East Asian Audio-Visual Collaboration and the Global Expansion of Chinese Media

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In recent years, many of the world's leading media producers, screenwriters, technicians and investors, particularly those in the Asia-Pacific region, have been drawn to work in the People's Republic of China (hereafter China or Mainland China). Media projects with a lighter commercial entertainment feel – compared with the heavy propaganda-oriented content of the past – have multiplied, thanks to the Chinese state's newfound willingness to consider collaboration with foreign partners. This is no more evident than in film. Despite their long-standing reputation for rigorous censorship, state policymakers are now encouraging Chinese media entrepreneurs to generate fresh ideas and to develop products that will revitalise the stagnant domestic production sector. It is hoped that an increase in both the quality and quantity of domestic feature films, stimulated by an infusion of creativity and cutting-edge technology from outside the country, will help reverse China's 'cultural trade deficit' (*wenhua maoyi chizi*) (Keane 2007).

This task will not be an easy one. Most feature-length film projects have failed the market test, many others have been overruled by censors before completion, and even more have sunk in the maze of regulations promulgated by the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT, formerly known as the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television, or SARFT). The backdrop to this newfound acceptance of foreign production expertise and technical know-how is the Chinese government's own 'going global campaign' *(zou quchu)*, a move reflecting the determination of domestic media and cultural 'enterprises' to break out of national constraints and win the plaudits of foreign audiences. Sometimes called 'soft power', this marshalling of cultural resources is typically supported by government branding policies, many of which are seen by outsiders as delivering the kiss of death. In other contexts, a number of Confucius Institutes around the world – the Chinese equivalent of Germany's Goethe Institutes – have attracted

negative publicity and claims of interference in academic freedom in Europe and North America (see Hartig 2015).

In the early 1990s, the term 'please come in' (*qing jinlai*) was the forerunner to the nation's 'going out' (circa 2000) – although the invitation to enter was not extended to sensitive areas like media and culture. Fifteen years after China joined the World Trade Organisation, the non-Chinese world still confronts firewalls, censorship and confusing policy pronouncements. Yet as Peter Nolan (2012) observes, while large Chinese firms are beginning to 'go out' with varying degrees of success, global companies are increasing their efforts to break into the lucrative Chinese market. Other commentators such as Yecies (2014) have shown how Chinese film companies are 'going out' by staying home'. The point here is that Chinese media companies are attracting foreign companies to work collaboratively in China, in this way enhancing their prospects of producing content that can reach into world markets and refresh the negative stigma often associated with 'brand China.'

In the past few years, an unprecedented rise in collaborative screen production ventures in areas other than feature film has facilitated the transfer of human capital, technology and knowledge between media entrepreneurs and companies in China, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Australia, and the US. For example, investment and human capital are contributing to the growth of the television, documentary, animation and games sectors. Co-productions, the development of popular television formats, and joint ventures have become common. Transfers of human capital (including media celebrities) are occurring in multiple directions, as well as across regional markets. Much of this change has occurred since 2003 with the signing of the Closer Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) between Mainland China and Hong Kong, which allowed bilateral co-productions to be counted as "domestic" Chinese films, thus increasing Hong Kong producers' access to China's rapidly expanding feature film market. Since then, China has shifted gear to become a 'willing collaborator' with other international partners. A second key moment was the introduction in China of the Administrative Provisions on Internet Audio-Visual Program Services in December 2007 (Zhao and Keane 2013), which forced video content companies (including major players Tudou, Youku, and Sina) to seek out pan-Asian and international partnerships in order to reduce the cost of purchasing original content. In response, many video companies established in-house production capabilities, harnessing talent from within the region to generate 'fashionable' genres, popular formats and celebrity talk shows.

Of course, China was, and still is, a low-cost location for film, TV and the creative industries sector in general. For example, the Hengdian World Studios in Zhejiang province (aka Chinawood), originally established to compete on price, has turned out the bulk of historical dramas and related films made in China since around 2005. Other industry 'bases' are competing for overseas projects as well as domestic productions, including the Beijing CBD International Media Cluster in Chaoyang District, the Huairou Film Base in northern Beijing, and 'nationally accredited' production bases in almost every province. Furthermore, in the online and mobile media sectors, China is host to some of the world's most advanced new platforms and technologies, driven by the ever-expanding coffers of media giants such as Sohu, Youku, Sina Video, Tencent Video, and LeTV and their evolving ecosystems – companies which have successfully captured the world's largest media audience. However, despite these striking developments and innovations, China remains less prominent in scholarly discussion of digital media and the creative industries than its neighbours South Korea (hereafter Korea) and Japan.

This theme issue investigates the significant re-orientation of audio-visual production in East Asia over the last few years brought about by the rise of China, drawing on a three-year Australian Research Council Discovery Project (DP140101643, 2014-2016) with Chief Investigators Michael Keane, Brian Yecies, Terry Flew, and Partner Investigators Anthony Fung and Michael Curtin. We began our project with the proposition that unprecedented change is occurring in East Asian media production. While the 'Sinophone world' – the Chinese Diaspora outside of Greater China (i.e. Mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan) – was the locus of critical analysis in the past, all eyes are now focused squarely on China. We had become aware that flows of knowledge and expertise were becoming as significant as flows of content in the East Asian mediascape. Yet we also knew that this dimension had not been addressed by most scholarship in the field. Accordingly, we argue that conceptual and theoretical frameworks based on cross-border consumption of East Asian content require urgent revision. Media collaborations are changing global media practice and disrupting the text-based paradigm of East Asian media flows. We therefore set out to investigate the variety and kinds of contemporary international collaborations. Among other topics, we considered relevant policy frameworks that impact, positively or negatively, on productions by international partners working in film, television, and online and mobile video

content. The articles in this special issue represent some of the fruits of the ARC Discovery Project.

Against this background, this issue focuses on some of the exciting and important new developments across a range of audio-visual and digital content service sectors including film, television, games and applications in traditional, online and mobile environments. The authors provide case studies from East Asia where companies are relocating to China for a variety of reasons, not just competition on cost. By definition, collaboration implies sharing. Prior to the late 1990s the media industries of East Asian countries, and the wider region, operated on the principle of national sovereignty; most Japanese media products were restricted in Korea [they are still subject to quotas in mainland China but often enter through the black market] (Pang 2009). Due to politically imposed restrictions, the media products of each jurisdiction bore markers of difference, as well as displaying many similar features. As political boundaries relaxed in the late 1990s, trade flourished—in *anime*, *manga*, movies, TV serials, and TV formats (see Black et al 2010; Berry et al 2009). Across Asia, Japanese and Korean media products and celebrities became 'cool' and fashionable; at the same time Taiwan offered a synthesis of Chinese culture with some Japanese elements. However, with practitioners in all East Asian countries (and regions) now working together as willing collaborators, we are seeing a fusion of styles, recognition of the value of pop culture, and with these trends a sharing of regional identity (Chua 2012).

The contributions in this special issue together create a rounded portrait of this new generation of media entrepreneurs in China. Highly creative, they bring a wealth of managerial, consulting and technical skills to their work; their wide-ranging professional expertise includes alternative approaches to human capital management and new ways of solving problems in the international mediasphere. Acting as skilled intermediaries, they are bringing ideas, investment, technology and know-how to both the Asian and global entertainment sectors. For scholars seeking to open up conversations in this area, these developments offer a timely opportunity to gain deeper insights into the globe's largest media playground as Australia and the world moves into the 'Asian Century'.

First, Michael Keane's article focuses on the ways that Chinese television has sought to exploit the advantages of collaboration. He discusses how Chinese media industries have sought to expand into new territories, identifying four mechanisms by which Chinese cultural

and media products are traded and consumed: finished content, co-productions, formats and online platforms. Keane also considers the value of overseas locations for domestic programmes and acquisition of international media assets. The key idea he discusses in regard to China's outward-bound trade mission is know-how. In the world of media production, producers tend to opt for risk avoidance rather than creative exploration. Consequently, Chinese producers, investors and practitioners are deficient in knowledge of international markets and audience perceptions because the government has chosen to intervene, select and guide Chinese products. The author suggests that this situation is gradually changing.

Next, Brian Yecies explores how technicians working in the cinema technology arm of the Korean conglomerate CJ Global are pioneering the diffusion of 4DX motion widescreen cinema exhibition. He analyses the work-flow processes being developed to connect Asian and Hollywood films with local audiences via 4DX motion and environmental special effects, as well as some of the cultural assumptions underlying this new technology. As a case study, this paper investigates how the Korean 4DX team in Beijing is seeking to appeal to Chinese audiences through this innovative process, while assisting CJ Global's expansion across China and the world. This study sheds light on a new type of inconspicuous transnational collaboration that is enabling Korean post-production practitioners to contribute to the expansion of the film industry in China and its integration of technical innovation and ideas from outside the country.

Terry Flew's paper addresses one of the most important concepts in international political economy in recent years – 'soft power'. The 'soft power' thesis (Nye, 2004) proposes that nations acquire global influence not only through formal mechanisms (diplomacy, military power, economic influence), but through informal influences that are primarily cultural, and project ideas and images associated with the nation that shape the thinking of those in other countries. Flew argues that there is a lack of conceptual clarity in the 'soft power' concept as it relates to entertainment media. Here he considers the relevance of 'soft power' discourses to recent debates about media and development strategies devised for the creative industries in East Asia, including China, Japan and South Korea. He also considers the growth in regional co-productions, and what this means for theories of soft power, which are premised on a primarily nation-to-nation projection of cultural influence.

Anthony Fung's article maps and compares the development of various modes of cultural economy in Asia. "Cultural economy" refers to the production, distribution, marketing, value chains, workforce and regulations that drive creative industries, which include games, design, comics, and animation. Based on interviews and empirical studies in China, Japan, Korea, and SE Asian countries in 2012-2014, Fung's paper outlines several alternative routes for development to the type of cultural economy found in the US and UK. He argues that while the top-down, state-driven model of cultural economy has the potential to counter the dominance of Western cultural industries in Asia, the bottom-up entrepreneurship more characteristic of developing states could open up new possibilities for innovation and survival.

Elaine Zhao's contribution examines the recent transformation of the Chinese online video sector, where service providers have shifted their strategic focus from distribution to content production. This process has witnessed cross-border collaboration which is evidenced both in content and talent flows. While many online video platforms have invested significantly in both domestic and overseas copyright, the securing of original content has become a key strategy in countering massive copyright costs and establishing differentiation with respect to competitors. By focusing on the flow of talent from television companies to online video sites, and from across borders to mainland China, Zhao analyses the causes of this cultural migration, the different types of collaboration involved, and the impact on online content, especially with regard to genre. She also discusses the aspirations of Chinese online video platforms to expand into overseas markets. Zhao effectively illustrates the dynamic content and talent flows associated with China's online video companies as they move up the industry value chain.

Michael Curtin argues that market access is becoming the single most significant factor affecting collaborations between Hollywood feature film producers and their Chinese partners. Under China's import quota system, only 34 titles are approved each year; these films are then distributed by the state-run China Film Group, which also controls the release date for each title. The best way for a foreign filmmaker to manage these uncertainties is to fashion a co-production deal with a mainland counterpart such as Dalian Wanda Group – which has now almost completed a huge studio complex in Qingdao, a project that has been greeted with scepticism by industry critics. Curtin assesses the ambitious logic behind this project, situating it in the broader context of the globally networked production infrastructure that has emerged over the past twenty years, one that generally favors Hollywood producers

at the expense of local partners. Despite this situation, he suggests reasons why the Wanda studio may in fact succeed, and why foreign producers are growing ever more willing to collaborate with Chinese partners.

Finally, Weiying Peng focuses on the potential for Sino–Australian film co-productions. She examines the incentives for Australian and Chinese filmmakers to work together, and analyses the challenges involved in formulating a Sino–Australia co-production treaty. She addresses the question of why only a handful of low-profile films have been made after several years of official collaboration. Although the rewards of the Chinese market remain elusive, valuable lessons have been learnt. The two case studies examined in this paper illustrate Australia's junior partnership role in film co-productions with China to date.

The contributions to this special issue on East Asian audio-visual collaboration and the global expansion of Chinese media have only scratched the surface of a complex and engaging story in the making. Chinese cultural goods and services are making greater inroads into world markets. In addition to Chinese aesthetics, philosophy, traditional Chinese medicine, handicrafts, and branded goods, markets are witnessing more 'hybrids'—ostensibly international cultural products, formats, brands, media infrastructure and services that are invested in, owned by, or co-created by Chinese nationals. More Chinese cultural products and brands are co-invested in, and co-produced by 'foreigners'

A vast volume of work remains to be undertaken – for example, on digital media and its social impacts, new information communication tools and the cross-cultural dimensions of social media apps, through to service and infrastructure innovations in the online and wireless/mobile Internet arenas. Other topics include transnational webcomics; political, economic and institutional analysis of the gaming industry; and user-generated content across local social media sharing environments. These are all areas that need further investigation – as is also the case with the transformative roles that Internet giants Baidu, Alibaba, and Tencent (aka BAT), and Dalian Wanda are playing in the development of China's national and international digital media and cultural industries. Together, these established topics and new developments form part of a vital conversation that we hope this special issue of *Media International Australia* will help to catalyse well into the future.

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