Over the past century numerous waves of transnational media have washed across East Asia, with cycles emanating from various centers of cultural production such as Tokyo, Hong Kong, and Seoul. Most recently the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has begun to exert growing influence over the production and flow of screen media, a phenomenon tied to the increasing size and power of its overall economy. The country’s rising status achieved truly global recognition during the 2008 Beijing Olympics. In the seven years leading up to the event, the Chinese economy tripled in size, expanding from $1.3 trillion to almost $4 trillion, a figure that made it the world’s third largest economy, slightly behind Japan but decisively ahead of its European counterparts, Germany, France, and the United Kingdom. The scale and speed of this transformation are stunning. Just as momentous are the changes in its film, television, and digital media markets, which now figure prominently in the calculations of producers throughout East Asia.

China’s “peaceful rise” is the organizing theme of the government’s economic and foreign policies and, quite strikingly, it was also the emphatic message of the Olympic ceremonies staged by Zhang Yimou, the PRC’s most internationally renowned film director. Named artistic advisor to the Games during the early planning stage, Zhang later won the competition to design the opening and closing spectacles, ultimately spending an estimated $300 million and employing 15,000 performers to produce undeniably the most visually striking ceremonies in the history of the Olympics. Such ceremonies are commonly perceived as one of the most important payoffs to governments that sponsor the games, for they provide not only an opportunity to promote national pride but also offer a chance to speak directly to a huge global television audience, estimated at between 2 and 3 billion people. Unsurprisingly, another structuring message at the Beijing Olympics was “harmonious society,” a phrase coined by President Hu Jintao, suggesting the government’s shift in emphasis from political struggle
and economic growth toward societal balance and harmony. Issues like environment, culture, and quality of life are taking on greater importance with this policy transition, as is the suggestion that China seeks cordial and fruitful relations with its international partners, especially those in Asia. The opening ceremony therefore aimed to inspire national pride and to promote the PRC’s regional and global prominence, while also seeking to reassure the world that its rising power poses no danger to others.

As in Zhang’s films, the Olympic spectacle featured rich, expansive swathes of color that vividly defined each “scene,” reminding the audience at turns of key innovations that China contributed to world history: paper, the printing press, the compass, and gunpowder. Like these turning points from the past, the ceremony suggested that China is today perched on the threshold of another momentous era in its long history, but one where Confucian notions of harmony and restraint tether the dynamic forces of genius and ambition. Interestingly, the scale of the event and the cast of thousands would have conveyed anything but restraint if not for the skillful choreography that Zhang brought to the event. Like a Red Square rally or a Busby Berkeley musical, the ceremony proved fascinating primarily because of the persistent tension between scale and skill, and between energy and efficiency. These contending forces were deftly managed by Zhang, but many critics also have charged that the director himself has over time been harnessed by the Communist Party and that in exchange he has gained access to lavish resources and vast promotional opportunities.¹

Once considered a renegade by government officials, Zhang now enjoys favorable opening dates and distribution arrangements for his films. In exchange, his movies promote messages that are complicit with the ideological agenda of the ruling party. Zhang for his part says he is more interested in entertainment than politics, and he claims to be most keenly interested in competing with Hollywood, both in China and around the world. Yet this, too, reflects government priorities, which now emphasize commercial and cultural concerns with respect to media, as opposed to a prior focus on their propaganda function. To the extent that Zhang’s blockbusters compete with Hollywood, the government is pleased, especially with his costume dramas that recast Chinese history in a favorable light. Over the past decade PRC officials have reportedly lobbied hard on behalf of his films at Hollywood’s Academy Awards.

Of course, none of this is surprising behavior for a world power. The US government has long appreciated Hollywood’s role as cultural ambassador, and audiences around the world understand this as well, albeit with a critical eye. American movies and TV shows as well as US policies with respect to intellectual property and the “free flow” of information are all seen as part of a broad American cultural agenda. And yet this agenda is executed in a decentralized fashion, allowing plausible deniability of collusion or conspiracy. Whether producing Potter or Pirates, Seinfeld or Sopranos, Hollywood executives and talent have long contended that they are more interested in

entertainment than politics, an assertion that is small comfort to government officials and cultural producers in other locales who must adapt to the imposing and pervasive influence of a powerful global neighbor.

Similarly, media practitioners in East Asia must increasingly take account of Chinese media’s growing impact on audiences, artists, markets, and finance. Most Hong Kong filmmakers, for example, now presume that mainland audiences and production partners must play a central role in their projects, a development that has significantly affected the tenor of their movies. Likewise, television producers in Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan now covet the vast mainland audience as potentially their most significant export market. Moreover, influential distributors from countries such as Korea increasingly believe it necessary to take the PRC’s market potential into account when staging and financing film and television productions. But if the Chinese audience now figures prominently in the calculations of media practitioners, can one say the same about mainland media exports? Are they growing more popular in regional markets? Here the signals are mixed, with big blockbusters and television series achieving only occasional success. Moreover, the most exportable screen products tend to be coproductions with foreign partners. As we shall see in this forum, creative constraints within the PRC and distribution problems in regional markets have attenuated the circulation of China’s screen media so far. Yet government ambitions and the growing clout of the mainland economy suggest that the potential for growth is nevertheless substantial and worthy of careful consideration.

In this In Focus we therefore explore a series of related questions: In what ways have the themes and concerns of artists and talent changed in the shadow of China’s rise? How have relations of production, financing, and distribution been refigured? In what ways have the experiences and practices of audiences changed, inside the mainland as well as outside? And what future developments might we expect over the next twenty years?

Darrell Davis begins with a description of the specific ways that government policy is shaping the Chinese film industry and how such efforts are affecting the production and circulation of cinematic narratives. He furthermore positions these observations within the broader context of marketization, an explicit government policy to grow the economy while sustaining the ideological and political authority of the Communist Party. Although the PRC aims for global influence, its policies are resolutely nationalist in conception and execution. The resulting impact on mainland screen media is significant, but the government’s policy agenda extends to other locations and other cultural forms as well. Wanning Sun examines the implications of such policies with respect to diasporic audiences. An expansive state-run satellite television platform now delivers dozens of channels and thousands of hours of programming to four continents. Meanwhile, calculated interventions in street festivals, art expositions, and local community radio enable the government to extend and circulate official perspectives to overseas Chinese populations and to broader transnational audiences.

The government’s intense and growing interest in media and cultural policy is, however, fraught with anxiety regarding China’s creative capacity. Michael Keane shows that in the realm of television drama, mainland China remains a net importer, owing largely to constraints on the creative economy. Required to navigate a cautious
path with respect to content, producers eschew contemporary themes, often defaulting to historical series that are politically safe but have limited appeal with overseas audiences. Yingjin Zhang notes a similar pattern in the film industry, arguing that although some historical blockbusters do indeed find a prominent place in the international market, the vast majority of films are produced on modest budgets and enjoy only diminutive distribution support. He furthermore contends that despite the imposing ambitions of the PRC leadership, Chinese cinema is today—and has always been—a translocal cinema rather than a national cinema. Instead of one vast, integrated nation, Zhang explains, China is comprised of many particular locales, and connections are usually made between these places rather than at a grand territorial scale. Laikwan Pang extends this argument by reflecting on recent changes in Hong Kong cinema. Since the 1997 handover she has observed two tendencies, as many producers have responded to the territory’s reintegration with the mainland by refocusing their projects to suit a broad national audience, while others have begun to glimpse an opportunity to rebuild a Cantonese-language regional cinema by focusing primarily on Guangdong Province and overseas migrants from southern China. As the above-mentioned commentaries suggest, “China’s rise” may be predicated on the singular ambitions of the Communist Party leadership, but the circumstances confronting media executives and creative talent are far less coherent and malleable.

Similarly complex conditions obtain in overseas markets such as Korea and Japan. Jinhee Choi explains that media distribution companies in South Korea make it difficult for Chinese feature films to line up exhibition venues for theatrical runs, which depresses audience awareness as well as box office and video revenues. Although Hong Kong movies were at one time in vogue, the peninsular market is today dominated by major Hollywood movies and domestic Korean productions. Consequently, even the most popular Chinese blockbusters have registered barely a blip on the cultural radar screen in South Korea. Koichi Iwabuchi observes that the circulation of Chinese media is likewise circumscribed in Japan, but for other, largely cultural reasons. During the PRC’s economic and political transformations of the 1980s and 1990s, many Japanese perceived China as a dynamic cultural force with tremendous potential and, argues Iwabuchi, they consequently projected many of their own aspirations onto a chimerical China. More recently, however, the two countries have clashed over a number of contentious issues, and such tensions have resonated even more widely in Japanese society, as popular discourse about corruption, pollution, and piracy in China have eroded earlier fantasies and with them the potential appeal of Chinese screen media.

Given this range of complications, one should be cautious about too readily embracing “China’s rise” in transnational media and popular culture. Nevertheless, the explicit ambitions and policies of the PRC leadership and the vast and growing size of the mainland economy render Chinese media virtually impossible to ignore. The government certainly has the will and the means to play a significant regional and even global role. Whether it achieves such influence is subject to the particular plays of power and circumstance currently at work. The range of perspectives offered by our commentators helps to elaborate and critically analyze these multiple lines of force as well as their impact on screen media in East Asia.
n April 18, 2009, Jackie Chan told a high-ranking group of mainland business leaders that freedom for Chinese people was not such a great idea. “I’m not sure if it’s good to have freedom or not,” he said, adding freedom in Hong Kong and Taiwan made those places “chaotic.” This brought applause from the audience of officials and executives. “I’m gradually beginning to feel that we Chinese need to be controlled. If we’re not being controlled, we’ll just do what we want.” He added he’d rather buy a TV set made in Japan, as Chinese-made sets might explode. The star’s remarks sparked outrage in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the mainland. “Who are you representing when you say this? And who do you want to be controlled by?” asked blogger Liu Qujing. Chan’s company rushed to douse the flames, saying his comments had been deliberately misinterpreted.

In China proper, Jackie Chan’s work was well under control. His film Shinjuku Incident (San suk si gin; Derek Yee, 2009) was not released on mainland screens due to violence and a lurid story line about Chinese illegal immigrants. This decision was made by Chan and his backers, not by censors. Chan’s character, a gangster named Steel-head, allies himself with a Japanese cop in order to clean up Shinjuku, Tokyo’s red-light district, by thrashing rival gangsters from Taiwan. The film was quite favorably reviewed, and Chan was praised for his courage in a dramatic role. Chan’s 2010 film, Little Big Soldier, (Da Bing Xiao Jiang, Ding Sheng) is an action comedy. This means a return to form, with Chan appearing in movies in which his audience and investors can feel more confident.

That Hong Kong–Hollywood star Jackie Chan can address mainland elites with such familiarity says a lot about China’s ambitions. Since the Reform and Opening thirty years ago, China has transitioned from a planned economy to a market-oriented economy. Chinese film enterprises, like the larger economy, enjoy booming production, investment, and international participation. To a world facing widespread recession, this is enviable. Firms from Hollywood, Europe, Japan, South Korea, and especially Hong Kong hotly pursue joint ventures with the People’s Republic of China (PRC) production and exhibition outfits.
From 2002, domestic production climbed, with a spike in 2004, the year that the Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement (CEPA) was launched (Table 1). CEPA sought to integrate China, Hong Kong, and Macau through a package of changes providing favorable conditions for products and services from the latter two, which are now Special Administrative Regions (SAR) of the PRC.

This was especially helpful to Hong Kong companies like Media Asia, Edko, and Golden Harvest, and furthermore supported coproduction with foreign players abroad. In 2004 production and box office in the PRC grew by over 50 percent, in 2007 by more than 20 percent, and in 2008 by 27 percent. CEPA projects contributed forty pictures to the “domestic” film total in 2008 and therefore played a significant role in the rapid rise of China’s film industry over the past decade.

In exhibition, too, there was a 20 percent annual growth rate (400 new screens per year) with 570 new screens opening in 2008 alone, bringing the national total to 4,000 screens.

This growth, however, was not merely a response to changes in audience demand, for China is of course not an unplanned economy. It is instead a country that espouses a very self-conscious policy of marketization. In China today, marketization functions to spur investment, production, and consumption with the aim of encouraging homemade products that are otherwise unable to compete with imports. China’s marketization, according to the Communist Party, is supposed to align the industry with international standards, but it is not a path to liberalism or unbridled openness that might pose a challenge to the authority of the Party.


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Table 1. China’s Annual Feature Film Production and Box Office (1998–2008)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of Films Produced</th>
<th>Domestic Box Office</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>1.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>0.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>0.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>212</td>
<td>1.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>260</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>330</td>
<td>2.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>402</td>
<td>3.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>406</td>
<td>2.56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figures indicate billions of RMB. One billion RMB (renminbi) is equivalent to about 146.48 million US dollars.

Source: China Film Yearbook (1998–2008)
The purpose of marketization is to monitor and control market performance, overseeing what goes to market not by fiat but through “micro-adjustments” (weiguan tiao kong). In some cases, it allows protectionism and preferential handling, allocating market share for domestic pictures. Schemes like CEPA and joint ventures are meant to benefit all participants and create a win-win result between Chinese and foreign partners, in that order. Marketization is not an end in itself but is rather intended to boost the quality and quantity of Chinese films, moving the PRC steadily toward a major soft-power role in the international arena.

Indeed, reform and market opening are seen as powerful tools to promote growth and profitability for Chinese companies, but marketization doesn’t necessarily mean full privatization or commercialization divorced from benefits to society. There are clear targets: marketization must assist Chinese cinema, but it must also uphold socialist tenets while entertaining and enlightening audiences regarding Party legitimacy; the market may not purvey destabilizing, unworthy material. If this means constraints on filmmakers, businessmen, and bureaucrats, so be it. As with other freedoms—artistic, academic, religious, journalistic—“freedom” in the marketplace is fine, but it is subject to proper authority and control. All Chinese know this, according to official writ.

Perhaps this indicates a form of convergence, an exchange of political-economic features across distinct systems. In information technology and media, convergence means overlapping technologies, with image, voice, information, entertainment, and commerce coalescing and converging onto demand-led platforms. As discussed in the pages of Cinema Journal, convergence involves burgeoning connections between computer games, television, and film. To these technological and intertextual convergences can be added a political-economic aspect, aligned by reference to geopolitical coordinates.

Convergence of political economy is a recurrence of some features and practices across different, once antagonistic models. China and the West both face specters of corruption, tainted products, and misappropriation of immense resources, public and private. There is a crisis of confidence in markets, undermining faith in a key model of socioeconomic adjudication. China’s planned economy is not conducive to some capitalist innovations, like investment-led research, creative industries, or mortgage-backed securities, insofar as we assume capitalism rewards original ideas (while socialist models tend to discourage it). Yet marketization, as followed in the PRC, may nevertheless be effective in its stipulation of targets, outcomes, and constraints.

While infamous for intellectual property violations of Hollywood films, Windows software, and luxury brands, China can and does protect its own wares in an inauspicious market. Market players and forces are then managed to ensure that entry, conduct, and share are properly allocated. The PRC’s self-protection measures are remarkably stringent, worthy of Disney Inc. (e.g., the 2008 Beijing Olympic imagery).

2 Darrell William Davis and Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh, East Asian Screen Industries (London: British Film Institute, 2008), 174–176.
In cinema, for example, there are blackouts on foreign releases during sensitive times, like political memorials such as June 4th or the sixtieth anniversary of the PRC in October 2009. These so-called “domestic film protection periods” are reserved for major Chinese *dapian* (“big film”), like Zhang Yimou pictures and John Woo’s *Red Cliff* (*Chi bi*; 2008). For favored projects market windows are flung open wide, even derailing other Chinese movies that could upset the balance of market outcomes.

Independent distributor PolyBona (“the Chinese Miramax”) lodged a public complaint about allocation of digital screens in early 2007 because its CEPA coproduction *Confession of Pain* (*Seung sing*; Lau Wai-keung and Alan Mak, 2006) was shut out of a lucrative year-end run. This “domestic protection” blackout also postponed scheduled openings of Disney, Paramount, Warners, and DreamWorks, as well as theatrical release of Jia Zhangke’s *Still Life* (*Sanxia haoren*; 2006). The government action was designed to boost Zhang Yimou’s *Curse of the Golden Flower* (*Man cheng jin dai huang jin jia*; 2006) just as blackouts had benefited his previous films *House of Flying Daggers* (*Shi mian mai fu*; 2004) and *Hero* (*Ying xiong*; 2002). Interestingly, despite its huge box office, *Curse of the Golden Flower* later received criticism from the Party.

Marketization, as balancing act between an open market and a planned economy, aims for predictability, control, and convergence. It is “Chinawood” aspiring to match Hollywood internationally while continuing to serve the Party at the national level. This might appear manipulative, tantamount to interference by the state or its proxies, but in the post-crash era of the Western economies, there is something to be said for careful monitoring and regulation of markets, ensuring protection of financial and social resources.

There might then be some convergence of China and the West with respect to interdependence between public and private enterprise. In China, the state’s role in the market is not just as referee but as active player, too. In the United States, banks, insurers, and automakers have now fallen into the arms of the federal government—wards of the state—so the distinction between the two systems is no longer as stark as it once was.

The Chinese film industry has always had close ties with the state; once a propaganda arm, it has upgraded to a visible, lucrative source of revenue and prestige. Consider China Film Group (CFG), a large government-owned and -operated conglomerate that occupies the most favored position under SARFT (State Administration of Radio, Film, Television). A major responsibility of CFG is to promote *dapian*, big event pictures like *Mei Lanfang* (Chen Kaige, 2008), *The Banquet* (Feng Xiaogang, 2006), and *The Promise* (Chen, 2005). These are modeled in part on imported blockbusters, which a CFG subsidiary China Film Import-Export handles, bringing in twenty foreign films per year, mostly from Hollywood. Since 1994, imports have been used to prime the market and to leverage local productions into commercial hits. Exotic transplants of the mid-1990s like *True Lies* (James Cameron, 1994), *The Fugitive*...
(Andrew Davis, 1993), and *Titanic* (James Cameron, 1997) functioned as models for China-made blockbusters. Since 2002, CFG has refashioned Western blockbusters into Chinese *dapian* such as *Hero*, *House of Flying Daggers*, *Curse of the Golden Flower*, and *Red Cliff*, and such pictures enjoy around 80 percent of the annual domestic box office revenue.

Another format is *zhu xuanlü*, “main melody” or keynote pictures, initiated in 1987. These state-sponsored works are propaganda films—glorifying the lives of Party officials, celebrating heroic incidents, or portraying war stories and patriotic melodramas. They are numerous, constituting 30 percent of overall production (over one hundred films per year) but insignificant in revenue (5 percent of the total box office). Official policy seems to try to merge and converge *dapian* and keynote films; the latter need to perform more like *dapian* in box office and production values, and be received by viewers as entertainment, not just medicinal propaganda. This signals another kind of convergence, where spectacular tent-pole blockbusters also carry grand ideologies of national glory (this is true for American pictures, too, like *Armageddon* [Michael Bay, 1998], *Independence Day* [Roland Emmerich, 1996], *War of the Worlds* [Steven Spielberg, 2005], etc.).

A third tier is the medium-to-small-budget production, which gets little theatrical exposure, going instead to DVD and cable television, such as CFG’s CCTV-6 Movie Channel. Genre pictures and art/festival films with domestic or foreign backing usually fall into this camp. Most private production slates pursued outside state-owned enterprises operate in this mode.

Finally, CFG transfers private expertise into public enterprise and does so most effectively by partnering with (or co-opting) private and foreign enterprises. In late 2004, CFG joined two private companies to form China Warner Film HG, a giant production-distribution-exhibition conglomerate that aimed to enhance Chinese media capacity by exploiting Hollywood expertise. Yet within two years of its formation the joint venture was stumbling, and in 2007 Warner Bros. pulled out. Ownership issues proved to be the sticking point, with Warners expecting a bigger slice of the company pie. This would have put majority control of a major mainland distribution company in foreign hands, however, something that proved unacceptable to state bureaucrats and Party officials.

Could we then see the mainland film industry as conglomerate or giant syndicate, not truly a market? Subject to firm guidance, control, and command from its supreme board of directors, this model is not so different from Disney, which tries, in the name of “synergy,” to coordinate various product lines and subsidiaries within a vast, interconnected entity. Control, management, and monitoring of results: in the eyes of Chinese leaders, these are worthy goals in a market economy, and they are ultimately the essence of marketization in the PRC. In today’s unpredictable global economy any hedge against unwanted outcomes is no doubt reassuring to figures with clout, bigger players for sure than Jackie Chan.

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In March 2009, Li Changchun, China’s Chief of Propaganda and a senior member of the standing committee of China’s Political Bureau, told the ABC (Australia’s national broadcaster) that China was “concerned” about the Western media’s reporting of Tibetan issues, and he firmly requested that the ABC discuss China in a “comprehensive, well-balanced, fair, and objective manner.” Li’s behavior is indicative of China’s increasingly proactive—rather than reactive—approach to propaganda. Instead of waiting for Western media to become “objective” or more sympathetic to China in their coverage of sensitive issues, China is now moving its propaganda offshore. For instance, the photo exhibition, “Tibet of China: Past and Present,” recently traveled around the world repudiating the West’s popular representations of the Dalai Lama. What emerges from offshore propaganda is a high level of synergy—sometimes planned but at other times arising organically—between the Chinese government and diasporic Chinese communities with respect to international public opinion of China. While Li Changchun was espousing the official government line on Tibet, similar sentiments were being expressed by students from the People’s Republic of China (PRC), in a series of clashes with pro-Tibet demonstrators in a number of Western cities. Many Chinese students and migrants found it surprising and emotionally unacceptable that the Western media, supposedly balanced and free of propaganda, could be just as one-sided as the Chinese state’s propaganda machine. As part of its “soft power” ploy, the Chinese state wants to improve the effectiveness of its propaganda—dubbed more neutrally its “communication capacity”—overseas, and in aiming for this, it has found a ready-made channel among former Chinese nationals now living outside China.

The growing assertiveness of diasporic Chinese toward the West can best be understood against the backdrop of China’s ascent on the global stage. Until recently the world has witnessed steady double-digit economic growth in China, which only became a member of the World Trade Organization in December of 2001—the same year that Beijing finally won its bid to host the Olympic Games. A post-Games China is believed to have “graduated to world power status,” and its supposed ascent as the most powerful nation of the twenty-first century has started to take on the appearance of established truth rather than prediction.

Patterns of outbound migration from China have also changed since the 1980s, and this has affected communication flows as well. The massive exodus of post-1989 political dissidents, humanitarian refugees, and economic opportunists has given way to a steady stream of full-fee-paying tertiary and secondary students. A sure sign of the PRC’s self-confidence is its changed attitude toward Chinese students and migrants now living overseas. Once regarding these “wandering children” (haiwai youzi) with suspicion, Chinese embassies and consulates now make systematic efforts to reach out to them, including providing free Chinese textbooks to Chinese-language schools overseas, organizing “roots-seeking” summer camps for children of former PRC nationals, and participating in various diasporic Chinese gatherings. Diasporic communities live out the reality of China’s ascent in their everyday cultural production and consumption practices, at both the individual and the collective level. Many overseas Chinese households now have a satellite dish on their roof or in their backyard, enabling them to re-create a Chinese mediasphere wherever they are.

After more than a decade of practice, the Chinese state media have achieved a high level of sophistication—both rhetorically and technologically—in speaking to these diasporic audiences. China’s official television network, CCTV (China Central Television), now delivers two popular services, with CCTV-4 reaching around 10 million viewers globally, and CCTV-9 finding some 40 million viewers overseas. The network also controls about 75 percent of Chinese-language television stations in North America. CCTV’s Great Wall TV platform, launched in 2004, carries an enormous amount of content from China’s national and provincial channels, and has now expanded into the Asian region with services to Vietnam, Thailand, South Korea, Myanmar, Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan.

There is also a greater degree of self-awareness among diasporic communities that they are now an essential component of mainland media’s intended audience despite their physical absence, and that they are both keenly spoken to and listened to by the media “back at home.” Over the past decade or more, the state-run media have become increasingly savvy at promoting patriotism offshore via satellite technology.


through a series of media events that has included the Hong Kong hand-over ceremony, the successful launch of the Shenzhou space shuttle, and, most recently, the 2008 Olympics. These events, together with the annual Spring Festival television gala, demonstrate the ingenuity of the Chinese state in reinventing ways of addressing diasporic viewers as part of their extended national audience. CCTV’s highly orchestrated coverage of the Sichuan earthquakes in May 2008 also proves that media events focusing on national tragedies could be equally effective in projecting national unity onto the diasporic sphere.

The transmission of highly orchestrated media events and spectacles via satellite and other deterritorialized technologies represents one important strategy for reaching out to diasporic individuals as national subjects. Equally important, however, is a range of initiatives aiming to integrate Chinese media content into the transnational mediasphere, thus enabling the diasporic consumption of media products from the PRC on a quotidian basis. Some initiatives take the form of joint ventures with foreign local media content providers. Australian subscribers to cable television provider Foxtel, for instance, can access a limited number of Chinese-language television channels (including CCTV-4). Meanwhile other initiatives dovetail with the entrepreneurial impulse of transnational Chinese business elites.

Tommy Jiang, a Melbourne-based migrant from northern China is the owner of five Chinese-language newspapers in Australia, and also owns Australia’s first Chinese radio station, 3CW, which has been in operation since 1999. Several years ago Jiang expanded his business to Perth, the capital of Western Australia, a city that is now host to around 100,000 Chinese-speaking migrants. Jiang set up a Chinese television station there and has also established Perth’s first commercial Chinese-language radio station, Perth Chinese Radio 104.9 FM, which broadcasts twenty-four hours a day. In 2008, he took over the Oriental Post, one of Perth’s most widely circulated bilingual Chinese-English newspapers. Despite the phenomenal size of his media business in Australia, Jiang considers the ultimate hallmark of his success to be a deal he secured with China Radio International (CRI) in 2007, which effectively made him a partner of China’s official international radio broadcaster. With twenty-seven offices scattered around the world, CRI is metonymic of China’s growing ambition to infiltrate diasporic communities. As part of the agreement, Perth Chinese Radio 104.9 FM now broadcasts ten hours of CRI programs each day, in both English and Chinese, in addition to its own local news and current affairs. Jiang is equally proud of the fact that his radio station has become the de facto cultural home for Chinese students now studying in Perth.8

China’s ambition for cultural expansion manifests itself not only in its efforts to reach out to the Chinese population overseas, but more recently and noticeably in a series of attempts to promote Chinese culture as an essential ingredient of global cosmopolitan urban culture. While Confucius Institutes that have mushroomed in many Western universities represent an institutionalized form of China’s cultural expansion, efforts to make China’s presence felt on the global stage also take place at ad hoc grassroots events, which tend to be small in scale and context specific. One such initiative was a recent two-week-long photo exhibition showcasing the PRC’s economic

8 Interview with Tommy Jiang, January 2009.
achievements entitled “China’s Rise,” which was staged in Hurstville, an inner-western suburb of Sydney with a Chinese population of some 14 percent. Co-organized by the local municipality of Hurstville and the Chinese consulate in Sydney, this was one of the increasingly common local cultural events that testify to China’s growing capacity to infiltrate the cultural landscape of the West.

No longer content with the circulation of Chinese culture through mediated spectacles such as occasional Chinese art exhibitions and artistic performances overseas, the Chinese government is forever on the lookout for opportunities to insert itself into the cosmopolitan cultural makeup of Western countries such as the United States and Australia. One crucial strategy is the instigation of or active participation in annual festivals featuring Chinese culture, but aiming to showcase the cosmopolitanism of the host country or city. Such events fit snugly with the host nation’s multicultural agenda of delivering culturally inclusive goods and services. The growing popularity of Chinese New Year celebrations in a number of global cities including New York, Toronto, Paris, and Sydney bears testimony to this newly emerging cultural exhibitionism. For a decade, the annual Lantern Festival in Auckland, New Zealand, has featured lantern and art works from Guangzhou, its sister city. The city of Sydney, Australia’s most populous city and home to the largest Chinese community in the nation, has, for the last thirteen years, hosted the biggest annual celebration of the Lunar New Year outside of Asia, including a Chinese New Year Parade. Each annual event focuses on a particular Chinese province. For the Year of the Ox (2009), 500 hundred artists from Henan Province, embodying China’s “central plain” culture, were flown in for the event, offering Sydney spectators a taste of the “quintessential China.” The celebrations followed a protracted phase of planning and negotiation between Henan’s provincial government and the city of Sydney. Supported by Sydney’s local government and business sectors, it was sponsored by both Chinese and Australian companies including the Bank of China, China Union Pay, Medibank Private, and Volkswagen.

It is also important to remember that Chinese cultural events offshore often present themselves as ideological battlefields whereby various positions are contested, and it is logical to assume that such contestation will only intensify in the future. For example, the Shen Yun Divine Performing Arts Troupe, which is based in New York, tours around the world showcasing “traditional” Chinese culture as opposed to PRC-sanctioned culture. Its promotional materials make it clear that the troupe is “independent of China’s regime,” and it is proud to declare its support for Falun Gong.

Although it may not be wise to predict exactly how China’s rise will rework the transnational Chinese mediasphere, it is nevertheless safe to say that the global ambitions of this economic powerhouse have already unleashed unprecedented cultural leadership, entrepreneurship, and expansionism. As a result, cultural traffic between the PRC and the diasporic sphere is increasingly characterized by a coalition between state authorities (of both China and the host country) and transnational capital. This alliance features, moreover, a curious coexistence of the “middle-kingdom complex”

on the part of the Chinese state, and a benign orientalism on the part of the white-dominated but multicultural polity of the host nation. It also displays the resolute determination of the Chinese state to inscribe a particular vision of Chinese culture onto both diasporic Chinese and global cosmopolitan cultural spheres. Finally, such traffic is slowly but surely eroding the boundary between the PRC mediasphere and the diasporic Chinese mediasphere.

Keeping Up with the Neighbors: China’s Soft Power Ambitions

by MICHAEL KEANE

On the evening of August 8, 2008, viewers of the Beijing Olympic Games opening ceremony witnessed the most impressively coordinated launch of any major global event. Superbly choreographed by the film director Zhang Yimou, the lavish spectacle was infused with color, symbolic meaning, and reminders of China’s creative past.

Yet the creative success of the Opening Ceremony was not matched by economic success. The number of international tourists failed to meet expectations, and the massive investment in infrastructure has saddled Beijing’s “Olympic economy” with a legacy of debts. Still, the Games, and particularly the opening ceremony, are remembered in terms of China’s “soft power.” This in itself is not a new idea. Coined by Joseph Nye in the early 1990s, the concept of soft power has been applied broadly in the field of international diplomacy.¹ One of the key elements of soft power is cultural exports, and in this respect China is following a path paved by its Asian neighbors. Japan has expressed its influence through popular culture (its so-called Gross National Cool) and South Korea has exploited the Korean wave, its emergence coinciding with another global sporting event, the 2002 World Cup.

China’s soft power has become a key issue in the reform of its cultural, media, and creative industries. In the past two years a number of conferences organized by major universities have attempted to clarify the concept, linking it to the larger strategic political idea of

Comprehensive National Power (CNP). In late 2008, the efficacy of soft power received an injection of life when the newly appointed Vice Chairman of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, Li Wuwei, published *Creativity Is Changing China*. An economist by training, and Director of the Research Centre for Creative Industries at the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, Li argues for a renovation of China’s media and cultural industries—and the broader economy as well—via a transformation of China’s industrial structure. Li calls for a shift from infrastructure toward human capital—from “made in China” toward “created in China.” In his prescription, “cultural soft power” opens up a more international sphere of activity. In contrast to a Beijing-centered concern about “cultural security” (*wénhuà ànquān*)—essentially a call to arms against the forces of globalization—Li talks about the power of “borderless industries.”

So what does this mean? Can China create its way out of the economic crisis? Certainly, this is a key element of Li’s vision. However, Li’s position comes up against a community of scholars and policymakers who believe that China is doing very well already in managing its media industries, and who believe China should stick to churning out movies and TV aimed at educating the masses. For such conservatives, reinforcement of “cultural security” through distinctively Chinese ideas is the key to soft power. Moreover, they believe that an attempt to emulate the cultural export success of Korea and Japan might compromise the strategy of building and maintaining national identity.

Nevertheless, there is a growing consensus that China should become a regional player. Many are now asking if success in regional markets would trigger a wave of national pride. Indeed, increasing box office returns in China’s film industry, both domestically and internationally, have led to calls for new markets in other industries including television, animation, and video games. Herein lies a dilemma for producers, writers, and investors in China’s audiovisual industries. In the past, China’s “small screen” industries responded obediently to the government’s call to target the domestic market. However, the domestic market does not reward originality, and even though the audience is huge, television companies generally receive a standard broadcast fee from China Central TV regardless of the quality of their work. Moreover, producers, such as animation shops, are charged first and foremost with the responsibility of educating the children of China and resisting the impact of foreign competition. The pleasures of the viewer and the profitability of the product must take a back seat to such concerns.

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3 Li Wuwei, *Creativity Is Changing China (Chuangyi gaibian Zhongguo)* (Beijing: Xinhua Publishing, 2008).
5 According to many industry interviews I have conducted, the China Central TV fee for one minute of animation is usually RMB 800.
In television drama similar problems exist. While there have been a number of successful contemporary shows, there is a propensity to generate historical dramas, usually with a political message. The overt pedagogical framing of much domestic content operates as a form of “cultural discount” in regional markets. In other words, the political accent diminishes the value of the product. Ying Zhu succinctly describes the regional orientation of TV drama: “[H]istory has become China’s niche, while Hong Kong maintains its reign in the martial arts arena and Taiwan leads the pack in family melodramas and idol dramas.”

**Cultural Trade: UNCTAD to the Rescue.** Until 2006, the lack of outward media traffic did not really matter in Beijing as long as the national market was listening to the messages sent out. However, in 2006, the topic of China’s cultural trade deficit made news. Much was made of the fact that China’s East Asian neighbors were selling their TV dramas, movies, and animation to the mainland, but China was not effectively countering these flows. Moreover, the trade imbalance extended into other areas of cultural production including publishing and performing arts. Zhao Qizheng, a member of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), was damning in his assessment of China’s performance, saying, “The country’s weakness in culture should be blamed.”

In April, Ding Wei, the Assistant Minister of Culture, announced the nation’s deficit in international cultural trade, revealing that the ratio of imports of cultural products to exports stood at 10.3 to 1. The general manager of China’s Arts and Entertainment Group, Zhang Yu, added soberly, “China’s foreign trade in culture is very weak.” In the television industry the picture was especially depressing. According to Zhang Xinjian, the deputy director of the cultural market department with the Ministry of Culture, “Most exported Chinese TV dramas are old fashioned and poorly packaged by international standards, which doom [sic] them to fail.”

Yet the gloom of the cultural trade debate would soon dissipate. Somewhat surprisingly, the silver lining was the springtime release of the *Creative Economy Report 2008* compiled by the United Nations (UN) Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and the UN Development Programme (UNDP). Only months later, the Chinese Academy of Social Science (CASS) embraced the UN findings pointing to China’s status as “the leading player in the world market for creative goods.” This reevaluation was welcome news for many in the Ministry of Culture. The *Creative
Economy Report was widely circulated and extensively mentioned in the media. From an apparent basket case in 2006 to world leader in 2008, it appeared China’s export tide had quickly turned.

This apparent reversal proved illusory, however. Purporting to capture the intangibility of the term “creative economy,” the UNCTAD report did not attempt to represent the intellectual property components of audiovisual data, relying instead on “the physical auditing of imports and exports of goods across national borders.” The report admits, “[W]hat many regard as the core of creative activity—the creation of intellectual property [rights]—is not directly measured for the simple reason that IPRs are increasingly disembedded from material products.” Consequently, the report centers on material products, that is, the number of items and their stated trade value in customs audits.

Another Story. How does one reconcile China’s success as a creative exporter, according to UNCTAD, with the admission from the Ministry of Culture that China is suffering a cultural exports deficit? How does one accurately account for the value of cross-border trade? In order to gain a different perspective, we can look at data compiled by China’s own industrial bean counters in the film and television industries, those sectors in which China is seriously seeking to counter the influence of Japanese and Korean “soft power.” Here we find another story.

China’s success story since 2003 is undoubtedly cinema. In 1992, 170 feature films were released; in 1998 this had fallen to 82, the lowest since 1979. By 2007, the number of feature films produced had jumped to 400. Of this number, however, many were low-budget films that received limited distribution and success. Nevertheless, the data show the film industry steadily gaining momentum.

While Chinese film has made significant improvements, China’s TV industry exports struggle to compete with the country’s East Asian neighbors, largely because of a lack of compelling content. Since the mid-1980s, China’s television exports have

12 Ibid., 94.
13 Ibid., 91.
14 In accounting for creativity in this way, Italy was the leader among developed countries in 2005 with exports of $28.01 million, followed by the United States with $25.54 million and Germany with $24.76 million. However, China, described as a developing country by UNCTAD, tops all of the developed countries with a massive $61.36 million. In addition, Hong Kong, also listed as “developing,” ranks second with $27.67 million, and in audiovisual exports ($3 million) it rates as one of the top ten exporters of “developing countries”: India is first, followed by Mexico, the Republic of Korea, Thailand, and Argentina. Both China and the Province of Taiwan are surprisingly beaten out of the top ten by Singapore.
15 Prior to 2003, Chinese productions accounted for only 10 percent of the total box office revenue in the PRC, with Hollywood and Hong Kong films accounting for the other 90 percent. In 2003, the leading film in terms of box office was Zhang Yimou’s Hero, which also garnered the majority of earnings in that year’s total exports of $80.6 million (RMB 0.55 billion). In the following year, a surge of interest in Chinese films saw Zhang’s House of Flying Daggers recoup $12.5 million in the United States and $10 million in Japan. By 2008, China’s film export revenues had jumped to $370.85 million (RMB 2.528 billion). Since 2003, the bulk of the box office takings in China have gone to Chinese films, most notably big-budget films coproduced with Hong Kong. See Fan Chen, “2008 National Box Office Over 4.3 Billion, New Record in All the Statistics,” Administration Centre of Digital Film Content, SARFT, http://www.dmcc.gov.cn/index/asp/newstop/200911291129.asp (accessed June 22, 2009). See also http://news.163.com/07/0108/07/34A399VR000120GU.html (accessed June 22, 2009).
been heavily reliant on costume serial drama.\textsuperscript{16} Over 50 percent of People’s Republic of China (PRC) TV exports are destined for Taiwan and Hong Kong. Other markets, roughly in order of sales volume, include Singapore, Malaysia, Japan, Korea, the United States, Indonesia, and Thailand. These markets remained consistent throughout the 1990s. By 2003, however, China’s revenue from serial drama exports to these core markets was hit by competition from popular South Korean dramas. The proportion of TV serial drama in total TV exports dropped from over 80 percent in 2002 to 50.2 percent in 2003 and 58.7 percent in 2004. In effect, the challenge from Korea had diminished the capacity of China to sell TV drama to its own cultural-linguistic backyard. Moreover, the price per episode decreased by almost 50 percent. In effect, the markets for TV drama in Asia are volatile and rely heavily on a few big hits. Examples of hit series creating cross-territory demand include the 2003 Korean serial \textit{The Jewel in the Palace} and the 1998 Chinese serial \textit{Princess Huanzhu}.\textsuperscript{17}

**Concluding Remarks.** Looking at the other side of the ledger, the value of TV drama imports, as well as the number of broadcast hours they command, has fallen in the past few years. This is in part due to State Administration of Radio Film and TV regulations limiting the amount of foreign programs a station can purchase.\textsuperscript{18} Yet despite government allocations, domestic television companies use a variety of tactics to get around restrictions. Consequently, official figures may show that the quantity of imports is dropping when in fact they remain quite popular among mainland audiences. A good example is Hunan Satellite Television (HSTV), a provincial telecaster whose signal is also available nationally via satellite. In cases where the purchase of a foreign TV serial drama exceeds its quota, a station such as HSTV will buy the remaining episodes from another station. In 2004, HSTV was able to utilize this practice to acquire the full schedule of \textit{The Jewel in the Palace}, even though this would not be reflected in official government data. UN reports to the contrary, China remains a very substantial importer of television drama.

In an attempt to boost the PRC’s cultural prominence, substantial investment has flowed into China’s creative sectors, most notably film, animation, and associated creative services. Animation bases, creative clusters, creative incubators, and film studios have sprung up, all talking up the idea of producing “original content.” It seems one

\textsuperscript{16} See Michael Keane, “From National Preoccupation to Overseas Aspiration,” in \textit{TV Drama in China}, ed. Ying Zhu, Michael Keane, and Ruoyun Bai (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008), 145–156. Sales in Asian markets in the 1980s included \textit{Tales of the Red Mansion} (Honglou meng) and \textit{The Water Margin} (Shuihu zhuhan). In the 1990s, \textit{The Romance of the Three Kingdoms} (Sanguo yanyi) and a remake of \textit{The Water Margin} performed strongly, notably in Taiwan and Hong Kong. The following decade, \textit{Swordsmen} (Xiaoxiao jianghu), \textit{Kangxi Dynasty} (Kangxi wangchao), \textit{Yongzheng Dynasty} (Yongzheng wangchao), and \textit{Grand Mansiongate} (Dazhaimen) recorded good earnings in Taiwan.

\textsuperscript{17} \textit{The Jewel in the Palace} (\textit{Dae jang geum}) took markets across Asia but was especially popular in mainland China; \textit{Princess Huanzhu} was extremely successful in pan-Asian markets. The volatility of exports can be seen in data. In 2005, the value of China’s TV exports was $9.96 million (RMB 67.86 million). In 2006, TV exports were $24.85 million (RMB 169.39 million), but fell to $17.86 million (RMB 121.74 million) in 2007. See National Bureau of Statistics of China, http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/ndsj/shehui2006/html/0422.htm (accessed April 28, 2009) and SARFT Statistics, http://gdtj.chinasarft.gov.cn (accessed April 28, 2009).

\textsuperscript{18} Rules for the Administration of the Import and Broadcast of Foreign Television Programs, Article 8.
way to get the attention of bureaucrats is to have a plan, in particular one which takes advantage of preferential location policies. The term “soft power” is now commonly used in plans and proposals circulated by China’s film, TV, and animation sectors. There is a sense that if Japan and Korea can make waves in terms of cultural production, then it may be China’s turn next. Understood this way, soft power is about national pride as much as export data. It goes without saying that the prospect of a Chinese Wave is intriguing to many Chinese. The unanswered question is, How will China manage, on the one hand, to generate a stream of content that satisfies the aspirations of party leaders concerned with maintaining national and cultural sovereignty and, on the other hand, lure entrepreneurs looking to broker a new Pan-Asian style that might prove attractive to audiences across the region?

Thanks to Bonnie Liu and Tingting Song for assistance with compiling the industry data.

Transnationalism and Translocality in Chinese Cinema

by YINGJIN ZHANG

Chinese cinema has experienced a paradoxical time of boom and doom in recent years. In terms of statistics, the industry and the market have posted unprecedented double-digit growth, and the government has been eager to tout its economic agenda by facilitating the production and circulation of transnational Chinese blockbusters. After the centennial celebration of Chinese cinema in 2005, no one doubted the extraordinary growth of Chinese cinema in the new century, and today production and box office figures continue to feed a general sense of euphoria. Annual feature productions increased from 88 in 2001 to 406 in 2008. Similarly, total box office revenues rose from RMB 840 million in 2001 to 4,341 million in 2008, while domestic films’ box office jumped from RMB 294 million in 2001 to 2,689 million in 2008. In a short period, overseas sales of Chinese films grew from RMB 550 million in 2003 to 2,528 billion in 2008. Moreover, new box office records for domestic films were established one after another. In early 2002, Big Shot’s Funeral (Da wan; Feng Xiaogang, 2001) claimed an unprecedented RMB 42 million; in 2003, Hero (Ying xiong; Zhang Yimou, 2002) raked in RMB 250 million in domestic exhibition. The seemingly unstoppable expansion
was confirmed by *The Curse of the Golden Flower* (*Man cheng jin dai huang jin jia*; Zhang Yimou, 2006), which took in RMB 290 million in China alone, and the most recent domestic record was RMB 340 million scored by *If You Are the One* (*Fei cheng wu rao*; Feng Xiaogang, 2008).¹

A fundamental problem, however, is that aside from the most prominent films, most feature productions do not receive theatrical exhibition and therefore incur huge financial losses. Moreover, in 2004, seven of the top ten titles were coproductions with Hong Kong, and they represented over 70 percent of the year’s box office total. Exhibition revenues from the top three films that same year were roughly equal to total revenues for the 209 other domestic films. This means that the average box office for the latter was approximately RMB 2 million, or less than 1 million after sharing revenues with the distributors and exhibitors. The production cost of most low-budget features ranges from RMB 1.5 to 3 million, and RMB 5 million is considered a safety mark beyond which it is difficult to recoup investment. Given this dire situation, up to 85 percent of low-budget feature productions in 2005 and 2006 never entered exhibition and therefore never recovered their investments from theaters.²

Clearly, Chinese cinema is a lopsided industry strong in production but weak in exhibition. Industry personnel and scholars have listed other problems that constrain Chinese cinema, such as rampant video piracy, exorbitant ticket prices (RMB 40–80 in major cities) in relation to incomes, underreported ticket sales, and the absence of a ratings system (which continues to make censorship an unpredictable issue). Still, given the spectacular box office records of recent blockbusters, most scholars seem to believe that transnationalism has worked wonders for Chinese cinema and that globalization is the only choice for the Chinese film industry if it is to compete with Hollywood.

I should clarify that, unlike the standard concept of “transnationalism” as “beyond the national but below the global,” in the Chinese context “transnationalism” often implies “across national, geopolitical, or linguistic borders,” as the term “transnational Chinese cinema(s)” suggests.³ The notion of national cinema has always been problematic in the Chinese context, especially when it involves Hong Kong and Taiwan. What happens, then, if we move away from transnationalism and instead examine the horizontal tactics of translocality? How might it alter our perspective on Chinese cinema? I contend that film production, distribution, exhibition, and reception often take place at the scale of the local or translocal rather than the national, especially in terms of market economy. Translocality prefers place-based imagination and reveals dynamic processes of the local/global (or glocal)—processes that involve not just the traffic of capital and people but that of ideas, images, styles, and technologies across places in polylocality. Moreover, translocal traffic is rarely a one-way street. On the

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² Yin Hong, *Kuayue bainian: Quanqiu hu xiade Zhongguo dianying* (Crossing the centennial year: Chinese cinema against the background of globalization) (Beijing: Qinghua daxue chubanshe, 2007), 149.

contrary, polylocality allows for the reconfiguration of different spaces and patterns of collaboration, competition, contestation, and contradiction. Filmmaking has always been a translocal practice, and Chinese film studies must rethink such translocality in filmmaking as well as in film scholarship.

In the context of early Chinese cinema, neither film production nor distribution and exhibition started at the national scale. On the contrary, local film operations specific to a city were the norm in the 1900s–1910s, and translocal and transregional cooperation dominated the industry in the 1920s. Fengtai Photographic Studio, which reputedly filmed the first Chinese short feature based on a Peking opera performance, Conquering Jun Mountain (Ding Junshan; 1905), was located in Beijing. Yaxiya was founded by Benjamin Brodsky, a Jewish American, in Shanghai in 1909 and produced shorts in both Shanghai and Hong Kong. Li Minwei collaborated with Brodsky in Hong Kong and under the company name Huamei produced Zhuangzi Tests His Wife (Zhuangzi shi qi; Li Beihai, 1913), a short feature based on Cantonese opera and reportedly shown in Los Angeles in 1917. Li Minwei and his two brothers launched Minxin in Hong Kong in 1923 and subsequently moved its operations to Shanghai in 1926. In a similar transregional move, Changcheng was established in Shanghai in 1924 by a group of patriotic Chinese who had operated a company of the same name in Brooklyn, New York, in 1921. Meanwhile, Shao Zuoweng established Tianyi in Shanghai in 1925 and in 1926 sent two of his younger brothers, Runme Shaw and Run Run Shaw, to develop their distribution and exhibition network in Southeast Asia.

It is evident that Chinese cinema rarely operated at the national scale before the late 1920s. As Wen-hsin Yeh suggests, “Chinese cinema in its formative period was . . . not a national enterprise self-contained within the boundaries of the nation-state but a diasporic venture connecting the Chinese populations in Shanghai, Hong Kong, Singapore, Southeast Asia, Australia, and North America.” The transregional connection would be further strengthened in the 1930s when the exigency of China’s war with Japan made it imperative that film companies and filmmakers relocate their operations to places that might or might not match their ideological affiliations, from Shanghai to Hong Kong or Chongqing. Nonetheless, despite this expansive geographic dispersal, Yeh’s term “diasporic venture” carries a misleading connotation because early Chinese filmmaking was not always decentering or self-marginalizing.

In comparison, Laikwan Pang’s deliberation on the potential of the leftist film movement of the 1930s as a Shanghai cinema vis-à-vis a Chinese cinema is more nuanced. Leftist films, based exclusively in Shanghai, “were specific products of the city rather than of the nation,” Pang writes, but she is nevertheless quick to confirm that their “self-avowed national profile was obvious.” In other words, leftist films were deeply implicated in a multilayered articulation between the city and the nation. As a prominent branch of Shanghai cinema in the 1930s, the leftist film movement departs from Wen-hsin Yeh’s overseas-oriented vision of diasporic Chinese cinema.

4 Wen-hsin Yeh, review of Between Shanghai and Hong Kong: The Politics of Shanghai Cinemas, American Historical Review 110, no. 5 (December 2005): 1501.

Like the leftist film movement, Luo Mingyou’s Lianhua production company was based in Shanghai, but it drew on a larger translocal network he had built for his distribution and exhibition enterprise in central and northeast China during the 1920s, and it would quickly merge several well-known filmmaking enterprises in Shanghai and Hong Kong (e.g., Minxin), thus expanding its transregional networks farther away to places like Singapore and San Francisco in the 1930s. Rather than diasporic, however, Luo’s strategy was to assert his film operations as primarily national, and that was why he specifically issued this cultural-nationalist slogan for Lianhua: “Rescue national cinema, propagate national essence, promote national industry, and serve national interest.”

With its unequivocal emphasis on the national, Luo’s case demonstrates that national aspirations and local or translocal practices are not mutually exclusive, and that the position of cultural nationalism could be adopted to advance one’s economic cause.

Moving from early cinema to contemporary cinema, we are reminded that what the media nowadays customarily hype as transnational blockbusters may be more accurately described as translocal productions. This is not just because companies involved in joint financing and production are simply not national enterprises, but are rather private businesses located in cosmopolitan cities like Beijing, Shanghai, Hong Kong, Taipei, Tokyo, and Seoul; this is also because these companies, together with their multinational film crews and cast, do not always represent the nations or national cultures involved. For example, The Promise (Wu ji; Chen Kaige, 2005) was coproduced by companies based in mainland China, Hong Kong, Japan, and South Korea, but it doesn’t necessarily represent these nations; neither does Korean star Dong-Kun Jang represent Korea nor does Japanese star Hiroyuki Sanada represent Japan. Similarly, the film’s composer Klaus Badelt does not stand for Germany, nor does his musical score reflect the German tradition. To conceptualize a blockbuster film like The Promise as unproblematically “transnational” is to insist on paying lip service to nationality as a necessary geopolitical marker at a time when the frequent cross-border traffic of capital and people has significantly diminished the centrality of the nation-state and has conversely strengthened connections further down on the geographic scale, at multiple localities.

Some social scientists have recently theorized translocality with respect to the changing landscape of a globalizing China. Carolyn Cartier recommends that we rethink “scale relations” between global, regional, national, provincial, and local “as a set of ‘translocal’ processes” that involve “multiple places of attachment experienced by highly mobile people.” In her view, translocality at once connects places (geographies), attachments (emotions), and people (subjects) on the move, and the last category includes globe-trotting business elites and migrant rural workers. Tim Oakes and Louisa Schein elaborate the concept of translocality in order “to highlight a simultaneous analytic focus on mobilities and localities.” For them, translocality captures

8 Tim Oakes and Louisa Schein, eds., Translocal China: Linkages, Identities, and the Reimagining of Space (London: Routledge, 2006), xii, 1; original emphases.
not just the mobility of people but also the circulation of capital, ideas and images, goods and styles, services, diseases, technologies, and modes of communication. Thus elaborated, translocality implies multiple sites of identification and the mutability of attachment.

I have investigated the mutual imbrication of cinema and translocality elsewhere, but I want to add that Chinese Film Studies stands to benefit from studying translocality as well as transnationalism. Compared with transnationalism at a nation-to-nation scale, translocality in cinema operates in myriad ways, from shooting locations to places of financing and postproduction to cinematic address and points of identification. Except for the apparently “national” scale of distribution and exhibition that involves Chinese and Hollywood blockbusters—a national orientation dictated inside China by the government’s monopoly on distribution and maintained overseas by the international distribution business’s fundamental reliance on the sale of rights by national territory—the bulk of Chinese film production operates in a predominantly translocal fashion, drawing on piecemeal resources here and there, in ways parallel to the cottage film industry of the silent era.

Indeed, translocal practice best characterizes contemporary Chinese independent film and video production and exhibition because they are situated squarely in multiple localities and are brought into circulation by a variety of translocal agents and agencies (e.g., nonprofit organizations, international film festivals, and overseas media channels). What emerges as a salient feature of Chinese independent film and video is not so much its transnational reputation as its translocal practice, for the latter enables Chinese artists to jump the vertical scale by simultaneously forming horizontal alliances with artists in other localities and by transcending national contexts to connect directly with a global network of translocal personnel and institutions.

9 Yingjin Zhang, Cinema, Space, and Polylocality in a Globalizing China (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2010).

10 See Paul G. Pickowicz and Yingjin Zhang, eds., From Underground to Independent: Alternative Film Culture in Contemporary China (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).
Hong Kong Cinema as a Dialect Cinema?

by LAIKWAN PANG

Hong Kong’s commercial film industry has had ups and downs in its nearly ninety-year history, yet it endures and continues to churn out movies by the thousands—urbane and profane, commercial and alternative. However, the recession it has experienced since the late 1990s has hit hard. Hong Kong cinema had always been transnational: winning popularity and influence in Southeast Asia; borrowing filmmakers, technology, and natural scenery from Japan and other neighboring countries; circulating into Anglophone markets via action genres; and raising its international image by participating in international film festivals. Hong Kong cinema might be described as transnational, but the “national” is not applicable to this cinema in any direct sense. Its success in the twentieth century was marked by the cultural and economic “irrelevance” of Chinese mainland cinema; and, ironically, its recent downturn is in part a result of the rise of mainland commercial cinema. Indeed, the film industry’s difficulties since the 1990s can be characterized by Hong Kong cinema’s painstaking attempts to come to terms with China.

After a decade of experimentation by filmmakers, two options appear to be viable: making big-budget Putonghua coproductions for the Chinese nation or making regional films for Cantonese speakers in southern China and the rest of the world (an estimated global audience of almost 100 million). The “nationalist” option is prevalent at the moment: not only are most Hong Kong films now made in large part for the People’s Republic of China (PRC) market, but studios, filmmakers, crews, and talent are increasingly based in Beijing. Many of the actual operations are also conducted on the mainland owing to lower costs and cultural proximity to the potential audience. This strategy portends the possible demise of Hong Kong cinema as

1 Hong Kong’s first cinematic activities date back to the first years of the twentieth century, but no industry existed until Minxin Film Studio was established in 1922.
2 See Law Kar, “Crisis and Opportunity: Crossing Borders in Hong Kong Cinema, Its Development from the 40s to the 70s,” in Hong Kong Cinema Retrospective: Border Crossings in Hong Kong, ed. Law Kar (Hong Kong: Leisure and Cultural Services Department, 2000), 116–122.
3 In this essay I use the term “Putonghua” to denote the official language of the PRC and “Mandarin” for that of the ROC, although basically the two terms refer to the same language.
a cultural industry; as talent and operations are drained from the area, the “domestic” market is increasingly marginalized. Identification with Hong Kong on the part of actors and key creative personnel might still be valued in China, but should the nationalist model prevail, this is likely to be the last generation of film talent to retain this distinctive identity.

As for the “regionalist” option, it has been made possible by the Mainland and Hong Kong Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement (CEPA). CEPA V (implemented in 2008) removes quota restrictions on the distribution and screening of Cantonese versions of Hong Kong films in Guangdong Province. The new policy, whose implementation has been extremely slow and whose effects remain unclear, allows Hong Kong films to qualify as local products in Guangdong, therefore bypassing many of the political and cultural restrictions that accompany cross-border coproductions. Carving out a new Cantonese market in southern China also means the expansion of the domestic audience for Hong Kong movies from the city’s 7 million citizens to the 86.42 million residents of Guangdong Province. Although not all residents of Guangdong are native Cantonese speakers, they are culturally close to Hong Kongers and have been receptive to Hong Kong popular culture for the last three decades. This is particularly the case in Guangzhou, a major Chinese city that has retained a strong and distinct local identity. Many Hong Kong filmmakers are more confident about making movies for southern China than for the vast Chinese nation. Much attention has already been paid to the transborder coproduction trend; in this short essay I argue that this second option might imply a new cultural identity for this regional cinema.

Those filmmakers and studios committed to Hong Kong–based Cantonese productions (such as Johnnie To and his studio, Milkyway Image) particularly welcome CEPA, as it allows them to continue to devote themselves to the genres and themes with which they have achieved notable success. Even Sundream Motion Pictures, the Hong Kong i-Cable subsidiary film studio that has invested heavily in transborder coproductions, has decided to focus on making more films for local tastes in 2009. As the director of Sundream, Xu Xiaoming, asserts, viewers in the Guangdong region account for one-third of national box office receipts, and they are attracted by Hong Kong–based Cantonese products. With the support of recent policy, Hong Kong films with distinct local flavor might make an impressive comeback.

The overall motivations behind CEPA are primarily economic—allowing the PRC’s gradual adoption of the market liberalization stipulated by the World Trade Organization, and also benefiting Hong Kong by further introducing its goods and services into the huge Chinese market. CEPA V allows Hong Kong cinema to expand its “domestic” market to include all of Guangdong Province, a policy that is likely to have unintended—and as yet unnoticed—political effects as well. China is one of the most linguistically diverse nations, and its official endorsement of a non-Putonghua

5 Interview with Yau Nai-hoi, director and screenwriter for Milkyway Image, November 5, 2008.
film industry within its borders is tantamount to sanctioning cultural regionalism. In addition, Guangdong Province is to establish its own censorship board and will be able to determine which and how many Hong Kong films to import—giving the province de facto autonomous cultural and political status.

The use of dialect in the mass media has always been a political matter, particularly in China. In the early 1930s, when sound was first introduced to Chinese cinema, filmmakers in Shanghai and Hong Kong were already debating the issue of China’s national film language. In the name of language unification, the Republican government implemented a vague policy prohibiting the screening of any film using dialect, but it lacked the capacity to enforce it in the relatively autonomous Guangdong Province. Then in 1949, the PRC central government mandated the use of Putonghua in the mass media, and this time Guangdong was no exception. Dialects became extinct in the Communist mass media until the 1980s, and only recently could dialects be heard in television programs and movies across China. Some of the earliest cinematic examples of this include *The Story of Qiu Ju* (*Qiu Ju da guan si*; Zhang Yimou, 1992), which features the Shanxi dialect, and *Shanghai Fever* (*Gu feng*; Lee Kwok Lap, 1994), in which audiences can hear a mélange of Shanghainese, Cantonese, and Putonghua. The recent award-winning films of Jia Jiangke and the box office success of Ning Hao have made various Northeast and Northwest dialects in vogue. Nevertheless, the use of Putonghua is still mandated for all mass media in the mainland.

Outside the PRC, however, films in Minnanese, Hakka, Amoy, Chiuchow, and other dialects were made in Taiwan and Hong Kong until the 1980s. These cinemas gradually lost their audiences and faded out, but Cantonese films have continued to be the mainstay of Hong Kong cinema. Only in the last few years has Putonghua again been used with any frequency in Hong Kong movies thanks to the rise of transborder coproduction cinema. For non-transborder films, currently Hong Kong–made movies are all dubbed in Putonghua before being released in the Mainland, legally distributed disc copies always feature audio channels in both Cantonese and Putonghua. Pirated Hong Kong films are primarily the Cantonese versions, and non-Cantonese viewers have to rely on what are sometimes lousy subtitles to follow (or fail to follow) the dialogue. The Hong Kong films that have circulated in China during the last two decades are marked not only by the strong cultural identity of a (post)colonial city but also by its strong linguistic identity. After Putonghua, Cantonese might be the most readily understood dialect in this linguistically diverse country, and the strong Cantonese identity of the Guangzhou region is partly attributable to the popularity of Hong Kong media content.

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Although Hong Kong cinema should not be equated with a Cantonese cinema, the city itself is primarily a Cantonese society, and the use of Putonghua has become a thorny issue for local actors and actresses. Before the 1980s, Mandarin films that were produced in Hong Kong were made primarily for the Taiwanese market. Native speakers of Mandarin were featured in these films, and their identities were distinct from the Cantonese stars in Cantonese cinema. Currently, performers of different native tongues appear in an increasingly convergent transborder Chinese cinema, and performers from various regions often are featured in the same film, so as to appeal to the greatest number of markets. Top-tier Hong Kong stars such as Stephen Chow, Andy Lau, and Tony Leung—however fluent their Putonghua—are still overdubbed in transborder coproductions, lest their Cantonese accents alienate Mainland viewers, as was the case of Chow Yun-Fat and Michelle Yeoh in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (*Wo hu cang long*; Ang Lee, 2000). But while dubbing is still considered acceptable in period films, contemporary films with realistic sound environments make dubbing irritating to increasingly sophisticated audiences. Consequently, producers and distributors have to be alert to the linguistic nuances of their films.

The continued development of the new CEPA policy will have an enormous impact both on Hong Kong cinema and on the cultural identity of Guangdong. The Hong Kong film industry will be given a chance to maintain its own cultural and linguistic identity, although this may in turn encourage a hegemonic Hong Kong cinema throughout Guangdong Province. Yet at the same time, this policy could nurture a stronger Guangdong-based cultural identity that is distinct from that of the far more hegemonic “national Chinese” identity. The cinematic autonomy of Guangdong Province has a historical precedent, and the Canton regime of the early 1930s actually implemented its own regional film and censorship policies. The PRC government has been much better at political centralization, and has effectively curtailed Guangdong’s autonomy for close to fifty years, but CEPA V, if fully realized, could facilitate the resumption of a repressed historical tendency.

This minor film policy might also be a first step toward China’s acceptance of an alternative cultural industry, an indirect recognition of a cultural alterity within the national self, as Cantonese is largely incomprehensible to most Chinese citizens. Guangdong cinema will be different from the one we have known, because for the first time Hong Kong cinema is being embraced as China’s own, but its traditional—and alienating—linguistic components persist. Separatism has always been a most delicate political matter in the PRC, and the ways that China and Hong Kong approach this new cultural synergism could prove to be productive but contentious.

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11 Mandarin dialect, adopted by the Manchurians and developed during the Qing, is only 400 years old. Dialects in Guangdong and Guangxi, distant from the center of Qing power, have retained much of their traditional linguistic structures.
Over the past two decades, the East Asian region has witnessed various ebbs and flows in cultural saliency. As the cult of Hong Kong cinema waned in the mid-1990s, a Korean Wave (*hallyu*) unexpectedly surged, and the popularity of Korean cultural products such as pop music and television drama series rose to great economic and cultural significance throughout the region. Regional audiences currently may be anxiously awaiting what might follow this Korean Wave. Not surprisingly, officials within media conglomerates and local governments might themselves actively seek to initiate or be part of the “next” wave, which could either sustain or replace the current one. Some critics and scholars are cautiously predicting and estimating the potential of an impending “Chinese wave.”

This essay examines the distribution of Chinese-language films in South Korea, for which the most dominant foreign regional cinema is still Hong Kong and Hong Kong/China coproductions. I attempt to show how the South Korean majors’ distribution practices restrict the dissemination of Chinese-language films because a significantly smaller number of theaters are allotted to Chinese-language films during their opening weeks in comparison to either South Korean or Hollywood blockbusters. This discussion also examines the popular discourse on Chinese and Japanese media in South Korea, through which one can detect a more positive disposition toward the latter, even though both are “marginal” in terms of their saliency within Korean national culture. I will argue that the difference should be attributed to Korean cultural policies as well as cultural novelty—not to audiences’ economic aspiration for the consumed culture, contrary to the model advanced and discussed by scholars such as Koichi Iwabuchi.¹

Hong Kong cinema has long been an integral part of the cultural memory of Korean audiences and filmmakers alike. South Korea was not immune to the worldwide phenomenon of Bruce Lee in the 1970s,² followed by that of Jackie Chan in the 1980s.

of Death (Robert Clouse, 1978) opened at a single theater in Seoul and over two months (May 18 to July 31, 1978) attracted an audience of 281,000. A year later, Drunken Master (Jui kuen; Yuen Woo-ping, 1978) had an extended run over five months (September 29, 1979, to March 28, 1980), pulling in 891,000 viewers.

Cultural affinities and the universal appeal of the carnal aspect of martial arts may explain the popularity of Hong Kong martial arts films in South Korea. But one must look further into the distribution and exhibition policies that facilitated and/or deterred the importation of Hong Kong cinema. In the 1970s, foreign imports dominated the screen at first-run theaters during the major holiday seasons in South Korea. Although there was a screening quota in place designed to allow ample screen time for domestic productions, it was often ignored by local exhibitors who preferred foreign films over domestically produced features. Furthermore, since the South Korean government forbade the importation of foreign films with production costs of more than $35,000, the relatively low production budgets of Hong Kong cinema, in addition to their proven popularity at first-run theaters, might suggest why such films were such a viable option for importers.

As the kung fu phase slowly died out in the 1980s, the box office draw of Hong Kong films—both martial arts and actioners—significantly declined. With the exception of Jackie Chan’s directorial debut Police Story (Ging chat goo si; 1985), many Hong Kong films, including A Better Tomorrow (Ying hung boon sik; Woo, 1986) and A Chinese Ghost Story (Sien nui yau wom; Ching Siu-tung, 1987), sold fewer than 100,000 tickets, despite the fact that the number of opening theaters had tripled since the 1970s. As Ahn Jin-soo has pointed out, the popularity of Hong Kong bloodshed gangster cinema began as a cult phenomenon in South Korea, shown mostly at second-run theaters, which had difficulty in securing content under the direct distribution system used by the Hollywood majors. However, the cult status of Hong Kong cinema did not last long. With the success of A Better Tomorrow 2 (Ying hung boon Sik II; Woo, 1987), which opened in three first-run theaters in Seoul (July 22 to September 6, 1988) and attracted 260,480 admissions, a newfound craze for Hong Kong cinema was quickly incorporated within South Korean mainstream culture.

These two phases of Hong Kong cinema emerged from two different industrial contexts within the history of South Korean cinema, each with varying cultural status for Korean audiences. Is Hong Kong cinema only a cultural marker from the past?

3 Korean Film Council (KOFIC), Yoenghwa Jeongbo 1977–2007.
4 Ibid.
6 Ibid., 94.
7 Ibid., 51.
As many have observed, the drastic decline of the Hong Kong film industry after its return to China in 1997 was indicated by both its waning output and decreasing market share at the home front. But this dormant period was also marked by a major regional hit, *Infernal Affairs* (*Moo gaan dou*; Andy Lau and Alan Mak, 2002), a film that enjoyed widespread success in many East Asian countries. Interestingly, the impact of *Infernal Affairs* was less apparent in South Korea. In February 2003, *Infernal Affairs*, distributed by the South Korean company Taechang Entertainment, opened on 36 screens in Seoul with 157,349 admissions (397,448 nationwide), quite short of hit status for domestically produced films and imports in South Korea. By comparison, Hollywood and Korean blockbusters typically enjoy saturation booking, opening on 80–100 screens in Seoul alone (300–450 theaters nationwide). In the same year, *The Matrix Reloaded* (Wachowski Brothers, 2003: 1,596,000 admissions in Seoul, 3,510,000 nationwide) and *The Matrix Revolutions* (Wachowski Brothers, 2003: 930,031 admissions in Seoul, 2,240,000 nationwide), both directly distributed by Warners Korea, each secured over 100 screens in Seoul, while *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the Kings* (Peter Jackson, 2003: 1,905,567 admissions in Seoul, 3,935,677 nationwide), distributed by Taewon Entertainment, played at 105 screens in Seoul. The Korean blockbuster *Silmido* (Kang Woo-suk, 2003) was shown on 83 screens in Seoul (450 screens nationwide) during its opening week and would go on to rank as the second greatest hit at the Korean box office for that year, with 3.1 million admissions in Seoul (10.8 million nationwide).

By comparison, the box office draw of Hong Kong cinema today is meager, even among non-blockbuster films. The Korean romantic comedy *My Tutor Friend* (*Donggabnaegi gwawoehagi*; Kim Kyeong-hyeong, 2003) played on fifty-four screens the same month that *Infernal Affairs* was released, and pulled in 1,587,975 admissions in Seoul (4,937,573 nationwide). The box office results of *Infernal Affairs* fall short of even Korean “art-house” cinema: *Good Lawyer’s Wife* (*Baramnan gajok*; Im Sang-woo, 2003) secured slightly fewer screens (thirty-two theaters) than *Infernal Affairs* later that same year, yet attracted 636,735 admissions in Seoul (1,748,258 nationwide).

Such disparity in the reception of *Infernal Affairs* can be attributed to diverging tastes with Korean audiences, but we should also take note of the distribution methods of Hong Kong and Chinese-language cinema in South Korea. The South Korean film industry underwent a drastic restructuring after it opened its domestic market to direct distribution by the Hollywood majors in 1988. Anxiety over Hollywood domination in the South Korean market was prevalent, and the South Korean industry turned

11 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
this perceived crisis into a renaissance through corporate-led modernization of industry practices. In order to attract domestic audiences, the industry began to cater its products to audience demands and sensibilities. With investment finance flowing in from Korean conglomerates such as Samsung and Daewoo and then from venture capitalists, the Korean industry started producing films with both entertainment value and slick visual style.\(^{17}\) Another outcome of this transformation was the emergence of major distributors in South Korea, such as CJ Entertainment, Cinema Service, and Showbox/Mediaplex. These major producer-distributors are more or less vertically integrated, owning multiplex chains and acquiring films from other Korean production companies, as well as producing films of their own. CJ Entertainment initiated a multiplex boom through an exhibition joint venture, originally with Hong Kong’s Golden Harvest and Australia’s Village Roadshow;\(^{18}\) but currently with only the latter. Showbox/Mediaplex, another leading production-distribution house, is aligned with Megabox Cineplex, and is part of the Orion conglomerate.\(^{19}\) Cinema Service also secures exhibition venues through its parent company Plenus Entertainment, which owns the theater chain Primus Cinema.\(^{20}\)

This concentrated ownership structure makes it difficult for Chinese-language films to achieve theatrical success unless they are picked up by one of the major Korean distributors or by a Hollywood major. Korea Pictures—which emerged as a leading distributor after the success of *Friend* (*Chingu*; Kwak Kyeong-taek, 2001)\(^{21}\)—locally distributed the international Chinese hit *Hero* (*Ying xiong*; Zhang Yimou, 2002), which opened on forty-seven screens in January 2003, reaching 795,000 admissions in Seoul (1,910,000 nationwide), an audience five times greater than that for *Infernal Affairs*. In 2005, Releasing Korea (a division of Sony Pictures) secured the same number of theaters for *Kung Fu Hustle* (*Kung fu*; Stephen Chow, 2004), which proved an even stronger box office draw with 963,580 admissions. By contrast, the rights to *Initial D* (*Tau man ji D*; Andy Lau, Alan Mak, 2005), starring Taiwan pop star Jay Chou, were acquired by CNS Entertainment and distributed by Media-line Korea, but sold fewer than 5,000 tickets in Seoul (10,036 nationwide). Even *The Promise* (*Wu ji*; Chen Kaige, 2005), featuring a multinational cast including Jang Dong-gun (a top-ranking Korean actor), struggled to find distribution venues over the Christmas holiday season. The film’s opening was originally planned to be simultaneous with China, but it had to be rescheduled as a result of competition from the Korean blockbuster *Typhoon* (*Taepung*; Kwak Kyeong-taek, 2005), which also starred Jang.\(^{22}\)

Certainly, box office success should not be viewed as the only indicator of the popularity or influence of films from Hong Kong and China in South Korean film culture. One might assume that the short theatrical release period might serve as a

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marketing strategy for subsequent ancillary markets. However, because of widespread illegal downloading and pirating, South Korea lacks a lucrative DVD market, which limits its potential as a strong market for Chinese media corporations. Furthermore, contemporary fan-based discourse does not seem to measure up to the enthusiasm for Hong Kong cinema in the past; the younger generation has turned to Japanese films and media instead. Though on a relatively small scale, Japanese films are becoming popular in South Korea, as the government’s ban on Japanese cultural products has been systematically and “gradually” lifted starting in 1998. By 2004, the last phase of this process, South Korean audiences gained access to theatrically released Japanese films of all ratings, as well as access to public performances of Japanese musicians and bands, and cable television broadcasts of Japanese television shows and dramas. Japanese romancers have been warmly received by South Korean audiences, such as *Love Letter* (*Rabu retâ*; Iwai Shunji, 1995), which ranked in the top ten at the Korean box office in 1999. All this is in addition to a cult following for Japanese anime and horror films, as well as low-budget films, such as *Sad Vacation* (*Aoyama Shinji, 2007*) and *Then Summer Came* (*Tamio no shiwase; Iwamatsu Ryo, 2008*). In 2006, visits and performances of Japanese stars and singers—including Japanese heartthrob Odagiri Jo and the idol band Arashi—sparked the circulation of the term *Illyu* (*Japanese Wave*), which registers both enthusiasm and anxiety over this new cultural trend. Japanese culture has always been viewed with ambivalence, due to both its long absence within Korean culture and the colonial history of Korea. The Japanese film *Sway* (*Yureru; Nishikawa Miwa, 2006*), which stars Odagiri Jo and opened on only six screens in South Korea in August 2006, set the record for an “independent” movie by pulling 300,000 admissions in only fifteen days.

The ebbs and flows within East Asian cultural fields are not easy to predict. However, if, as I have observed, Chinese-language movie imports in Korea have only been successful and influential to the extent that they have been able to attract paying audiences, the South Korean film industry’s systematic restriction of the distribution of Hong Kong or Chinese cinema inevitably limits the saliency of Chinese media culture within South Korea. The stagnation of the South Korean film industry of late, however, might provide room for Chinese-language films to achieve a wider range of public access. In 2007, the market share for Korean cinema dropped for the first time in almost a decade. That same year, Mediaplex sold off its Megabox cinema chain, and its Showbox production-distribution unit pulled out of one of the most

24 All movies, both domestic and foreign, are subject to a rating system comprised of four categories: A (adult only); P-15 (prohibited to those younger than 15); P-12 (banned for those younger than 12); and G (for general viewing). Koh Chik-mann, “Imports Face Tough Clearance Laws, No Censors Pix in Korea Straits,” *Variety*, October 9, 1996, 20.
26 *Hanguk yeonghwa yeongam* (Seoul: KOFIC, 2001), 86.
anticipated films of 2008: Kim Ji-woon’s “oriental” Western, The Good, the Bad, and the Weird (Joewon nabbeunnom isanghannom).\textsuperscript{30} Korean production companies have eagerly looked for partnerships both within the region and with Hollywood in an attempt not only to reduce the risks involved in financing Korean blockbusters but also to diversify their product lines. The success of Red Cliff 2 (Chi bi xia; Jue zhan tian xia; John Woo, 2009) early this year seems a vindication of such a strategy. Showbox, a partial investor (10.5 percent) and distributor of the film, secured over 400 theaters nationwide for the theatrical release of the film. Red Cliff 2 was predicted to become the highest-grossing Chinese-language film in South Korea. The day before the film’s release (January 22), OCN, a Korean cable movie channel and affiliate of Mediaplex, aired thirty-minute highlights of the first Red Cliff (Chi bi; John Woo, 2008). Furthermore, both films were released together during the opening week of Red Cliff 2 (January 23–27).\textsuperscript{31}

Over the years, Japanese, South Korean, and Hong Kong/Chinese films have competed for similar target audiences, and this rivalry is likely a principal reason for why Chinese-language cinema has not been widely disseminated. Given recent signs of the decline in the South Korean film industry, attempts by Korean production-distribution companies to benefit from multinational coproduction—despite the fact that some previous attempts have failed miserably—might increasingly open up the Korean market to Chinese-language cinema. But in order to determine whether the success of Red Cliff 2 is an isolated case or the beginning of a trend in successful multinational co-ventures, one must wait and see.


"China," Japan’s Chimera, and Media Cultural Globalization

by Koichi Iwabuchi

China has long been a significant imaginative geography for Japan. It evokes desire, yearning, respect, and comradeship as well as disdain, hostility, fear, and the enigmatic. This is due to China’s unambiguous dominance and cultural influence in the premodern era, its subjection and resistance to European and Japanese imperialism, its postwar communist revitalization, and, more recently, its dramatic shift to a capitalist market system. In addition to this rich history, China’s massive scale with respect to territory, population, and
diversity confers the special status of a cultural entity full of promising but not-yet-fulfilled potential, appearing as a chimera in the eyes of the people of a neighboring country.

This especially has been the case since the 1990s as spectacular and rapid economic development made China come to signify a capitalist Asian dreamworld. Its huge market has captivated entrepreneurs from advanced countries who dream of making profits in the last goldmine of the world. In media culture, too, China has attracted many corporations, creators, and audiences from around the world. While most key players have been of Euro-American origins, as exemplified by Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation, Japanese players have also been keen to enter the huge market. The rise of China as well as other Asian economies, such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, and South Korea, has deprived Japan of the idiosyncrasy of being the only highly industrialized country outside the West. This has made it necessary for Japan not just to enter these booming Asian markets but also to reclaim its cultural ties to East Asian countries.

The possibility of coproducing a pan-Asian pop culture motivated Japanese media and cultural industries to enter the Chinese media markets. Setting up local offices and employing local staff, Japanese music companies and talent agencies were actively trying to find and manufacture pan-Asian pop idols by conducting auditions in Beijing and Shanghai. They dreamed of creating a pan-Asian market, drawing on their previous experience of indigenizing American production techniques on Asian soil. While this attempt coincided with the then popular discourse of Asianism, which was most strongly advocated by Singapore and Malaysia, the idea was apparently overdetermined by Japan’s historically constituted ideology of an East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.

However, there was more to the Japanese goal of creating a pan-Asian market than a mere attraction to the vast mainland market and an overdetermined imperial desire. They were no less propelled by sheer interest in communicating with geographically proximate but emotionally distant Asian neighbors through media and popular culture. Despite the diversity of language, religion, race/ethnicity, and culture in East Asia, globalized media and popular culture formats became a basis for meeting and conversing with talent and personnel from other countries. Intra-regional media and popular cultural connections in East Asia gave a new opportunity for Japan to encounter and work together with (nearly) equally modernized cultural neighbors.

Other Japanese were fascinated by the radical possibilities of Chinese cultural expressions that emerged out of the contradictions and contestations of a dazzlingly modernizing society. Although rock-and-roll had lost its oppositional political potential in the West and in Japan, its renewed possibilities were passionately explored in China, with pioneering rock star Cui Jian a particular favorite of many Japanese. In the course of rapid economic development, widening gaps between the haves

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and have-nots, and the urban and the rural, as well as apparent contradictions between freedom and control and between capitalism and socialism, became palpable. Some alternative cultural expressions and imaginations, it was expected, would be produced out of the unprecedented socioeconomic upheaval. Dreaming of what one could no longer pursue or had forgotten in the Japanese context, no small number of producers, critics, journalists, academics, and audiences were keen not just to witness but also to join and support the production of these new cultural expressions.

All of these sociohistorically articulated desires for “China” in the 1990s were never fulfilled, however; hence, China became Japan’s chimera. Except for the attraction of the size of the market, though, the fascination with China now seems to have declined. On the one hand, we have witnessed interregional media traffic become even more active and multidirectional in East Asia. Mutual consumption, coproduction, and copromotion are becoming more and more common among Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. China is also involved, as it receives many media products from other parts of East Asia and coproduces TV dramas, films, and pop music, especially with Hong Kong and Taiwan but also with Japan and Korea. China is also deeply and unevenly implicated in transnational media culture with respect to the new international division of cultural labor. China’s cheap labor is an important link in transnational production chains, not just for Hollywood but also for Japanese cultural industries such as animation. Yet, China’s media exports to other parts of Asia, especially to Japan, are still negligible. *Huáiliú* (the Chinese Wave) is observed in Japan, but it usually refers to media and popular culture from Taiwan and Hong Kong, not from mainland China. Even more popular these days are media products from South Korea.

It is impossible to straightforwardly explain why Chinese media and popular culture do not attract the populace of Japan, but it could be argued that, unlike Korean and Taiwanese media and popular cultures, Chinese popular culture has not yet mastered globalized styles, which pleasurably and sophisticatedly represent the everyday experiences of capitalist consumer society. If the glocal organization of cultural diversity (in which cultural specificity is expressed through common formats in the local) is the basis of the intensifying connectivity among East Asian media and popular cultures, it also highlights the perception that China still occupies a different realm from “our” East Asian (post)modernity. Put bluntly, precisely because Japan has been more extensively involved in the transnational cultural connections in East Asia in a glocalized manner, the propensity to meet China on a common ground and appreciate alternative sociocultural expressions in China has declined.

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At the same time, Japan’s chimerical appreciation of China has been disappearing as China becomes a real and potentially threatening political and economic power. What has recently become prominent in mainstream Japanese discourse is the perceived menace of China “greedily eating us up.” China’s lasting high economic growth, which is in stark contrast to Japan’s low or even negative growth, is taking away the top position that Japan has long enjoyed in the region and thus strongly evokes a sense of anxiety of being overwhelmed. This sense is exacerbated by another serious nuisance perceived by people in Japan, namely, the rise of fervent nationalism and patriotism in China. In the early twenty-first century, we have observed a vicious cycle of antagonistic nationalism between Japan and China (and Korea) in terms of historical issues associated with Japan’s colonialism and imperialism. Japan’s disengagement from the past, as exemplified by former prime minister Koizumi’s persistent visits to Yasukuni Shrine, has evoked a strong anti-Japanese nationalism in China, which has also been nurtured, if only partly, by the Chinese government’s emphasis on patriotic education. This in turn has led no small number of people in Japan to become reactively frustrated with China’s condemnation of Japan. In 2005, Japanese mass media repeatedly reported violent scenes in which some Chinese demonstrators threw eggs at the Japanese Embassy and Japanese restaurants, and in which the Japanese soccer team was severely jeered by Chinese audiences. Recent surveys show that the mutual perception between China and Japan is getting worse. While the Korean people’s perception of Japan has been negatively impacted by historical issues and territorial disputes, media flows have improved the mutual perception, especially among the Japanese populace, but this is not the case with China.

Such economic and political anxieties are culturally translated into criticisms of China’s cultural production capacity and denunciation of mainland violations of intellectual property. Illegal copying of brand goods and DVDs has been an issue since the 1990s, for example. Strong pressure from the United States and China’s admission to the World Trade Organization have forced the Chinese government to reduce the public visibility of video piracy, especially at the time of the Beijing Olympics. Nevertheless, piracy is easily interpreted as emblematic of the uncivilized disorder of Chinese society, which is then extended to include a more general critique of “fake culture” in many other aspects of Chinese society. Japanese mass media have keenly and repeatedly reported on the replica theme park in China, where there are many “cheap copies” of popular characters such as Mickey Mouse and Doraemon. Since imitation is a necessary step to developing originality, piracy and/or copying could therefore be read as the development of necessary infrastructure from which new cultural imaginations and expressions might emerge. Japan did the same thing with American popular culture for a long time. Japanese mass media, however, tend to mock the poor quality of Chinese copies and criticize the vulgarity of Chinese society with respect to piracy and recent incidents of food contamination, all of which purportedly disqualify China from being a legitimate player in the top tier of nations.

Moreover, no other recent Olympic Games (except the Moscow Games) have attracted as many negative Japanese media reports as the Beijing Olympics, which provoked stories about Tibetan independence, censorship, the forced removal of local residents in Beijing, the risk of food poisoning, the omnipresence of pirated products, and the passionate public displays of nationalism. It seems that no matter how much China develops its economic and political power, it is still perceived as a coarse nation in cultural and democratic terms. This is quite a different way of experiencing China from earlier Japanese perceptions of the Chinese chimera. One is apt now to perceive an uncivilized fake culture of Chinese modernity as China’s radical alterity is disavowed in an Orientalist manner.

The Chinese government is now keen to export its media products, especially animation and films, which is suggestive of a global trend of branding national cultures and exercising soft power. Chinese media and popular culture would be more exportable if Chinese producers adjusted to globalized formats and worked more collaboratively with transnational media and cultural industries. Should that occur, Chinese media and popular culture would likely be well received in Japan, and Japan’s perception of China might change positively, as has been the case with Korea. However, this would mean the incorporation of Chinese media and popular culture into a loose network of Asian mass culture connections that advances a particular kind of mutual consumption and competition via nationally (and thus globally) dominant cultures but represses other cultural forms. As cultural conversation among people in East Asia advances, nationally marginalized voices and alternative visions for the present and future tend to be left out. The circulation of easily consumable images of China might finally confirm China’s entering into “our” realm, but at the expense of the full complexity that has deeply influenced Japan’s chimera. The Chinese people’s experiences of consumerism and social control and of widening social disjunctures under the regime of socialist capitalism still require us to catch a glimpse of something different from the paths that other societies in East Asia have taken. How they are represented and contested by various cultural expressions is what we need to strive to discern for the sake of nurturing a reflective understanding of the dynamic of Chinese society, and for imagining the self and our own society differently.

It seems that the time is ripe for people in Japan to become conscious that a Janus-faced desire—which is deeply evoked by a historically constituted perception of Asia and its own sociocultural contradictions under globalizing forces—has haunted Japan’s understanding of China. However, a considered confrontation with this Janus-faced desire would not necessarily allow effortless mass cultural approval of China to prevail and cause Japan’s chimera to vanish. Rather, it might allow people in Japan to see things unseen, imagine visions unimagined. Japan’s chimera then will be transformed into a self-reflexive dialogue with China, and that is when Japan’s chimera might fulfill its historical role.

5 Iwabuchi, Recentering Globalization; and Chua Beng Huat and Koichi Iwabuchi, eds., East Asian Pop Culture: Analyzing the Korean Wave (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008).
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