

## Once Upon a Time in China and America: Transnational Storytelling and the Recent Films of Peter Chan

Gary Bettinson

What options are available for Hong Kong directors seeking transnational success? Such directors could content themselves with localized production aimed at the domestic market, the reliable but modest pan-Asian territories, and the overseas diaspora. They could try to penetrate the fast-growing PRC market by mounting Hong Kong-China coproductions. They might try to forge strategic partnerships with other Asian countries, as Soi Cheang did by courting Japanese investors to co-finance Manga adaptation *Shamo* (2008). Sourcing European investors, as Johnnie To did with *Vengeance* (2009), provides another option. Or the Hong Kong director could venture to Hollywood, a path chosen by several of the region's foremost directors in the 1990s. Peter Ho-Sun Chan – a Hong Kong producer-director renowned for launching transnational initiatives – has during his career pursued several of these production pathways. Encouraged by the 2003 CEPA trade agreement [1], Chan and other Hong Kong directors have in recent years intensified their commitment to PRC production. At the same time, edicts handed down from Beijing encourage the production of Chinese-produced blockbusters that attain global success. “In China there is a national incentive that all industries must expand internationally,” states distributor Jeffrey Chan. “The PRC government issued a statement that Chinese films should go international.” [2] Industry executives in Hong Kong and China frequently take Ang Lee's global hit *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) as the benchmark for this kind of transnational enterprise.

Notwithstanding *Crouching Tiger*'s crossover success, many critics and industry personnel – on both hemispheres – contend that Chinese storytelling is intrinsically different from Western storytelling, hence Chinese crossover movies represent an inevitably rare species of film. (These commentators often point out that *Crouching Tiger* was written by an American screenwriter, James Schamus.) Compounding this perspective is the commercial failure of transnational ventures such as Zhang Yimou's *The Flowers of War* (2011) in the West. The axiom seems to

be: If Chinese films are to succeed in the West, Chinese filmmakers must change the way they tell their stories. In this chapter I suggest that this contention – widespread though it is – generates an Orientalist fallacy, and moreover, that a Chinese film’s international success relies as much on adroit distribution and marketing as on universal storytelling devices. I focus on the latter-day career of Peter Chan, whose recent films have brought him into close proximity with this essentialist storytelling fallacy in both Asia and America.

The PRC’s rapid industrial and market growth creates increased opportunity, which Hong Kong directors are culturally and geographically well-placed to exploit. Nevertheless, the Hong Kong director venturing north abnegates a degree of artistic freedom to Beijing censors. As is well known, China’s state censors monitor both preproduction (all mainland productions are subject to script approval) and postproduction (the full cut of the film is submitted to The State Administration of Radio, Film and Television [SARFT] for final distribution approval). No such restrictions apply in Hong Kong, where full-fledged scripts often coalesce only at the end of shooting. In addition, the typical Hong Kong director’s genre specialisms – martial-arts action, heroic bloodshed, supernatural thrillers, and comedies – run counter to SARFT rules forbidding the depiction of ghosts, sympathetic criminals, and extreme violence and sex. Then there are the intricate geopolitical taboos. Any film put forward for mainland distribution – whether produced in the PRC or imported from overseas – is vetted for potential offence given to China’s allies. Also to be avoided is sensitive socio-historical subject matter. Hong Kong comedy *Running on Karma*, signed by Johnnie To and Wai Ka-fai in 2003, ran afoul of Beijing censors for depicting a Chinese protagonist (Cecilia Cheung) reincarnated from a Japanese soldier. Such a premise, though overtly comedic, offends a Chinese government to whom Sino-Japanese relations remain fractious. According to the film’s co-writer Au Kin-ye, SARFT – ever vigilant against superstition – also objected to the male hero’s preternatural ability to perceive the past lives of others. Consequently, the Milkyway Image creative team excised the male hero’s extrasensory “visions” from the mainland release, resulting in nonsensical stretches of action. “The movie was released in China,” says Au, “but it received very bad reviews because of all the changes we were forced to make – the mainland critics couldn’t understand what was going on in the movie because, without the hero’s visions, the story no longer made sense.” [3] By contrast, the

unedited version of *Running on Karma* distributed in other Asian territories garnered admiring reviews and numerous prizes. In all, PRC censorship presents a significant obstacle to all films submitted for mainland distribution.

Faced with such strictures, Hong Kong directors rely on ingenuity, guilefulness, and duplicity to attain coproduction approval. Some filmmakers resort to stealth tactics, furnishing SARFT's script censors with bogus screenplays. In the early 2000s, as Milkyway's staff writers toiled on other projects, freelancers hired by the studio churned out insipid SARFT-friendly scripts bearing only facile resemblance to the de facto shooting script. The phony screenplay, its purpose in acquiring SARFT authorization fulfilled, gave way during production to the practice of devising scenes per diem, as customary in Hong Kong filmmaking. Milkyway abandoned this stratagem as script censors grew more vigilant, but it remains a practical expedient for some joint-venture studios. Once censored by SARFT, the "script" becomes less an ironclad mandate for filming than a blueprint identifying political taboos. A few filmmakers, recognizing that script censorship and postproduction censorship constitute distinct processes, deviate from the sanctioned script during shooting so as to accommodate new ideas and practical exigencies. In this context, creativity can still flourish beyond the script-censorship stage, the filmmaker aware that script approval is but the first hurdle in an all-encompassing censorship process. Some directors, such as Peter Chan, quietly defy the censors and shoot the expurgated passages of the script. "Time and again," says Chan, "I find that things censored at the script-approval stage pass the censors at the postproduction censorship stage. On paper the censored element is a no-no, but when the censors watch the finished film and are emotionally touched by it, they allow us to keep the censored element in the film." [4] The final censorship stage – approving the completed cut for theatrical release – can lead to wrangling between filmmaker and state censors, at worst culminating in stalemate; the film may never find release. But the shrewd director navigates this phase by means of trade-offs and compromise. A panel of SARFT censors, having viewed the director's cut, provides the director instructions for revisions. "They may tell you to change eight things," Chan points out. "You can't fight them on all eight points. Instead, five or six of those things you must learn to live without, so that you can fight for the two or three things that you *really* care about."

So much jockeying is onerous but necessary for Hong Kong directors who see working with or within China worthwhile. Once immersed in state-governed filmmaking, she or he learns that SARFT censors – apparently all-powerful and absolute – occupy a mere tier in the government hierarchy. “SARFT is not the deciding party, they are the mediator,” remarks Chan. “Nobody knows who actually calls the shots.” Though the state censorship system is opaque, it is not intransigent. Some SARFT proscriptions are flexible, others mercurial, and the Hong Kong director must divine the epoch’s limits of permissibility. Officially thorny subjects, such as China’s one-child-per-family policy and child trafficking, may unexpectedly be granted approval by SARFT’s script censors, as in the case of Chan’s *Dearest* (2014). In short, some Hong Kong directors – particularly those already possessing experience and esteem – consider SARFT a negotiable obstacle. Though artistic compromise is inevitable, bargaining power may be wielded, and SARFT censors may acquiesce on certain points of contention. At any rate, directors believe that the mainland market will repay their efforts. Not only financially (though the vast market potential of the PRC is certainly a prime attraction), but culturally, too, the mainland pathway holds advantages. According to Chan, the “serious” film director – more so than top-flight matinee idols – is venerated both by the mainland critical firmament and by the market itself, whose passionate film culture accords auteurs a level of reverence and loyalty rare in Hong Kong. Moreover, the PRC market is not only populous but eclectic: mass tastes demand a diversity of film product. Hence the Hong Kong director can indulge pluralistic impulses stifled by the action-centered Cantonese cinema. Beijing censorship may close down artistic expression, but the creative opportunity to go beyond action-genre filmmaking represents, for directors like Chan, a kind of freedom seldom possible within the Hong Kong mainstream.

### **Going North: *American Dreams in China* (2013)**

For Hong Kong directors, then, the China production route proves to be double-edged. Beijing curbs artistic freedom through official censorship, but the cinephilic market nourishes the Hong Kong filmmaker eager to diversify. Chan’s *American Dreams in China* provides an instance of the ambivalence attending the China pathway. On the one hand, Chan is obliged to exercise a

priori self-censorship, omitting any coverage of the Tiananmen uprising despite the film's backdrop of 1980s Chinese history. "That's the biggest red tape in China," attests Chan. "There is no way, in a movie made in China, that one could even hint that there was such an incident; if you want to recreate the Tiananmen incident on film, then forget about making your movie in China." On the other hand, Chan prospered by China's giant theatrical market. Against a budget of US \$9 million, *American Dreams* grossed US \$86 million domestically; the film's success boosted Chan's renown in China; and it provided him a degree of leverage with SARFT, possibly accounting for the script censors' leniency toward *Dearest*, Chan's subsequent project about China's child abduction crisis.

*American Dreams in China* centers on three mainland Chinese protagonists, first introduced as college students in mid-1980s Beijing. Cheng Dongqing (Huang Xiaoming), Meng Xiaojun (Deng Chao), and Wang Yang (Tong Dawei) idolize America, and the most confident of these young men – Xiaojun – enrolls as an exchange student at Harvard University. Yang's girlfriend Su Mei (Du Juan) also gains entry into America. Dongqing, desperate to bask in the American Dream, is repeatedly denied a US visa. Dejected, he takes a job teaching English language in China. Unexpectedly, his private classes amass a large following, and he expands his teaching venture into a large-scale business. Meanwhile, Xiaojun's experiences in the US debunk the myth of the American Dream, and he returns disconsolately to China. Several years pass, and the three friends found the New Vision Institute, an English tuition enterprise that morphs into a global brand. When the three men are summoned to America to defend legal charges of a professional breach, cultural and interpersonal conflicts come to the fore.

From the start, Chan conceived *American Dreams* to be a China-centric production. A first-draft screenplay by Hong Kong colleague Aubrey Lam established the broad plot outline, but Chan sought to Sinicize the script by recruiting mainland writers (Zhou Zhiyong and Zhang Ji) to infuse the story with local detail. Out of this rewrite sprang the film's ideological fervor. Specifically, the finished script promotes the concept of a "Chinese dream," a polysemous phrase broadly denoting a collective, nationalistic optimism that is believed to have "deeply penetrated

the psyche of regular [Chinese] citizens” (Burkitt 2014). [5] Gerard Lemos, in *The End of the Chinese Dream*, defines this concept as a specifically 1980s phenomenon triggered by the end of the Cultural Revolution and the promise of political reform under Deng Xiaoping. The Chinese dream, Lemos maintains, encapsulates civic hopes for security, stability, prosperity, and social freedoms – ideals that Lemos claims evaporated following the 1989 protests in Beijing (Lemos 2013: 38; 57; 271). To some extent, the plot of *American Dreams* dramatizes this historical trajectory sans the Tiananmen incident, while attempting at the climax to rehabilitate the Chinese dream for the 2000s (much as President Xi Jinping has revived the concept in recent political speeches).

In this context, *American Dreams* functions as a vehicle for PRC soft power, promoting national cohesion and societal harmony within China. As the British weekly *The Economist* reported in 2013, “The [Chinese] government has twin ambitions in fostering the film industry, one domestic and one global. At home, it wants people to see films that will inculcate Chinese values and culture...Abroad, the government wants to spread a more attractive image of the country” (Anon. 2013: 101). Similarly, soft power may be principally domestic and pan-Asian – “creating common, imagined identities and values for Asians” (Young and Jong, 2008: 470) – and/or global, propagating Chinese ideology to the rest of the world and assuaging western fears of the so-called “China threat.” [6] *American Dreams*, thematized around the optimistic Chinese dream, harnesses domestic soft power, and as such obliges Chan to forego the international market. As one critic writes, “[In films like] *American Dreams in China*, one dimensional patriotism doesn’t appeal to foreigners whatsoever” (Huntsman 2014: 35). To its detractors, the film embodies state propaganda. Here domestic soft power – the kind of story that China tells its own citizens – is sharply different than global soft power, the kinds of story conceived for a transnational audience. For *American Dreams* (according to its critics) fosters not only ethnocentrism, but anti-western nationalism. In particular, its perceived anti-American rhetoric all but torpedoed the film’s prospects for North American distribution. For Chan, this means delimiting his audience to a single albeit very large market – a drastic shift for a producer-director renowned for transnational storytelling and modes of distribution. Needless to say, too, the state’s premium on

China-centrism and domestic soft power stymies the industry's ability to produce crossover international hits like *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and *Hero*.

*American Dreams in China* opens with a montage sequence that, through a kind of narrational omniscience, deftly establishes the Chinese protagonists' superiority over Americans. Doe-eyed student Dongqing, denied a US visa by an aloof American clerk, sinks into despair, but the sequence supplies his retrospective voiceover narration, placing us (that is, the intended Chinese spectator) in a privileged position of knowledge about the American clerk's folly. The rest of the film will depict Dongqing's (and his friends') rise to success *in spite of* America and Americans. The three college friends, at first zealously pro-United States ("Our generation desires all things American"), trace an arc of disillusionment with the country. At college they staunchly defend American values, but their Chinese professor decries their callowness ("You're still too young, too naïve," he insists, citing their ignorance of American racism against ethnic minorities). Adamant that the US harbors indiscriminate opportunity, Xiaojun becomes a student there, later followed by Yang and Mei. But Xiaojun's American dream soon fizzles: obliged to scratch a living washing dishes, and thwarted in his academic aspirations, he returns to China. A similar fate befalls Mei and Yang. Reunited in Beijing with Dongqing and Yang, Xiaojun discovers that Chinese citizens can achieve the American Dream not in the US but in China – or, at least, some variant thereof, a "New Vision" or a "Chinese dream." Now, Xiaojun echoes his former professor: "I was too young and too naïve [about America]," he reflects, puncturing the illusion that America provides equal opportunity for all ("The playing field has never been even"). [7] At the climax, the protagonists castigate the American executives litigating against them. "You don't understand Chinese culture...China has changed, but you're still stuck in the past." Nowadays, they say, Chinese students aspire for success in China, not America. [8]

American critics object to the film's putatively anti-American polemic, but director Chan avers that *American Dreams* reflects contemporary Chinese attitudes: "I could have made the film less offensive [to American viewers] but it represents exactly the mentality in China right now." Nevertheless, the film's imputed slighting of American society – a corollary to its soft power

rhetoric of Chinese nationalism – makes large-scale US export untenable. For some commentators, however, the film’s problems go deeper. A widely-shared assumption holds that not only ethnocentrism but cultural essentialism handicaps Chinese films in the global marketplace. On this view, Chinese movies such as those made by Chan (a director renowned for possessing a “western” outlook [9]) will inevitably falter in the west regardless of their ideological biases, because Chinese modes of storytelling differ radically from the storytelling norms of western cinema. Bizarrely, this essentialist fallacy seems to prevail both among film critics and within the international distribution sector. Critic Raymond Zhou, for instance, contends that cinematic storytelling is determined by a director’s “cultural sensibility”: “Unless a filmmaker is born in – or grew up with – two cultures, he or she can approach a story from only one cultural angle” (Zhou 2014). Within the film distribution industry, received wisdom dictates that only certain genres – particularly horror and action – harbor cross-cultural potential, while others such as comedy flounder overseas. [10] “European distributors don’t even want us to make love stories,” claims Chan. “Even though romance is universal, the distributors think that foreign audiences don’t want to watch romance films set in an unfamiliar city featuring movie stars they don’t know.” Accordingly, Chan’s most successful US exports are entries into the genres of action (*The Warlords* [2007]) and horror (*Three...Extremes* [2004]; *The Eye* [2002]), while his comedic and romance films (e.g. *Golden Chicken* [2002]; *Perhaps Love* [2005]) attract limited or no western distribution.

Not surprisingly, wary distributors balk at “risky” narrative and genre experimentation. While complex “puzzle” plots flourish in many national cinemas, China’s puzzle films are mostly deemed unfit for western export. Foreign distributors may re-edit the Chinese import in ways that amplify genre elements and diminish narrative complexity. As early as the preproduction phase, the local filmmaker’s narrative adventurousness may be vitiated by international sales agents. Based on advice from distributor Celluloid Dreams, for instance, Milkyway staff writers retooled the opening scenes of *Mad Detective* (2007) for greater narrative simplicity. At the same time, the film’s sales agent encouraged conventional genre plotting. “We were reminded from the start about market demand,” says the film’s writer Au Kin-ye. “Everybody expects a Johnnie To film to be a genre police action movie, and so, for distribution reasons – no matter



how crazy we made our detective protagonist – we had to try to keep *Mad Detective* within the context of a typical police crime story.” [11] A kind of compromise meant that *Mad Detective* remains a complexly-plotted genre film, but its international distribution would be limited chiefly to the festival circuit and ancillary markets. The thesis I wish to advance, then, is this: the dearth of successful Chinese crossover films is due not to irreducible disparities between Chinese and Western storytelling, but (in large measure) to conservative and wrongheaded overseas distribution criteria. These criteria betray essentialist assumptions regarding cultural specificity and competency. At worst, they override authorial intention, and determine *how* the film’s story is to be told – a process which invariably nullifies adventurous plotting, whether in the case of distributors reworking an extant Chinese release or promoting generic storytelling during production.

### **Going West: *Wu Xia* (2011)**

For directors like Chan, to target the North American market – much like targeting the PRC market – is to tolerate a kind of censorship whereby tacit essentialist principles constrain creative freedom. Chan’s swordplay drama *Wu Xia* provides a paradigm case. As a product traversing both the China coproduction system and the North American distribution process, *Wu Xia* testifies to the ways Chinese filmmakers must sublimate authorial expression to mercurial yet strongly-felt political and institutional boundaries. In preproduction the film was subject to SARFT script approval. Originally, Aubrey Lam’s script depicted the evil “72 Demons” cadre as ethnic Tanguts, but state censors flinched at the risk of inflaming peoples in the northwest – not least because political controversy still rages around Tibet, a region closely imbricated with Tangut history. “This element is still present in the finished film,” notes Chan, “but it had to be sort of hidden, because China is very nervous about offending different ethnic groups.” SARFT’s script censors also advised Chan to moderate scenes of physical violence. Aware that the film would face a second round of SARFT mandates upon completion, Chan shot scenes with the level of violence he desired. “The script censors are always telling you, ‘Reduce the amount of blood and gore,’ but I only take these notes seriously in postproduction editing. I shoot what I want to shoot, and then negotiate with SARFT in the final stage of censorship.”

In postproduction, other market pressures vexed Chan's authorial intentions. All dialogue in the "director's cut" is rendered in Mandarin, but Chan prepared an alternative audio track for audiences in Hong Kong and Guangdong. The latter region in particular has become a key market priority for Chinese distributors. [12] Not only the most populous province in mainland China (with a population of more than 100 million people as compared to Hong Kong's 7 million citizen), but also a Cantonese-speaking territory traditionally receptive to Cantonese cinema, the Guangdong market obliges distributors to dub Mandarin-dialect films into Cantonese. [13] Another stimulus for dubbing stems from the Chinese audience being most accustomed to *Wu Xia*'s leading players (Donnie Yen and Takeshi Kaneshiro) speaking Cantonese on screen. Here again Chan, anxious to preserve "the integrity of the film," sought the middle ground. Hence the southern China version of *Wu Xia* renders the heroic villagers' speech in Cantonese, and the evil Tanguts in Mandarin. Motivated realistically, the plot now locates its peaceful village in southern China; dramatic conflict erupts between North and South. This market-driven maneuver, however, amplifies the Manicheism of the action, diluting the moral complexity of Yen's reformed Tangut barbarian, and diverting the drama from the graduated moral dimensions Chan professes to favor.

*Wu Xia* would subsequently be reworked further at the behest of its North American distributor, the Weinstein Company (TWC). As far as US handling of Asian imports goes, the case of *Wu Xia* strikes me as fairly representative. Initially enthusiastic for the film's commercial prospects, TWC pledged to release *Wu Xia* in American theaters in extant form. Soon, though, Harvey Weinstein felt compelled to simplify the film's story. "I was told that 90% of the indigenous US market for foreign films is no longer the art-film crowd but ethnic teens, who want to watch action scenes," says Chan. "In that sense, *Wu Xia* was judged too complicated for viewers of 18 years and younger." As a result, TWC editors devised a streamlined version of *Wu Xia* catering to an action-oriented youth demographic. Trimmed by twenty minutes but padded with explanatory intertitles and voiceover fragments, the film's action-genre elements acquired additional salience. The TWC cut excises, shaves, re-sequences, or reverses individual frames, partly (in the last case) to conjure eyeline matches and smooth over elided footage; it expunges

the occasional music cue; and thanks to its abbreviated shots it accelerates the original film's tempo, yielding an average shot length of 2.6 seconds (as against the Chinese cut's ASL of about 3 seconds). So much tinkering culminated, to Chan's displeasure, in a perfunctory new title – *Dragon*. In all, the TWC cut relegates narrative complexity and dialogue-driven domestic scenes, throwing into bold relief scenes of physical action (chiefly kung-fu and swordplay). [14] Chan calls the final TWC version “compromised.” According to Chan, TWC followed this re-editing phase with months of internal note-gathering and market research, inducing among the TWC executives indecision, bureaucratic procrastination, and, finally, loss of faith in the film. “They lost interest and got scared,” maintains Chan. “They sent *Dragon* to the executives, every executive gave notes on this version, and this process invited criticism of the film because the executives are not allowed to *not* give notes – and eventually Harvey Weinstein didn't know what to do with the movie.” Granted a limited theatrical run of three days across fourteen screens, *Dragon* grossed a meager US \$11,137 at the North American box office. [15]

Of course, the Weinsteins' tampering with imports has by now become the stuff of notoriety. [16] Behind this practice lies an assumption that the Asian import *in toto* won't “translate” to a western audience, hence the need for aesthetic reshaping. Partly this premise relates to the American audience's cultural competency. As US distributor Doris Pfardrescher asserts, “There is a lot of local humor and cultural differences in Chinese films that Americans don't understand.” [17] For Jeffrey Chan, CEO of Distribution Workshop, “there may be social and political cultural background in a Chinese film that you have to explain to the western audience, and this may make the film boring to western viewers.” [18] Aside from culture-specific knowledge, however, there persists a belief that more fundamental incongruities are at play, as Patrick Frater attests: “One of the things I hear from distributors worldwide is that Chinese storytelling is simply different and doesn't work in the same way as western stories.” [19] This concern is only compounded by the Asian filmmaker's acquiescence, however grudging, to the principle of drastic reediting and narrative simplification.

Thus far these Asian directors have adopted several strategies of damage limitation. Most typical is that of consent and compromise, as typified by Chan and *Wu Xia*. Stephen Chow's 2001 comedy *Shaolin Soccer* – whose US release was repeatedly postponed by Miramax Films, and from which 26 minutes was excised – also demonstrates this line of muted resistance, as does Zhang Yimou's complicity in shearing twenty minutes from *Hero* (2002) at Miramax's behest. More unusually, the director may seek control of the re-editing phase by personally assembling the international cut. Wong Kar-wai's *The Grandmaster* (2013) provides the template here: Wong reordered scenes and imported new sequences while adhering to TWC's demands for interposed expository titles and an efficient running time (the American version is 22 minutes shorter than the Chinese theatrical release). Virtually unique is the tactic of challenge and repudiation. South Korean director Bong Joon-ho controversially adopted this stance over the Weinstein-acquired *Snowpiercer* (2013). TWC had struck a negative pickup deal for the film, acquiring distribution rights for six English-speaking territories. Tensions flared when TWC sought to trim Bong's original cut, insert explicative titles, and, according to critic Tony Rayns, "turn *Snowpiercer* into a more conventional action-thriller" (Rayns 2014: 38). Bong refused to sanction a TWC compressed cut. Consequently, says Peter Chan, "the film was in jail for six months or so" until the Korean director released it in territories not under Weinstein's jurisdiction. *Snowpiercer*'s success in these markets – as well as a groundswell of public and critical sympathy for Bong's wrangling with the Weinsteins – eventually broke the impasse. "The Weinsteins basically lost the battle," claims Chan. "They had to either give up the movie and get a refund of their deposit, or accept the movie as it is, because Bong wasn't prepared to let the film be edited." In fact, the outcome was less triumph than trade-off. TWC released *Snowpiercer* in the US without cuts, but reneged on its intended wide-scale release in favor of limited platform distribution.

In all the above cases, the American distributor's compulsion to "make over" the Asian movie springs from essentialist premises, along with predigested yet contentious axioms about western viewers' impatience with culture-specific content, their intolerance of subtitles, their "ever-diminishing attention spans" (Dixon: 363), and so forth. [20] Invariably, the makeover functions to attenuate the imported film's eccentricities and complexity. [21] Even Wong Kar-wai acceded

to essentialist tenets, reworking *The Grandmaster* for greater simplicity and clarity. The TWC version aims “to clarify [the Chinese version’s] complex historical context,” Wong has said. It aims to create a “more straightforward and linear” narrative for the US audience (Steinberg 2013). Here again an imputed lack of cultural competency among American viewers provides a pretext for simplifying the action: “*The Grandmaster* is very specific,” states Wong. “Because (non-Chinese viewers) don’t have much information or knowledge about the background and history, you have to give enough information for them to get into the story” (Chang 2013). As in *Dragon*, Wong’s US cut foregrounds martial-arts genre elements, while some domestic scenes are curtailed or entirely shorn away. [22] Intelligibility – and genre specification – is a prime concern not only for the Weinstein Company but for other US distribution firms too. “The way we market these films is very much toward one specific genre,” notes distributor Doris Pfordrescher. “With *Let the Bullets Fly* [2010], we tried to gear it toward one genre in order to simplify it.” [23] Thus distributors’ makeover tactics – the amplifying of genre content and downgrading of narrative complexity – go hand in glove with priorities of marketing and promotion.

Yet some theorists have argued that Chinese-language films rely on transcultural norms of story and style, and widespread or universal cognitive and perceptual propensities (see for instance Bordwell 1998 and 2001). More anecdotally, Peter Chan avers that “Whenever my films travel, the audience responds exactly the same anywhere I go... Yes, sometimes there are cultural nuances that people don’t get, and that can make the film a little less fun, but the core of the film still translates.” These films’ cultural nuances seldom jeopardize cross-cultural comprehension for they are embedded within broader transcultural storytelling norms shared across different cultures. Moreover, whereas US distributors seek to simplify narrative, popular trends in contemporary cinema indicate that audiences worldwide comprehend and enjoy narrative complexity. Puzzle-centered movies have grown prominent in most national cinemas, not least in Hong Kong and China where films such as *Wu Xia*, *Mad Detective*, *2046* (2004), *Infernal Affairs* (2002), and *Hero* (2002) are salient titles. Cognitive research supports the hypothesis that filmgoers savor adventurous storytelling. Of Hollywood movies, Todd Berliner notes the spectator’s pleasurable experience of “insight,” the exhilarating moment at which the solution to

the plot's central enigma is revealed (Berliner 2013: 208). Murray Smith describes the "architectural pleasure" elicited by elaborate plotting (Smith 2001: 156), while Ed Tan suggests that such plots can stimulate so-called "artefact emotions" triggered by the fiction's palpable construction (Tan 1996: 82). Reworking *The Grandmaster* into linear form might make the plot simpler to process, but it does not automatically make the film aesthetically, cognitively, or emotionally more rewarding.

That US distributors treat Asian imports timorously is justifiable, given the mammoth expenditure poured into American distribution (which is often greater than the entire production budget of an average Hong Kong film). Recondite, offbeat, or innovative films pose an especially imposing challenge for distributors. As Chan puts it: "Any foreign film that doesn't fit into a simple A-B-C formula – anything outside the box – is difficult to sell in the US market. This is not to say that American audiences can't understand those films, because a lot of those films tell universal stories." However, to attribute the lack of Chinese-language crossover hits to an intrinsic disparity between Chinese and western modes of storytelling is to obscure the integral role played by US distributors, whose caution and conservatism hobbles the Chinese film's market value in western territories. Worse, the cultural-difference premise reproduces Orientalist notions of Chinese inscrutability, of China as something fundamentally unknowable and Other. From here it is but a small step to the notion of the "Chinese threat" and an irrational fear of Chinese soft power.

### **Going Home**

For today's Hong Kong director, the difference between operating in the PRC and working with or within the United States is vanishingly thin. As one critic puts it, "In America power lies with the studios; in China with the state" (Anon 2013: 101). For Hong Kong directors migrating to the mainland or Hollywood film industry, the film they wish to make (or sell) is radically mediated by a host of industrial, economic, and political pressures, as the East-West trajectory of *Wu Xia* illustrates. State censorship, self-censorship, ideational imperatives (e.g. exporting soft power), postproduction dubbing, American retitling and re-editing, narrow theatrical release windows –

all these mediations assail the transnational Hong Kong filmmaker. Then there is the prolonged and labyrinthine bureaucracy, whether studio or state governed; and just as directors in the PRC must reckon with Beijing censors, so directors in Hollywood are susceptible to test screenings, comment cards, executive memos, and other market-led constraints. Appearances to the contrary, perhaps, the filmmaker must also adhere to same moral priorities in both Hollywood and China: Manichean dualisms prevail in the films of both industries, and most movies wend toward what Noël Carroll calls a “morally correct outcome” (Carroll 1996: 101). “The biggest problem in Chinese censorship that cannot be avoided is black and white morality on screen,” states Chan. “And it’s exactly the same thing in Hollywood: there are good guys and bad guys, and it’s very one-dimensional.” Indeed, Chan regards the two industries as broadly synonymous. “The best thing that prepared me for working in China was working in Hollywood,” he notes.

A third option for Chan – to “go home” and embark on localized Hong Kong production – proves not only unsustainable given the modest size of the region’s domestic market, but also undesirable for a filmmaker pledged to pan-Asian and international film production. The local cinema has always relied on overseas markets. Even Hong Kong directors dedicated to indigenous production and subject matter have oriented at least some of their output to the Greater China and southeast Asia markets – think of Ann Hui (*A Simple Life* [2011]), Johnnie To (*Drug War* [2013]), and Pang Ho-cheung (*Love in the Buff* [2012]). Granted, local film production harbors advantages. Bureaucratic obstacles are fewer and less byzantine than in China and Hollywood, and a ratings system eliminates the challenges of censorship. Wholly local ventures forego the principle of the preproduction script – much less the ritual of state or studio script approval – as a prerequisite for shooting. But even in Hong Kong few directors command the right of final cut, and all must balance artistic choice against market concerns, economic boundaries, and mandates from financiers, producers, and distributors. For Peter Chan, at least, mainland China constitutes the primary territory in which to make and market movies. Whereas the 1990s witnessed an exodus of Hong Kong directors to Hollywood, today the situation has changed. Though still craving crossover hits, Hong Kong and China no longer needs or covets America – precisely the realization achieved by the protagonists of *American Dreams in China*.

The bottom line is that, commensurate with China's rise as an economic power, the US and international markets matter less to Hong Kong and PRC filmmakers than they did a decade ago. No longer is foreign box office an economic priority. If in the early 2000s overseas revenue accounted for roughly 70% of a mainland film's overall gross, today that figure is closer to 5%, most of which comes not from America, Europe, or Japan but from pan-Asian territories (chiefly Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, and Malaysia). In this climate, the economic incentive to carpenter global crossover movies is low. (Instead, other kinds of incentive – namely, the international promotion of Chinese soft power – nourish Beijing's appetite to foster a global hit like *Crouching Tiger*.) Nor does Hollywood wield the gravitational pull on Chinese filmmakers it once did. Its cultural allure, along with the instability of the Hong Kong industry in the early 1990s, led to a migration of Hong Kong directors in that decade, but now comparable opportunities can be found in the mainland – seemingly without the problem of language barriers, unfamiliar work routines, cultural alienation, institutional racism, and so on. In Chan's view, “If I have the capacity to work at a fairly smooth level in China, and for other Asian directors able to do likewise, why would we want to go to Hollywood and start from scratch in an unfamiliar industry, at the bottom of [the Hollywood pecking order]?”

Today, China need not go to Hollywood; now Hollywood comes to China. Hollywood firms seeking a foothold in the China market court mainland studios and government agencies, lobbying for greater quota access and coproduction deals. Often the Sino-US joint venture amounts to what Chan calls “fake coproduction,” i.e. Hollywood movies ramped up by a few Chinese actors, and granted large-scale mainland distribution (he cites *Iron Man 3* [2013] and *Transformers 4: Age of Extinction* [2014] as examples). Still, Chan predicts that recent trade agreements and China's continued market growth make legitimate Sino-US coproductions inevitable in the years to come. If this comes to pass, Beijing may yet achieve genuine crossover success, buttressed in the West by the full might of Hollywood's distribution capabilities (as against TWC's low-key platform and video-on-demand release strategies). A few such megahits might even discredit the notion of sui generis Chinese storytelling.



## Notes

1. The Close Economic Partnership Arrangement (CEPA), signed in 2003, encompassed a range of incentives and provisions designed to integrate the economies of Hong Kong and China.
2. Jeffery Chan, “The Selling and Branding of Chinese-language Films Internationally,” Filmart industry seminar, Hong Kong, 18 March 2013.
3. Author’s interview with Au Kin-ye, 5 April 2014, Hong Kong.
4. Author’s interview with Peter Chan, 3 April 2014, Hong Kong. All subsequent quotations from, and claims attributed to, Peter Chan derive from this interview.
5. Several figures lay claim to this phrase’s inception: social historian Gerard Lemos, whose book *The End of the Chinese Dream* appeared in 2012; Party leader Xi Jinping, for whom the term became a political mantra in 2013; and Peter Chan himself, whose *American Dreams* dominated mainland theaters in the same year. Regardless of authorship, these coeval developments jointly swept the notion of a “Chinese dream” into the mainland public discourse.
6. The China threat encompasses a range of (western) anxieties concerning China’s economic rise as a global superpower, including the country’s increasing investment in and consumption of natural resources, its growing military capabilities, the perceived threat to western democratic values, and the peril of soft power eroding western (and especially American) supremacy. See for further discussion Barr 2011.
7. Chan’s film here skewers the American assumption that migration to the US benefits the migrant, who typically holds an affirmative opinion of American society. “International students usually return home with a greater appreciation of American values and institutions,” claims Joseph Nye (Nye 2004: 44-45).
8. The perception of a shift in power within Sino-US relations increasingly finds expression in both Chinese and American works of fiction. Asian American playwright David Henry Hwang thematizes this issue in his 2012 comedy, *Chinglish*. In the play’s closing scene, a white American businessman reflects on his experiences trading in China: “I think it’s important to enter the Chinese market with realistic expectations. I mean, there may have been a time when [the Chinese] looked up to us. If so, that was long before I came onto the scene. Nowadays, to be successful, you have to understand your place in their picture” (2012: 99).
9. Precisely what this outlook encompasses, and how it is manifested, typically goes unanalyzed by Chan’s commentators. I take these critics to connote more than Chan’s transnational

distribution and marketing strategies; rather, I think they mean to suggest a worldview, and a set of preoccupations, that are fundamentally different than those possessed by Chan's compatriots.

10. According to Well Go USA distributor Doris Pfardrescher, "what primarily do well in the US are martial-arts action films – they have a long-standing fanbase, they contain *simplified* stories and an abundance of visual effects, and they're easy for US viewers to consume" (Bettinson 2014: 265, emphasis added). This situation has changed little in the past decade. In 2008 Bey Logan, vice-president of Asian acquisitions at The Weinstein Company, attested: "The Asian films that are working for us in America are stylized action. The martial arts movies are selling, but the horror movies aren't." Author's interview with Bey Logan, 27 March 2008, Hong Kong.

11. Author's interview with Au Kin-ye, 5 April 2014, Hong Kong.

12. Peter Chan estimates that Cantonese-dubbed films automatically accrue 40% more revenue in Guangdong than Mandarin-language films.

13. Where logic dictates, exceptions may be found. The explicit subject matter and settings of *American Dreams*, for instance, meant that a Cantonese version would be inappropriate.

14. This version also exercises an act of politically-correct censorship, deleting a brief moment whereby a young child is physically disciplined by his mother.

15. Compare *Wu Xia*'s gross of US\$ 1,032,857 at the Hong Kong box office. As this example indicates, North American distribution poses problems not only of artistic interference but of straitened distribution too. Even when the US distributor has assembled a revised cut to their satisfaction, the film is granted a highly limited theatrical release. TWC released a reedited version of *Shaolin Soccer* (2002) on no more than fourteen screens at a time during its North American exhibition (Dombrowski 2008). Mainland blockbuster *Painted Skin: The Resurrection* (2012) was exhibited in just six US theatres during its 35-day run, and *Let the Bullets Fly* (2010) played in ten US theatres during its 56-day release. Critics often adduce the North American box-office failure of *Lost in Thailand* (2012) as evidence that Chinese films do not travel successfully (the film's US\$ 57,000 theatrical gross pales in comparison to its domestic gross of US\$ 202,000,000). But this film's North American release was restricted to just eleven days in 35 theatres, precluding much chance of box office success.

16. The reworking practices made famous by Weinstein are not unprecedented. A notable foregoing example is *The Legend of the 7 Golden Vampires* (1974), a Shaw Brothers-Hammer Film coproduction, whose original American distribution collapsed in 1974. Several years later, US distributor Dynamite Entertainment bought the American distribution rights. The firm excised twenty minutes from the original version, reedited scenes out of sequence, repeated certain scenes, and released the film in America under a different, misnomered title (*The Seven Brothers Meet Dracula*).

17. Doris Pfordrescher, “The Selling and Branding of Chinese-language Films Internationally,” Filmart industry seminar, Hong Kong, 18 March 2013.
18. Jeffery Chan, “The Selling and Branding of Chinese-language Films Internationally,” Filmart industry seminar, Hong Kong, 18 March 2013.
19. Patrick Frater, “The Selling and Branding of Chinese-language Films Internationally,” Filmart industry seminar, Hong Kong, 18 March 2013.
20. At times, a confused logic accompanies the distributor’s practice. If American viewers won’t sit still for subtitles, why suppose they will welcome newly-added intertitles? Moreover, Western viewers were apparently untroubled by subtitled screenings of *Hero*, *Infernal Affairs*, *Crouching Tiger*, and other successful Chinese-language imports. Accounting for the failure of Chinese comedies in the US, one critic echoes a widely-held assumption that “people going to the theater to laugh don’t want to read subtitles” (Huntsman 2014: 35). But there are ample counterexamples, such as *Kung Fu Hustle* (2004), that suggest that the import’s problems lie elsewhere than in Americans’ allergy to subtitles.
21. For example, a Tarantino-esque rock-guitar cue italicizes a major plot revelation in *Wu Xia*, but *Dragon* eliminates this incongruous riff in favor of an unemphatic and prosaic orchestral cue.
22. The Weinstein Company’s DVD release of *The Grandmaster* features additional material the nature of which makes clear the import’s target demographic – namely, western devotees and practitioners of martial arts, rather than the art-film or ‘world cinema’ cognoscenti that is Wong’s typical audience. The supplementary DVD material includes interviews with Bruce Lee’s daughter and Wu-Tang Clan producer RZA.
23. Pfordrescher, “The Selling and Branding of Chinese-language Films Internationally,” Filmart industry seminar, Hong Kong, 18 March 2013.

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