIFF Committee deployed three strategies. The first is to include films that have not acquired the 'dragon seal' in the screening program.⁷ As we noted, at the 15th FIFF, only two of the 16 shortlisted

⁵ *Notice of State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television on the Reaffirmation of Film Censorship Principles 2008* was repealed in 2010 and replaced by *Notice of State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television on Further Promoting and Improving Work Related to the Archival Filing of Film Scripts (Abstracts) and Film Censorship 2010*.

⁶ National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA), formerly the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT, 1998–2013) and the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT, 2013–2018).

⁷ The 'dragon seal' (*long biao*) is the seal of approval for public screening in China, and like other opening credits, it will be shown before a film. All the films screened in Chinese theatres have the 'dragon seal' to indicate that the film has been pre-reviewed and approved for screening by the local authorities after it has been released. Even tighter, according to Article 21 of the *Film Industry Promotion Law 2016*, only films with the 'dragon seal' are allowed to participate in film festivals or exhibitions. Indirect censorship also exists.

feature films screened (including documentaries) had a licence during the film festival.⁸ Even though most Chinese cinephiles are aware of censorship rules, the fleeting disappearance of the ‘dragon seal’ allows them to pretend that it may not exist. The second strategy has been to shift the focus of propaganda. Still, at the 2021 FIFF, there was a curation titled ‘Cinema Rewired’ (*gui cheng*). In essence, this catered to the Communist Party’s centenary in the same year, and thus, films that highlight a left-wing political attitude, such as *Eight Thousand Li of Cloud and Moon* (1947), were selected. However, we can observe that the name of the curation programme did not deliver messages strongly related to the CCP but was cleverly packaged as a sheer retrospective of Chinese cinema history. This moderate challenge is appreciated indeed, particularly in the current climate of the Chinese film industry, as the authority’s influence reaches deep into the film industry.⁹

The third strategy was to discursively construct Xining as a utopia for filmmakers. For example, Li Ziwei, one of FIFF’s founders, once described: ‘The air is much thinner up here (in Xining), but then that is like the environment for our filmmakers – resources are scarce, yet there is just enough to survive’ (Shackleton, 2018). Based on its official storytelling, the artistic spirit that FIFF would like to convey is exactly echoed by Xining’s local culture, as shown in the following account:

You can find indigenous people here whose origin cannot be traced. Apart from Han nationality, there are also Hui, Tibetan, and Salar. Huge influence brought by Tibetan Buddhism and Muslim can be noticed in daily life of natives. This profound influence has been well digested by this place and thus permeated in local people’s lives. Known for compatibility and tolerance, Xining and FIRST chimed in easily

The 12th FIFF Handbook, 2018, p. 364

FIFF is keenly aware that people’s certain expectations of Xining can be used to its advantage. Most tellingly, at the 2016 FIFF, screenings and discussions took place on the shore of Qinghai Lake. The lakeside, caravans, camping, open-air screenings, ground seating and films about pilgrimages and ancient prophecies – every detail met people’s original imagination for Xining. To clarify, apart from the above event, the majority of FIFF’s activities, as the following part will discuss, are held in the urban area of Xining, but this precisely strengthens the view mentioned here, that FIFF heightens Xining’s appeal to Chinese filmmakers by employing a modern narrative.

Unfortunately, censorship is a constant spectre in the Chinese film industry. The ‘dragon seal’ is looming, and Xining is no exception. *Parasite* (2019), which had been announced as the closing film of the 13th FIFF, was cancelled due to ‘technical reasons’ (Grogan, 2019). For the same reason, *Ward 11*, *Song Wu* (2021), *Smog Town* (2019), *Mr. Zhang* (2021) and *Singing in the Wilderness* (2021) were removed from the 15th FIFF.¹⁰ The ‘technical reasons’ are an unspoken secret; in other words, the authority rejects the films, either temporarily or permanently.

This section has examined the process of moving the FIFF from

⁸ FIFF does ask filmmakers to apply for screening permission. However, at the 15th FIFF, nominated films were announced on the 26th of June, and the film festival opened a month later then, on the 25th of July. That means, from when the films were nominated until when they were screened at the festival, filmmakers may not have enough time to obtain screening approval. The review application process has two steps. The first is to obtain content approval from the provincial administration. After this, filmmakers need to make a digital cinema distribution master (DCDM), used by China Film Administration (CFA) to impose the second censorship.

⁹ In 2018, particularly, the responsibility of film administration taken by SAPPRT was transferred to the Publicity Department of the Communist Party of China (CPCPD), which is believed to be a signal for more rigorous censorship (Xinhua News Agency, 2018).

¹⁰ The film *Ward 11*, *Song Wei* withdrew from the festival’s competition by itself. However, as it happened just a few days before the film festival, we still believe the power of censorship is not diminished but invisible here.

Beijing to Xining. The FIFF organisers are undoubtedly pleased with the success of the migration. To attract filmmakers and cinephiles to Xining, they rely on the cultural associations that Xining has with cinema, such as freedom and imagination. In general, people tend to look for opportunities that can contribute to the development of the city in places with a high concentration of creative facilities and services, but in the case of the FIFF, actively seeking connections between itself and the location of the event has proven to be more effective. It is also noted that, in this case, governments play a crucial role in defining the relationship between place and industry. The festival moved to Xining, where a more relaxed political environment gave it a chance to re-establish itself.

5. The role of FIFF in Xining’s urban development

Like many other municipalities in the country’s inland, western provinces, Xining has always faced difficulties securing investment through market mechanisms. According to official data, throughout the 1990s, only 0.01% of China’s foreign direct investment went to Qinghai Province (Gaubatz, 2008, p. 185). The number rose to 0.02% in 2020, which was still insignificant (Foreign Investment Administration Department of the Ministry of Commerce, 2021, p. 7). For officials in Xining, when it comes to securing financial investment, a more effective way is to take part in the various national developmental schemes implemented from the top down by the central government to reduce regional inequality. This is a common tool of political governance in China. The central government develops performance indicators against specific development targets for regional governments. Achievement of these targets is rewarded with honorary titles, with regions receiving financial rewards and local officials receiving promotion incentives. The awards given to Xining will be discussed later. Xining’s hosting of the FIFF is an attempt to compete for a place in these redistributive national development plans.

When FIFF was first held in Xining in 2011, its main venue was in the old city next to the Dongguan Mosque, a historical and religious landmark (Figs. 4 and 5). This was chosen based on two perspectives. Firstly, according to the central government’s statement that ‘urbanisation is the only path to modernisation’ (Party Literature Research Centre, 2017, p. 589), Xining’s main priority was urbanisation, and thereby FIFF was organised in the area that needed to be urbanised. In addition, FIFF was mentioned in the government’s annual work report three times from 2012 to 2014. Essential to the effort of Xining was to compete for the title of ‘National Public Culture Service System Demonstration Zone’, which was the project led by the central government to improve people’s cultural needs from 2011. Since then, Xining has expanded westward



Fig. 4. After moving to Xining, FIFF moved twice, from the Central District to the West District, and now it is held in the Haihu New District.



Fig. 5. One of the cinemas offered screenings at the 7th FIFF in 2013 (Photo courtesy of FIFF Committee).

gradually, with the location of the FIFF following suit. Three years later, in 2014, FIFF was held in a newly built pedestrian street in the middle of the city (Fig. 6). The municipal government did not cite FIFF in its periodic report between 2015 and 2016; nevertheless, since the commercial street was underscored to demonstrate its efforts in developing the service sector, FIFF functioned as a complement. The goal for representatives of cultural services remained unchanged, but Xining's new campaign was directed to the highest target set by the central government, namely the building of a 'National Civilised City'. Therefore, it is possible that Xining's growth relied on development schemes, particularly those that reflected the central government's intentions (Grant, 2018).

In 2012, while Haihu New District was still under construction, the Xining government had already proposed to introduce FIFF as a stimulus for the area (Xining Municipal People's Government, 2012). Finally, in 2016, at the suggestion of the Xining government, FIFF moved to the Haihu New District, a new development area 'serving as a window to display the city and create a high-quality urban space' (Qu & Li, 2007). Located in the western part of Xining, Haihu New District has public facilities, including the Qinghai Grand Theatre, Qinghai Science and Technology Museum, Qinghai Sports Centre and several shopping complexes such as Tangdao 637, Wanda Plaza and Wangfujing Mall. There is also a five-star luxury hotel and four multi-screen cinemas. Combining public structures and commercial spaces is a common method for creating new districts in China. According to the local official newspaper, 'Haihu New District is evidently showing the prosperity of



Fig. 6. From 2014 to 2015, FIFF was held in a newly built pedestrian street (Photo courtesy of FIFF Committee).

Xining' (Zhang, 2018).

These facilities, in some ways, meet FIFF's various requirements. Films were screened in three of the four cinemas during the eight-day event; attendees could move quickly between them as they are all within 5–10 min' walking distance. Celebrity directors and actors stayed in one of the only two five-star hotels in the province, the French hotel chain Sofitel, which offers the same quality of food and wine as in Beijing and Shanghai. At the Tangdao 637 shopping precinct, a bookshop named Geometry hosted small seminars with directors or jury members every day; the bars were rented daily for parties to welcome finalist filmmakers, the press, and other guests, serving the wine sponsored by the Hennessy group. In addition, unlike the halal-based dining in the old city, the new district is occupied by diverse food chains, such as Burger King and China's famous hot pot brand Haidilao. In terms of consumer diversity, Xining offers a similar experience to the big cities of eastern China, if not for the nearby mountains and the occasional passer-by in ethnic dress.

Xining is believed to have benefited from the presence of FIFF. Over the course of the festival, a large screen was installed in the middle of the commercial block. As well as showing nominated films at night, the screen acted as a stage, hosting meet-and-greets with film stars and live performances. While FIFF only lasts a few days in the summer, the local newspaper specifically mentioned the open-air activities to explain why the area could be recognised as a 'National Night Culture Tourism and Consumption Cluster', one of the first in the country (Wu, 2021). FIFF has been brought to the attention of Xining's government again in 2019. Xining intends to use the strong brand recognition attributed to the FIFF to compete for the title 'National Culture Tourism Consumption Pilot City' in 2020 (Xining Municipal People's Government, 2021).

6. Conclusion

As culture has been identified as playing a critical role in economic development, the study of cultural events has gained increasing attention accordingly. Many local governments have developed a strategy based on cultural events to generate advantages (e.g., reputation, diversity) and opportunities to enhance the attractiveness of a particular area. However, while many local governments are actively pursuing this development strategy, there still exist disputes regarding the priority of organising cultural events within different cities.

Our study of FIFF contributes to the ongoing discussion on why and how certain cultural events can be held in particular cities and exert an impact. According to our findings in this study, the creative class plays a significant agency role that needs to be fully considered. In fact, many people visit host cities for the purpose of attending cultural events, which is why the creative class is crucial, as they are responsible for organising such events. As demonstrated in the case of FIFF, it is FIFF's organisers who determine the migration of the film festival and identify and understand why Xining is favourable to the festival. The process challenges conventional perceptions of cultural events and cities, which are typically viewed through the lens of the city. Cultural events are inherently productive and lead to cultural production, rather than merely reconfiguring urban spaces through cultural consumption. A distinct geographical context such as Xining is more important to FIFF because it offers more opportunities for networking and the exchange of ideas, both of which are essential to the production of quality films. Accordingly, the fact that Xining consumes less cinema than Beijing during FIFF is not a major concern.

This study sheds light on the geographical dimension of cultural events. In addition to the creative class and its production network, this geography has also been shaped by different levels of government. Both the central and local governments have influenced FIFF in various ways. Although Xining is not a post-industrial city from an economic perspective, the local government can still take advantage of FIFF. This process illustrates that looking beyond neoliberalism's accumulative logic is necessary; instead, a more contextualised, open-ended

interpretation is always called for when understanding the connection between cultural events and the city.

Funding

This work was supported by Postgraduate Research Scholarship [grant number: PGRSB200602], Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Hui Wang: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Writing – original draft, preparation, Writing – review & editing, Funding acquisition. **Shih-yang Kao:** Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Dr. Yiwen Wang and the two anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments and suggestions on our original manuscript. We have also benefitted from conversations with Dr. Ying-fen Chen and Dr. Shuwei Tsai during the 2022 IGU International Congress. Lastly, we received helpful language supports by Dr. Trevor Mahy at Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University.

References

- Amin, A., & Thrift, N. (2007). Cultural-economy and cities. *Progress in Human Geography*, 31(2), 143–161.
- Caves, R. E. (2000). *Creative industries: Contacts between art and Commerce*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Chen, C., & Wei, L. (2016). *Ten years of FIRST: The transformation and persistence of an independent film festival (FIRST影展十年: 小众影展的蜕变与坚持)*. Available at: http://m.thepaper.cn/renmin_prom.jsp?contid=1505161&from=renmin. (Accessed 20 January 2022).
- China Film Association. (2021). *2021中国电影产业研究报告 (the research report on Chinese film industry)*. Beijing: China Film Press.
- China Film Producers' Association. (2021). *Members*. Available at: <http://chinafilms.net/html/qghy>. (Accessed 7 April 2022).
- Davis, J., & Thornley, A. (2010). Urban regeneration for the London 2012 Olympics: Issues of land acquisition and legacy. *City. Cult. Soc.*, 1(2), 89–98.
- Evans, G. (2001). *Cultural planning: An urban renaissance?* London: Routledge.
- Florida, R. (2014). The creative class and economic development. *Economic Development Quarterly*, 3, 196–205.
- Foreign Investment Administration Department of the Ministry of Commerce. (2021). *Statistical bulletin of FDI in China*. Beijing: Ministry of Commerce of the PRC.
- Ganga, R., Wise, N., & Perić, M. (2021). Exploring implicit and explicit cultural policy dimensions through major-event and neoliberal rhetoric. *City. Cult. Soc.*, 27, Article 10041.
- García, B. (2004). Urban regeneration, arts programming and major events: Glasgow 1990, Sydney 2000 and Barcelona 2004. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 10(1), 103–118.
- Gaubatz, P. (2008). Commercial redevelopment and regional inequality in urban China: Xining's wangfujing? *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 49(2), 180–199.
- Ge, Y. (2017). When capital targets independent film festivals (当资本盯上小众电影节). *China Bus. News.*, 4(August), A09.
- Getz, D. (1991). *Festivals, special events and tourism*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold.
- Grant, A. (2018). Hyperbuilding the civilized city: Ethnicity and marginalization in eastern Tibet. *Critical Asian Studies*, 50(4), 537–555.
- Grogan, B. (2019). *First film festival is giving China's arthouse cinema a platform to shine*. Available at: <https://www.thatsmags.com/china/post/28916/first-film-festival-is-giving-china-s-arthouse-cinema-a-platform-to-shine>. (Accessed 20 January 2022).
- Houdart, S. (2012). A city without citizens: The 2010 Shanghai world expo as a temporary city. *City. Cult. Soc.*, 3(2), 127–134.
- Kana, K. (2012). An experiment in urban regeneration using culture and art in senba, Osaka's historic urban center, with a focus on the regeneration of urban space. *City. Cult. Soc.*, 3(2), 151–163.
- Landry, C. (2000). *The creative city: A toolkit for urban innovators*. London: Comedia.
- Lash, S., & Urry, L. (1994). *Economies of signs and space*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.
- Lichaa, F. (2017). The Beijing independent film festival: Translating the non-profit model into China. In C. Berry, & L. Robinson (Eds.), *Chinese film festivals: Sites of translation* (pp. 101–120). London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Liu, Y., Xia, L., Zhang, B., & Liu, H. (2021). Song wen: The night sky over xining sparkles (宋文: 西宁夜空闪亮). *Condé Nast Traveler*, 106–107 (99; 7 May–7 June).
- Loist, S. (2016). Methods: Introduction. In M. de Valck, B. Kredell, & S. Loist (Eds.), *Film festivals: History, theory, method, practice* (pp. 119–121). Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.
- Martin, D., & Grodach, C. (2020). Placing production in urban cultural policy: The locational patterns of cultural industries and related manufacturing. *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 44(4–5), 567–587.
- National Bureau of Statistics of China. (2019). *China Statistics of yearbook-2019*. Beijing: China Statistics Press.
- Party Literature Research Center. (2017). *The socialism building of China, Xi Jinping (习近平关于社会主义经济建设论述摘编)*. Beijing: Central Party Literature Press.
- Power, D., & Scott, A. J. (2004). *Cultural industries and the production of culture*. New York: Routledge.
- Pratt, A. C. (2008). Creative cities: The cultural industries and the creative class. *Geografiska Annaler Series B Human Geography*, 90(2), 107–117.
- Quinn, B. (2005). Arts festivals and the city. *Urban Studies*, 42(5–6), 927–943.
- Qu, S., & Li, H. (2007). Xining Haihu new district strategic planning (西宁海湖新区概念规划). *Chengshi Guihua Tongxun*, 19(3), 14–16. Available at: <https://www.cnki.com.cn/Article/CJFDTotal-CSGT200719030.htm>. (Accessed 22 March 2022).
- Robinson, J., & Roy, A. (2016). Debate on global urbanisms and the nature of urban theory. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 40(1), 181–186.
- Scott, A. J. (2004). *On Hollywood: The Place, the Industry*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Scott, A. J. (2000). Economic geography the great half-century. *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 24(4), 483–504.
- Sengupta, M. (2016). Non-place, dispossession, and the 2010 commonwealth games: An urban transformation analyzed. *City. Cult. Soc.*, 7(4), 259–266.
- Seo, U. S. (2020). 'Urban regeneration governance, community organizing, and artists' commitment: A case study of seongbuk-dong in seoul' (Vol. 21). City: Culture and Society.
- Shackleton, L. (2018). *FIRST film festival report: An oxygen supply for Chinese indies*. Available at: <https://www.screendaily.com/news/first-film-festival-report-an-oxygen-supply-for-chinese-indies/5131307.article>. (Accessed 21 January 2022).
- Shin, H. B. (2012). Unequal cities of spectacle and mega-events in China. *City*, 16(6), 728–744.
- Shin, H. B. (2014). Urban spatial restructuring, event-led development and scalar politics. *Urban Studies*, 51(14), 2961–2978.
- Shin, H. B., & Li, B. (2013). Whose games? The costs of being "olympic citizens" in Beijing. *Environment and Urbanization*, 25(2), 559–576.
- Teng, Z. (2018). FIRST and xining: How can a film festival affect a city (FIRST与西宁: 一个影展要如何影响一座城市). *The Beijing News*, 3(August), C12.
- Virani, T. E. (2020). *Micro-community engagement and area-based regeneration in east London: The case of Chrisp Street Market*. City: Culture and Society, Article 100345.
- Wang, G. (2020). FIRST's蜕变 (the transformation of FIRST). *Bloomberg BusinessWeek Chinese Edition*, 457(3 August–16 August), 38–40.
- Wu, M. (2021). A place was selected as one of the first national night culture tourism and consumption clusters (我省一地入选首批国家级夜间文旅消费集聚区). *Xihai Metropolis Daily*, 27(October), A07.
- Wu, Y., Li, X., & Lin, G. C. S. (2016). Reproducing the city of the spectacle: Mega-events, local debts, and infrastructure-led urbanization in China. *Cities*, 53, 51–60.
- Xinhua News Agency. (2018). *Deepening the reform of the party and state institutions*. Available at: http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2018-03/21/c_1122570517.htm. (Accessed 20 January 2022).
- Xining Municipal People's Government. (2012). *Government annual work report 2012 (2012年政府工作报告)*. Available at: https://www.xining.gov.cn/zwgk/zfgzbg_84/201202/t20120220_145459.html. (Accessed 20 April 2022).
- Xining Municipal People's Government. (2021). *Government annual work report 2021 (2021年政府工作报告)*. Available at: https://www.xining.gov.cn/zwgk/zfgzbg_84/202103/t20210304_145469.html. (Accessed 20 April 2022).
- Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.
- Zhang, G. (2018). Haihu new district has become a new landmark of xining tourism (海湖新区成西宁旅游新地标). *Xining Evening News*, 15(October), 13.