

## Article

# Hollywood in the Development of China's Contemporary Cinema

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### Abstract

Since Hollywood re-entered the mainland Chinese film market in 1994, the role it plays in the development of China's contemporary cinema has been a subject drawing considerable research attention within the field of international culture and communication studies. Although the country is now the world's second-largest film market, China's state administration maintains strict control over cultural creation and foreign importation. In this paper, I critically review the history of Hollywood's involvement in the discussions of the transformation of China's cinema culture since 1987. From debates on the implications of Hollywood's interrelationship with Chinese cinema, it is not difficult to acknowledge that theories relating to imperialism and globalization dominate the research discipline at stages when American popular culture has been associated with different positions in China. In addition, conditions of social and material realities during this transition period are augmented to suggest that understandings of Hollywood's influence on China need to expand its cross-cultural reception scenario through investigating the local audience, their consumption and interpretation, in order to make complete "the communication circuit" of such a foreign media (Darnton, 1982).

### Introduction

The past few decades have witnessed the significant transformation of Chinese cinema since the "reform and opening-up". Both numbers of domestic production and box office grosses have been dramatically increasing. China's film business is now worth \$8.6 billion dollars, slightly behind the US as the second largest movie industry in the world (Frater, 2017). The interplay between Chinese cinema and Hollywood has drawn considerable attention in recent film and media studies. As Hollywood has long been blamed for its tendency of "implicating the entire globe" (Wark, 1994, p.15), the debate on the interrelations between national cinemas and Hollywood used to rely on

theories relating to cultural imperialism and globalization. It is assumed that Hollywood's expansion into a local market typically results in the shrinking of the national cinema, as can be seen in the case of France and Japan in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Then what are the distinct cultural meanings of Hollywood's presence in mainland China after it had been blocked for more than 40 years?<sup>1</sup> In other words, what has been argued through examining the roles Hollywood played in the development of China's cultural industry and indigenous film market within the past 25 years?

In this paper, I refer to materials in both the Mandarin and English languages from sources including publications, dissertations, government documents, news reports, et cetera, in order to review the examinations of the interplay between Hollywood and Chinese cinema in the contemporary era. The discussions on such a cross-cultural communication case demonstrate that understandings of the transformation of China's national cinema and its encounter with Hollywood are inseparable. In addition, I suggest that future studies on China's cinematic culture in relation to Hollywood ought to incorporate the local people and their reception of those popular American feature films. People's cultural behavior, in terms of how they make sense and make use of foreign media products, can add layers to the comprehension of the interrelations between audiences and the kind of media culture they are part of.

### **National cinema and the importation of *da'pian*: 1987~1994**

Hollywood movies are widely received across the globe, but the meaning of Hollywood cinema varies from country to country. Just as Ang (1996) has claimed, "global media do affect, but cannot control local meanings" (p.151). It is necessary to be aware of the particular circumstance under which Hollywood (re-)entered contemporary China's cinematic environment. National cinema in China had been serving as merely a means of political and ideological propaganda for decades. Both production and distribution of movies were strictly controlled by the state government. However, after the Communist Party introduced the "opening-up" program in 1978, economic and institutional reform promoted *commercialization* and *consumerism* across the country. Since the late 1980s, cinematic culture in China had been highly fragmented.

After Zhang Yimou was awarded a Golden Bear at the 38<sup>th</sup> Berlin International Film Festival for his directorial debut *Red Sorghum* (1987), Chinese cinema was brought under the spotlight of world attention. This resulted in ample foreign capital flooding towards the Fifth Generation of Chinese filmmakers, who in the main represented the first batch of graduates from Beijing Film Academy since the Cultural Revolution. Without the restriction of a planned-economic system, the Fifth Generation soon began to build their reputation among international film festivals. Again, Zhang's *Ju Dou* (1990) premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival and was nominated for both the Palme d'Or at the 43<sup>rd</sup> Cannes Film Festival and Best Foreign Language Film at the 63<sup>rd</sup> Academy Awards. In the following, *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991) won Zhang Yimou a Silver

Lion at the 48<sup>th</sup> Venice International Film Festival and *The Story of Qiu Ju* (Zhang, 1992) won him a Golden Lion the next year. In addition, Chen Kaige's *Farewell My Concubine* (1993) was awarded the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival in 1994. And female director Li Shaohong's *Blush* (1995) was awarded a Silver Bear at the 45<sup>th</sup> Berlin International Film Festival. Along with other directors, such as Tian Zhuangzhuang and Zhang Junzhao, the Fifth Generation, representing the so-called Chinese cinema, were noticeable for the unique subject of cultural reflection in their works. They tactically evaded politically sensitive issues and entered the West with a Chinese spectacle that had been kept hidden for so long (Dai, 1999; Rao, 2009). Highly evaluated overseas, these films only attracted local audiences through intense promotion based on the "high level" of the creative accomplishment consolidated by their status in the international cinematic scenario. In the end, the box office performances of these movies in the domestic market were far from satisfying.<sup>2</sup>

In contrast, productions aiming at the local people were in the predicament of balancing between self-expression and audience appreciation, between art aesthetics and box office performance. Without the protection of a well-established planned-economy, state-owned film producing studios were suffering profit decline. Until 1989, one-third of the national studios were in debt.<sup>3</sup> Chinese filmmakers, exposed to market regulation for the first time, began to produce *yule'pian*<sup>4</sup> in order to satisfy audiences' cultural demand. As a matter of fact, around 70% of the total productions in 1989 were entertainment films and they achieved the highest attendance figures. They became much more attractive than the ideologically monotonous films that served for mere propaganda purpose in that entertainment films captured variations in the lives of ordinary people in such an era of historical changes. Amongst, cinematic adaptations of famous writer Wang Shuo's novels were the most popular ones. For example, *The Troubleshooters* (Mi, 1989) was adapted from Wang's work of the same title. It was about three young men and their surreal company in its efforts to help clients with all kinds of unusual requests, including going on an undesirable date, arguing with the wife, and awarding someone who pretended to be a novelist. By calling attention to marginalized social groups, the film was well received due to its hilarious dialogues and unexpected plots which echoed the very moment when they were produced.

Under such circumstance, comments on the future of Chinese cinema in the late 1980s polarized: while some advocated a complete profit-orientation so as to match with the market economy model, others designated that the highest value of a film art is in its cultural quality. In spite of such disagreements, China's film policy at that time kept prioritizing "cinema as an ideological apparatus more than as a commercial enterprise" (Chu, 2002, p.47). In 1987, the state administration formulated *zhu'xuanlv dianying*<sup>5</sup> as an exceptional genre. Celebrating CPC's socialist value, main melody films were either about significant historical events, such as *The Birth of New China* (Li & Xiao, 1989), and *Decisive Engagement: Beijing Tianjin Campaign* (Li & Wei, 1992),<sup>6</sup> or about esteemed first-generation Party members, such as *Zhou Enlai* (Ding, 1992). Subsidized by

both MRFT<sup>7</sup> and the Ministry of Finance, main melody films were not only supported by the government financially, but also heavily publicized throughout the press and broadcasting media. Box office revenue of a main melody film was mostly assured by group ticket sales purchased by then state-owned enterprises. Employees were advised to go watch such films. Nonetheless, very few main melody films (one exception was *The Birth of New China* with a box office record of more than 30 million yuan) were able to draw people's attention back to the theater. Attendance figure thus continued declining in the early 1990s.

In order to further restructure China's film business, MRFT initiated a few more sets of re-configurations in the early 1990s. For example, ticket prices were no longer fixed under the central control but adjusted by regional and local government according to market demand and living standards in different areas. In the meanwhile, the central administration also put many efforts into promoting the shareholding system reform of state-owned film distributors. In 1993, MRFT issued *Document No.3*, claiming that domestic film studios were able to directly make contact with provincial-level distributors without the interference of CFC.<sup>8</sup> This brought CFC's absolute long-term monopoly on distribution for all feature films in China to an end. In the following year of 1994, the "opening-up" policy finally arrived in the film sector. It was announced, during the annual national film distribution and exhibition convention, that China Film<sup>9</sup> was to import and distribute "excellent" foreign films that "basically reflect the finest global cultural achievements and represent the latest artistic and technological accomplishments in contemporary world cinema" (as cited in Rao, 2009, p.462). A quota of ten imported foreign films per year was initiated and the box office revenues were to be shared between foreign studios and Chinese distributors. Although representatives from China Film emphasized that films were to be imported for excellence in "artistic and technological accomplishments", not in "box office grosses", the audiences still labeled them as Hollywood blockbusters and *da'pian*<sup>10</sup> became a popular term that both the public and the industry preferred. Thus entered *the wolf*<sup>11</sup>, in an era when Chinese cinema, from production to distribution to exhibition, was in a difficult situation in which the process of reform was full of uncertainties. As a consequence, Chinese cinema was unable to attain self-expression autonomously, incompetent to function as a sustainable system, and most importantly, failed to maintain its audiences compared to other forms of entertainment and leisure.

In November 1994, *The Fugitive* (Davis, 1993) became the first imported *da'pian* under the agreement of revenue-sharing. It is a clichéd thriller about how a white middle-class surgeon, who is convicted of first-degree murder of his beloved wife, fights against the injustice of law enforcement and searches for the real killer to clear his name. Starring Harrison Ford and Tommy Lee Jones, *The Fugitive* was US third most-grossed movie in 1993. It premiered in six selected cities in China (Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, Chongqing, Zhengzhou, and Guangzhou), and became an event-film with a box office record of 25 million yuan. For Chinese audiences, what *The Fugitive* brought with it was not only an opportunity to "integrate into the global community" but also a

sense of light “amusement” that had been difficult to obtain from China's propaganda cinema for a long time. This sense of “amusement” was seen in the film's universal theme of justice and love, its attractive plot as the protagonist fought as an outlaw, and the intense publicity carried out widespread across urban areas in China.

## **Cinematic Culture in the transition period: 1995-2012**

With the importation of American *da'pian*, Hollywood became a particular ingredient in China's cinema culture. At the beginning when imported blockbusters dominated China's box office, regulations and policies were issued to limit Hollywood's influence and to encourage domestic reform. After joining the World Trade Organization, China's filmed entertainment business developed in all sectors from production to distribution and exhibition. However, Chinese movie-viewers were in such a situation where identities conveyed through contemporary national cinema were fragmented and consuming practices in the stage of deregulation were diverse. Accordingly, the way Hollywood films and American culture were received and perceived in the Chinese context changes as the Sino-US cinematic relationship changes.

### **I. Transformation in the pre-WTO era**

In 1995, six more “wolves” came to carve up China's film market, including Michael Bay's action/comedy *Bad Boys* (1995), Bruce Willis' action sequel *Die Hard with a Vengeance* (McTiernan, 1995), winner of the Academy Award Best Picture *Forrest Gump* (Zemeckis, 1994), Disney's best-selling cartoon *The Lion King* (Minkoff & Allers, 1994), all-star spy feature *True Lies* (Cameron, 1994), and *The Speed* (de Bont, 1994), a crime/disaster starred Keanu Reeves, whose name would become very familiar to many Chinese movie-goers since then due to his overwhelmingly publicized Chinese-related ethnicity. All of them appeared on the annual list of top 10 grossed movies in the US. It seemed that, despite China Film's defense based on its definition of “excellence”, these imported American films fully met the public's expectation of *da'pian*.

A total number of 146 films were made in China in 1995, yet the six Hollywood imports made up more than half of China's overall box office revenue. This led to even more heated discussion on the survival of domestic cinema under the threat of American *da'pian*. Including Dai, cultural protectionists voiced their opinions for proper countermeasures in reaction to the Hollywood invasion. Accordingly, state administration announced several policies following the quota-system. For instance, annual imported foreign films (including those under the agreement of both revenue-sharing and flat fee) must not outnumber domestic productions, and screening of imported foreign films must not account for more than one-third of a movie theater's total screening hours. Likewise, MRFT issued *Document No. 538* in 1997, marking the end of the state-owned studios' monopoly on film production in China. Under the new regulations, qualified companies,

enterprises, and other economic organizations could apply for “Permit for Film Production (for a single film)”. In contrast to the conservatives, Chinese filmmakers and industry professionals generally welcomed such a more permissive environment for cinematic creation. They believed that competition between the two cinemas was inevitable, and therefore it was able to accelerate marketization in the film business as well as technical innovation in filmmaking (Rao, 2009). In spite of all these efforts, domestic filmmaking during those years did not suggest an auspicious future and Hollywood blockbusters maintained its domination of China’s film market.<sup>12</sup> In Dai’s interpretation of Hollywood’s popularity in China before the turn of the century, Chinese audiences were immersed into the dream world of American *da’pian* due to the international tendency of globalization, the allure of getting connected with the world (1999). That is to say, they enjoyed Hollywood blockbusters because it satisfied their “eagerness for the West” (Dai, 1999, p.404). The imported *da’pian* to Chinese people is exactly what movies of the Fifth Generation to the West: a spectacle that had been kept away for so long.

However, it would be unfair to conclude that Hollywood blockbusters were without connotation in Chinese cinema. Unsurprisingly, the high production values of Hollywood cinema increased Chinese audience’s expectations regarding domestic productions. While films such as *Titanic* (Cameron, 1997) and *The Lost World: Jurassic Park* (Spielberg, 1997) became extremely successful, Chinese filmmakers realized the box office return of visual spectacles and effects, and as a consequence, a few main melodies in the late 1990s took advantage of particular landscapes in different areas of China in order to incorporate such a perspective (Chu, 2002). *Red River Valley* (Feng X. [Xiaoning], 1996) was shot in Tibet and unstinting in presenting the region’s natural scenery. The production team of *Heart of China* (Feng X. [Xiaoning], 1999) went to a small county in Shanxi province to shoot Hukou Waterfall, the largest waterfall on the Yellow River in China, as the background of major film scenes. In some other cases that inspired by films such as *Forrest Gump* (Zemeckis, 1994), main melody films intended to “close the gap between heroes and ordinary people” (Wan & Kraus, 2002, p.429) so as to balance between Party’s requirement and people’s demand. Previously devoted to depicting significant historical figures or primary Party members, main melody biographies in the past had been deifying heroes into highly moralized models. In contrast, upgraded examples preferred common leaders on a regional or grass-roots level as the protagonists, and the stories did not only focus on their public servant responsibilities but also on their daily roles as husbands/wives, fathers/mothers, and friends. Rao (1999) described these *jingpin dianying*<sup>13</sup> in the new era as: flexible in the function of propaganda and education, having market potential, as well as embodying Chinese traditions and reflecting people’s everyday lives.

Under such circumstances, the importation of Hollywood feature films, it had been concluded, offered Chinese cinema both opportunities and threats at this early stage (Chu, 2002; Wan & Kraus, 2002; Wang, 2006; Rao, 2009; Wan, 2011). As discussed above, Hollywood’s domination of

China's film market was concerning, and the Chinese government had been carefully dealing with it since the beginning, initiating a series of counter-hegemony strategies. In the meanwhile, encouraging foreign and non-state investment in filmmaking to stimulate innovative creations was a necessary measure as the Film Bureau kept pushing industry reform toward marketization. The impact of Hollywood's expansion, in this pre-WTO period, was primarily explored through the changes in national cinema production practices. Domestic production began to undergo a series of transformations where the idea of *cinema as an entertainment commodity* (as opposed to the previously dominant ideology of *cinema as a mere propaganda tool*) continued to be strengthened.

Discussions as such failed to take into consideration the reception of Hollywood in people's everyday lives, especially outside the movie theaters. What also characterized Chinese society since the early 1990s was the problems of smuggled laser copies and illegal videotapes. The increasing popularity of video halls<sup>14</sup> and VHS during this period had gradually increased film consumption, but unfortunately stimulated the prosperity of the black market. As calculated by industry professionals, the sales volume of a pirated American feature film could reach over 5 million copies (Rao, 2009). Thus in 1995, the Ministry of Culture and the MRFT had jointly issued a few notes to regulate video hall business, according to which non-registered screening enterprises were to be closed. Despite the effort that had been put at both the state and regional levels, piracy continued to find its place in the contemporary media environment in China. In an anti-piracy drive in 2000, SARFT and the Ministry of Culture seized illegal copies of more than 540 different movies, many of which were foreign films from Hollywood and Hong Kong. Several reasons can explain the severe piracy issue of foreign cultural products in China at that time: unpleasant and underdeveloped conditions of movie theaters drove audiences away; low quality and declining numbers of domestic filmmaking turned Chinese audiences to sources from the outside; lack of regulation on intellectual properties spurred the new business in the grey zone. As a result, articulating Hollywood's involvement in the discussion of the development of contemporary Chinese cinema only from its imperialist feature seems too one-sided a story to fully make sense of its implications in the mainland.

## II. Transformation in the post-WTO era

China's participation in global cultural governance was deepened after its accession to the WTO. In accordance with the Sino-US bilateral agreement, China Film, since 2002, was to increase the annual importation quota to at least 20 foreign films under a revenue-sharing agreement, plus 20-50 titles under a flat-fee contract. Even though a small number of imported Hollywood blockbusters still managed to occupy nearly half of China's box office, a fever of producing domestic mega-films, initiated in this period, seemed to be able to cast light on the future of Chinese cinema. Zhang Yimou's *Hero* (2002) exemplified what a successful Chinese mega-production could look like. With a budget of \$30 million dollars, *Hero* featured a group of celebrities



including award-winning Hong Kong actor Tony Leung and actress Maggie Cheung, martial arts stars Jet Li and Donnie Yen, and famous mainland performers Chen Daoming and Zhang Ziyi. Based on the famous story of Jing Ke's assassination attempt on Qin Shi Huang, founder of the Qin Dynasty and the first emperor of a united ancient China, this martial arts epic, with its outstanding visual display and action performance, broke the record with a total box office receipts of 250 million yuan in 2002. The number one imported foreign film of that year, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (Columbus, 2001), was only able to generate 59 million yuan in spite of the fact that the book series also had a fair fan base in China. As a matter of fact, a series of domestic mega-productions, replicating the Hollywood model of the "high-concept", had considerably outperformed the imported ones since 2002. The refinement of the sense of *commercialism* and *entertainment* within these films was regarded as one of the clearest mutations in Chinese cinema under the influence of Hollywood *da'pian*.

Year	Domestic No.1	B.O.	Imported No.1	B.O.
2002	Hero (Ying xiong)	250	Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone	59
2003	Cell Phone (Shou ji)	56	Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets	52
2004	House of Flying Daggers (Shi mian mai fu)	153	The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King	86.33
2005	The Promise (Wu ji)	175	Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire	93.77
2006	Curse of the Golden Flower (Man cheng jin dai huang jin jia)	291	The Da Vinci Code	105.83

Source: China Film Yearbook (B.O. in million yuan)

In fact, Miramax invested in the co-production of Zhang's *Hero*, and this is not a single case for Hollywood to collaborate with the local. Many American studios had opened their branch offices in Asia in the early 1990s so as to take advantage of the growing market of the Far East. Columbia Pictures co-produced Feng Xiaogang's black comedy *The Big Shot's Funeral* (2001) and He Ping's martial arts epic *Warriors of Heaven and Earth* (2003). Universal partnered with Beijing Film Studio in the production of *Pavilion of Women* (Yim, 2001), a romance drama set in the 1930s China. Most of the co-production projects during this period were created by Chinese filmmakers and shot domestically, only co-financed by Hollywood. They diverged in genres, but were unified in terms of huge producing budget, all-star casts and crews (many of these films were played by both Western and Chinese actors, for example, Donald Sutherland guest starred in *The Big Shot's Funeral*, Willem Dafoe led *Pavilion of Women*), spectacle visual effects, and enormous releasing publicities.

Why Hollywood became hesitated in self-producing movies inspired by Chinese cultures is probably because of *Mulan* (Bancroft & Cook, 1997), an animated musical comedy with which Disney offered Chinese audiences friendship. The film is based on the story of an actual historic figure, one of the most popular female warriors in ancient China, Hua Mulan. Despite the effort Disney had put in researching the traditions and histories of the Northern and Southern dynasties,



the period in which this legendary woman lived, as well as various marketing campaigns before its release in the local area, *Mulan* was still considered “Americanized or Disneyised” and failed to “resonate culturally with the local audience” (Wang, 2006, p.56). To Disney’s disappointment, the film merely grossed 11.17 million yuan in China. The most successful animation of the year 1999, *Lotus Lantern* (Chang, 1999), was produced domestically and earned more than 25 million yuan.<sup>15</sup>

Under such circumstances, was Chinese cinema still “the kind of cultural consolidation threatened by globalization” (United Nation, 2006)? It seems that the “imperialist” Hollywood did not render Chinese cinema into a duplication, nor did it homogenize the Chinese audience’s tastes towards the Americans’. Nevertheless, “elements of commercialism” (p.4), in terms of celebrating high production budget and economic profits, were seen as the threatening influence that Hollywood blockbusters had on China’s cinematic culture, and correspondingly the national cultural identity (Wang, 2006). *Hero*, in such a point of view, represented *transnationalism*, and was treated as a cultural authenticity hazard. In the end, hopes for the autonomy of Chinese national cinema remained in protection policies (for instance, the importation quota system), and natural barriers of cultural discount from the receiving end (as seen in the case of *Mulan* and *Lotus Lantern*) (Wang, 2006).

When official policy tried to merge mega-production and main melody, cultural identities demonstrated through national cinema seemed highly fragmented (Davis D. W., 2010). The state still sponsored propaganda films, but those that did stand out in the market, such as *Aftershock* (Feng X. [Xiaogang], 2010) and *Sacrifice* (Chen, 2010)<sup>16</sup>, had strengthened their cinematic values via dramatic expressions and improved spectacles. Hence the *transnational* transformation of Chinese cinema was also considered as a cultural policy in an effort to resolve its own cinematic modernity (Su 2009). The kind of Hollywood blockbusters dominating China’s film market at this moment included fantasy franchises such as *Harry Potter*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *Pirates of the Caribbean*, comic adaptation superheroes such as *Superman*, *X-men*, and *Spider-Man*, family-friendly cartoons such as *Chicken Run*, *Shrek*, and *Finding Nemo*, et cetera. These movies, though suffering cultural distance, did offer entertaining pleasures to the people, but they merely “served as a reference” (Su, 2009, p.156) in contrast to a disorientated Chinese cinema. Accordingly, the implication of Hollywood in the Chinese context has been investigated as a site offering Chinese people alternative reading positions to negotiate their own modernization and national identity (Su, 2011).

The fever of domestic mega-production and foreign collaboration in this post-WTO era should not be isolated from the boom of China’s filmed entertainment business, in which deregulation in the distribution and exhibition system played a crucial role. As I have mentioned, China further opened its door after joining the WTO. Along with more American blockbusters came the comprehensive concept of a modern motion picture industry. In the past, traditional Chinese movie theaters, following the Soviet model, were mostly under regional administrative division. A single

movie had to pass through CFC, provincial film companies, regional film companies, and/or local film companies, before it reached the cinema. While state administration kept restraining foreign investment in the business of film distribution and exhibition, the urge to develop China's own theater chains as a way to overcome such inefficiency in the distributing system was on schedule (*Document No.320*, 2000; *Document No.1519*, 2001). Consequently, the exhibition sector attracted considerable investment to build modern cineplexes (Lu, 2016). In 2003, there were about 1,106 movie theaters with 2,197 film screens in the urban areas of China, a frustrating situation with more than 100 thousand people per screen (Rao, 2009). Within 10 years, the number increased to 4,583 cinemas with 18,195 screens overall.<sup>17</sup> These new leisure spots, with a fair proportion of multiplexes equipped with 3D and digital screening projectors, were aimed more at commercial entertainment productions than art-house movies.

Moreover, the distinctive progress of Chinese cinema's marketization can also be seen in the diversification of screening slots, though not without restrictions. Suppression of foreign release could be observed in various cases at sensitive times such as the National Day on October 1<sup>st</sup> or CPC Founding Day on July 1<sup>st</sup>. Similar to the US, summer in China is also one of the targeting seasons for blockbusters because students, the major frequent movie-goers, are free from school. While most of Hollywood films imported in China under the revenue-sharing agreement were released simultaneously with the original in the US, quite a few movies, such as *Shrek 2* (Adamson, Asbury, & Vernon, 2004) and *War of the Worlds* (Spielberg, 2005), had been postponed when a domestic mega-production or main melody was to be released during the same period.<sup>18</sup> Another attractive releasing slot in China is the holiday of the New Year. January 1<sup>st</sup> is normally treated as a "Western" new year, because the Spring Festival is the most important celebration in China, a national holiday with at least seven days off work. Some Chinese filmmakers, such as Feng Xiaogang who made his reputation with black comedies including *The Dream Factory* (1997) and *Be There or Be Square* (1998), are traditionally famous for making *hesui'pian*.<sup>19</sup> While foreign films were able to get released in China in January, very few managed to hit the big screen during the Chinese New Year (which is normally in February, according to the lunar calendar).

The release gap for Hollywood films between US and China had created room for illegal digital copies and internet downloads, which, as a result, worsened the piracy issue in China. But that is not the only reason. China's strict control over cultural creation and foreign importation had forced people to search for other sources in order to satisfy their cultural demand. Moving away from treating piracy as an ethical issue, it was simply one way for the audiences to consume globally diffused filmic contents (Pang, 2004). As video halls were disappearing, DVD rental shops became increasingly popular. It is worth noticing that, during the transition period, film ticket price in China raised dramatically from around 10 yuan in the late 1990s to an average of 35 yuan in 2009.<sup>20</sup> For many audiences, especially the young generation, renting or purchasing pirated digital copies was more affordable than going to the cinema. As computers and laptops later became a

household necessity, enjoying filmed entertainment as a daily activity shifted from the big screen to the small one. The beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century was hence seen as a very intricate moment of illegal video consumption in the media history of China. The crucial relationships between global, national, and local forces behind the piracy issue in China, for Wang and Zhu (2003), highlighted the problem that had been often overlooked in global cinema. Under such circumstances, again, examination of Hollywood's involvement in the discussion of contemporary Chinese cinema should not have ignored its presence in people's everyday life. When Chinese audience's consumption of Hollywood films was far bigger than imagined, meanings of the cultural reception of such a foreign media ought to take into account audience's consumption and interpretation.

### China's rising awareness of culture as soft power: 2013 onward

Gradually as China moves towards the center of the global economy, it is necessary for the country to further fulfill its obligation under WTO guidelines. In 2012, China agreed to raise the annual import quota to 34 foreign films under a revenue-sharing agreement, 14 of which were to be dedicated to special releasing such 3D or IMAX. Undoubtedly, "it is impossible for China to shut the door that has already been opened" (Gardels & Medavoy, 2015, p.6). The country is now equipped with more than 50,000 screens and with a total market value of 55.9 billion yuan.<sup>21</sup> China's own mega-productions have been improved and the overall performance of domestic films is getting better than their foreign counterparts.

Year	Total B.O. of Chinese Films	Total B.O. of Foreign Films
2013	12.8	9.0
2014	16.2	13.5
2015	27.2	16.7
2016	26.7	19.0
2017	30.1	25.8

Source: entgroup.cn (B.O. in billion yuan)

Nowadays, Hollywood actively seeks collaborating opportunities with Chinese filmmakers because being labeled as a "co-producer" would grant American studios a higher share of box office sales from China. Yet cinematic co-operation has become increasingly complex due to the state administration's non-transparent and ever-changing censorship on cultural productions (Peng, 2016; Kokas, 2017). To put up with the second best, Hollywood is now trying to lure the local audiences by adding popular Chinese symbols in the films. However, the outcomes are hard to predict. The *Kung Fu Panda* series succeeded both in the East and the West, earning both positive word-of-mouth and satisfying box office revenues; on the contrary, the edited-for-China versions of *Looper* (Johnson, 2012) and *Iron Man 3* (Black, 2013) not only failed to be released as a "co-production" but were also severely criticized by Chinese local media and audiences.

A report from the US-China Economic and Security Review of Commission elucidated that

Hollywood's self-censorship to appeal to China's state government in order to secure a releasing spot in the country may have an impact on the world perception of the country, which only proved China's increasing chilling influence within the global cultural governance (O'Connor & Armstrong, 2015). Such a phenomenon corresponds with the persistence of the CPC's stance that "art and literature are to be subordinate to politics" (Chin, 2015). China's rising awareness of soft power as a key element in the global competition of cultural governance can be observed in many areas, including Beijing's hosting of the 2008 Summer Olympic, the prosperity of Chinatown worldwide, and the popularity of Chinese television series among pan-Asian area in recent years. Joseph Nye noted "the rise of China's soft power" as early as in 2005. However, Chinese cinema might not be entering the realm of world popular culture as effectively as expected. Hollywood's dominance of the global cultural consumption is credited to the triumph of international marketing supported by its exceedingly institutionalized and industrialized producing system, as well as the success of global distribution secured by (neo)liberalism and mercantilism in international trade. Referring to this manifestation, Wanda Group purchased AMC theater chain in 2012 and Legendary Entertainment in 2016. Zhang Yimou's fantasy epic *Great Wall* (2016) is the director's first English-language film co-produced by Legendary East and China Film Group. The film was released worldwide in December 2016 but failed to satisfy China's ambition to compete with Hollywood mega-productions on a global level, causing the studios to lose at least 517 million yuan (about \$75 million dollars). Although it becomes unclear whether or not the relationship between Hollywood and the US administration can serve as a reference for China, deploying cinema as an effort to re-shape the circulation of cultural resources in the international affairs is surely on its national agenda (Vlassis, 2016).

### **Where is the Audience?**

Tracing through the history of the interplay between Hollywood and Chinese cinema, previous research demonstrates the implications of Hollywood according to different stages in the development of China's own filmed entertainment business. Popular American feature films were brought back to mainland China in the late 1990s in order to reactivate a declining market. They did attract audiences, but the reception of Hollywood cinema in China also indicated complex issues. On its way to modernization and marketization, Chinese cinema treated Hollywood as a threat, occupying domestic film market and influencing national cinema and its identities. Hollywood model also served as a reference, which supposed to help China move toward a major soft power role in the global cultural arena. As Hollywood fits in different positions in Chinese cinematic culture, not considering the local audiences leaves the "communication circuit" (Darnton, 1982, p.68) incomplete.

There are very few studies that have paid attention to the actual local audience, and those

mostly in business disciplines. Empirical studies aiming to discover the differences in audiences' expectations and satisfactions have reaffirmed issues concerning cultural homogeneity and heterogeneity under globalization. Although personal, social, and cultural differences still play their roles, Hollywood is observed to succeed in converging Chinese and American audiences' appreciation of blockbusters through formulated promotion strategies and unified franchise productions (Sussan & Chinta, 2016). On the other hand, Chinese consumers diverge from their American counterparts regarding the acceptance of US product placements in popular cinema (McKechnie & Zhou, 2003). It appears that the connotative meaning of images and messages in Hollywood cinema has its limitation in promoting a general culture of Americanness.

In that case, should we attribute this "limitation" to the ineffectiveness of Hollywood hegemony, or the effectiveness of China's counter-hegemony?

When *Titanic* set China's box office record with a total revenue of 3600 million yuan in 1998, it accounted for one-fifth of the country's overall yearly grosses. During a severe period when the number of China's annual production of feature films fell under 100 and when Chinese films were criticized for their low quality, it was readily recognized that the epic scenery constructed by then the most up-to-date filmmaking technology and a seemingly universal theme of love and life in most Hollywood blockbusters contributed to the Chinese audience's viewing pleasure the most. When posters of *Titanic* appeared in Zhang Yimou's *The Road Home* (1999), readings of such a symbolic representation were required to concern more about the penetration of foreign media into the process of popular cultural making in China (Wan & Kraus, 2002; Wang, 2006; Dillion, 2015). Dai's argument that the elements of globalization incorporated in *Titanic* were crucial in audience's appreciation of the movie stopped at the level of a text/audience encounter. What it left behind are "general cultural negotiations and contestations (Ang, 1996, p.137)" articulated through different meanings given to *Titanic* by the local audiences.

In another case, Hollywood franchise such as *Star Wars* and *The Lord of the Rings* seemed to be under-achieving in the Chinese market. When these Hollywood mega-productions did not achieve a box office performance as good as expected, they were usually believed to reflected "a palpable decline in their overall popularity among the Chinese audiences" (Wang, 2006, p.128). Accordingly, Wang argued that American fantasy and sci-fi experienced significant cultural discount due to distinct viewing tastes and preferences between the audiences. Such a quick conclusion largely neglected the reality of specific material and social conditions in Chinese society. Even before Hollywood entered China in 1994, penetration of non-resident cultural products had always been on a larger scale due to smugglings of laser copies and illegal videotapes. Regulations concerning the business of video halls and circulation of disk copies in a very early era only proved how severe the problem was. After joining the WTO, China's state government teamed with Hollywood in an effort to resolve the piracy issue. However, development in new media technologies benefited international textual poachers as much as, if no more than, media producers.

Widely accepted yet mostly overlooked, media piracy has made for an increasingly connected world culture in which screen texts help to win over “previously untouched viewers” (Miller, 2007, p.4). That being the case, when *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (Jackson, 2003) was released in China in 2004 with a ticket price more than doubled the usual to 80 yuan, an illegal DVD copy of 10 yuan would be without a doubt more attractive to young audiences. Under such circumstance, underperformed box office alone is not enough to claim audiences “limited level of receptiveness” (Wang, 2006, p.159) for foreign cultural products. In other words, just because certain receiving experiences are hard to trace through available official records does not mean they should be ignored. Audience research can serve to close the gap and explain the cultural significance of those reception practices.

Last but not least, a struggle for identities as demonstrated in the literature concerning China’s reception of Hollywood is inevitable in cultural and international communication studies. A commercialized Chinese cinema culture, as well as Hollywood’s increasing incorporation of Chinese cultural elements in recent years, is the consequence of the interaction of both global and local developments. As China steadily proceeded from the periphery to the center of global modernization, *how*, rather than *what*, becomes the main concern regarding the essence of the construction of cultural identity. In that sense, a change in the Chinese audience’s attitudes towards *Hero* after it was nominated Best Foreign Picture at the Oscar and was well received in the US makes transnational cinema a site of intense struggle. In the same sense, while *Mulan* and the *Kung Fu Panda* series both borrowed cultural legacies from China, audience’s different perceptions in relation to their recognition of “cultural appropriation” suggest different strategies of identity construction. Therefore, it is the audience who link the very nature of foreign media to its specific temporal moment in a specific local context. If culture is to be understood in relation to people’s way of life, their moral and social values, and their perceptions of themselves, either as cultural individuals or national citizens, reception studies at a cross-cultural level ought to involve a specific encounter with the real people, whether they are conceived as viewers, users, consumers, or interpreters.

In summary, Hollywood and its implications have been involved in the discussion of contemporary Chinese cinema mostly from an institutional and sociological perspective. Whether it is seen as an adversary or ally, there is a blank space from the audience perspective of understanding the reception of Hollywood in China. Future works should take into account local people and their cultural practice in relation to Hollywood cinema to make complete the “communication circuit”.

### **Filmography**

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## Endnotes

- 1 Shortly before the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, there had already been voices calling for the elimination of Hollywood cinema in China. On September 21<sup>st</sup>, 1949, the *People's Daily (Remin Ribao)* published an article in order to accelerate the banning of American and British produced foreign films in Shanghai, the business center for promotion and distribution of Hollywood cinema in China in that period. In the article, American/British foreign films (*Meiying Dianying*) were considered toxic and abominable, and as the embodiment of western imperialism. In June 1950, the Korean War occurred and further deteriorated the Sino-US relationship. One month later, the Government Administration Council (renamed State Council in 1954) issued several regulations so as to completely remove Hollywood's influence in China. Until November of the same year, Hollywood cinema was severely criticized among Chinese citizens. Movie theaters around the country refused to exhibit Hollywood films. In the meanwhile, local media, especially newspapers and magazines, had been constantly condemning "Hollywood's style of cinematic creation" for promoting capitalist ideology. As a consequence, by 1953, most of the former private-owned film companies had been nationalized into state enterprises, marking the complete adoption of a Leninist model, and incorporating national cinema as a propaganda tool.
- 2 *Ju Dou* was banned in China for a few years and was given permission for screening only in 1992. *Raise the Red Lantern* was also banned upon initial release. *Farewell My Concubine* was banned due to its sensitive themes including homosexual relations and portrayal of the Culture Revolution but was al-

- lowed to exhibit after it acquired the Palme d'Or in Cannes.
- 3 Source: *Dianying Jingji [Film Economy]*, 1992, Issue 4.
  - 4 *Yule'pian* (in Simplified Chinese: 娱乐片) literally means entertainment film. Opposing a conservative definition of cinema and its uses, this term describes the kind of films that are of low value in terms of education and political propaganda but exist merely for the sake of entertaining or amusing.
  - 5 *Zhu'xuanlv dianying* (in Simplified Chinese: 主旋律电影) literally means main melody film. It is also transcribed as "mainstream melody" or "major melody" in other studies. The "melody" in this term is an expression of the "tune" of China's cultural legacy. This idea was brought up by then director of Film Bureau Teng Jingxian in March 1987, and its purpose was to reinvigorate national spirit and pride. Since then, main melody has been a unique film genre in China and considered an extremely ideological production. Originally, they were mostly produced by state-owned studios and highly subsidized by the government. As Chinese cinema continued to reform, there are now also main melody films produced commercially under private or non-state-owned studios. Yet the core intention to promote patriotism in main melody films stays unchanged.
  - 6 *The Birth of New China* is about the founding ceremony of the People's Republic of China in 1949. *Decisive Engagement: Beiping Tianjin Campaign* is about one of the three major battles during the late stage of the Chinese Civil War between the Communist Party and the Nationalist Government. *Zhou Enlai* is the biography of China's first Premier Zhou Enlai. He was instrumental in the forming of China's foreign policy during the early days.
  - 7 Ministry of Radio, Film, and Television (MRFT), was reorganized into State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT) in 1998, and then into State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film, and Television (SAPPRFT) in 2013. According to the General Office of the State Council, however, China is to abolish SAPPRFT and to set up a new regulatory body in 2018.
  - 8 China Film Corporation (CFC), reformed as China Film Group Corporation (CFGC) in 1999. CFGC is the state-owned film enterprise that, according to Bloomberg, manages theaters, produces and distributes films, and supervises foreign importations.
  - 9 China Film Import & Export Corporation (in short, China Film), a subsidiary of CFGC, is the sole government-authorized foreign film importer in China.
  - 10 *Da'pian* (in Simplified Chinese: 大片) literally means mega-film. It is a similar expression to "high-concept" in Mandarin, in that "Da (in Simplified Chinese: 大)", literally meaning "big", indicates a feature film characterized by huge production budget, magnificent special visual effects, prestige film director, famous movie stars, and enormous box office potentials, which are typical marketable variables during the film's P&A campaign.
  - 11 Right after the announcement, film scholar Dai Jinhua published an article named "*The Wolf is Coming!*" on newspaper in order to express her concerns for Chinese cinema under the threat of imported Hollywood blockbusters. However, she was generally criticized due to such a conservative comment during the fever of "integration into the global community".
  - 12 Imported Hollywood films in the 1990s could easily obtain a box office of more than 10 million yuan. However, very few domestic productions in China were able to reach such a commercial achievement at that time. For a domestic production, it would be considered an extremely successful film as long as it grossed more than 1 million yuan.
  - 13 *Jingpin dianying* (in Simplified Chinese: 精品电影), literally means exquisite film. In a conference with

major film studios in 1996, the state administration proposed underlining “*jingpin dianying*” to make fewer but higher quality main melody films. It was also referred as the “9550 Excellent Film Product Project”, under which 50 *jingpin* films (10 per year) were about to be made during the country’s Ninth Five-year Plan. According to the Film Bureau, *jingpin dianying* should be able to balance between art, education, and entertainment.

- 14 A video hall was a small public screening place, usually featuring 20 to 30 seats, which played video cassettes either on a television or with a projector. Most of the video halls in the 1990s favored Hong Kong and Taiwan films and some of the films played were extremely exotic and violent. Until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, television had become a household necessity in China and some families were able to afford two TV sets or even more. Building home entertainment system became fashionable at that time with the help of VCD/DVD players and home stereo systems.
- 15 *Mulan* was produced by Disney and released in 1998 in the US. But it was imported into China in 1999.
- 16 *Aftershock* is about the 1976 Tangshan Earthquake in China. The film depicts the aftermath through a local family of four, in which the husband lost his life during the earthquake while the wife had to make a choice in a desperate situation when she could save only one of her twins. *Sacrifice* is based on the play *The Orphan of Zhao* in the Yuan dynasty. The story, set in the Spring and Autumn period in ancient China, is about Cheng Ying, a physician who sacrificed his own family in order to save the only child of the Duke of Jin.
- 17 Source: *China Film Industry Report 2013-2014* (www.entgroup.com.cn).
- 18 It is reported that in 2004, in order to secure enough screening hours for Zhang Yimou’s *House of Flying Daggers*, the Film Bureau advised theaters across the country to dedicate more slots for the film instead of other foreign ones (Yeh & Davis, 2008; Yeh, 2009). Since then, every year normally between June and July, very few foreign films would be able to be released in China. Therefore, *Shrek 2* was released in US on May 19<sup>th</sup>, but in China on August 10<sup>th</sup> in 2004, while *War of the Worlds* was released in US on June 29<sup>th</sup>, but in China on August 11<sup>th</sup> in 2005.  
 In fact, the government never publicly admits such a policy of “domestic protection month (in Simplified Chinese: 国产保护月, *guochan baohu yue*)”. In 2012 during a press conference with both domestic and foreign news reporters, Tian Jin, deputy director of SARFT, claimed that such a delay in the release of some foreign films in China is under complete market regulation without government interference. Even so, “domestic protection month” is widely used among both the press and the people. As for now, July is widely acknowledged as the “domestic protection month”.
- 19 *Hesui’pian*, in Simplified Chinese: 贺岁片, is a term initiated in Hong Kong to describe films released during the Luna New Year. To celebrate the holiday for gathering together, most *hesui’pian* are family friendly dramas or comedies. The concept traveled to the mainland in the 1980s and now the New Year slot is considered a typical time for families to go to the cinema. Currently, the New Year slot has been expanded to a longer period roughly from December to March since Chinese New Year is usually in February.
- 20 Source: *China Film Industry Report 2010*.
- 21 China’s overall box office revenue in 2017 was 55.9 billion RMB yuan, which is about \$8.6 billion.