

CHINA, HOLLYWOOD AND SPLIT SCREENS

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THE FILM MARKET in China is flourishing. Whereas in 2002, Chinese cinemas sold US\$133 million worth of tickets, total box office revenues in 2013 amounted to US\$3.6 billion. In 2014, China's box office had reached US\$1.6 billion by 21 May, just 141 days into the year. Both imported and Chinese films were doing well. Among the twenty-four films that had made over US\$16 million, half were categorised as 'domestic' films, generating a total revenue of US\$670 million. The other half were foreign, mainly Hollywood films, earning US\$630 million. Protectionist policies might have contributed to the box office success of domestic films: the government only allows thirty-four foreign films to be imported annually, and the authorities have reportedly pulled successful

imported films from cinemas from time to time to create breathing space for new domestic features. In June 2014, *Transformers* opening date was pushed to exactly one day after that of the Chinese-produced romantic comedy *Break-up Guru* 分手大师, and the head of the State Film Bureau, Zhang Hongsen 张宏森, ordered cinema owners not to pull domestic features in favour of the more lucrative imported blockbusters. Despite such policies, China has already surpassed Japan to become Hollywood's largest international market.

There are hopes for further growth: among the Hollywood stars who made publicity trips to China in 2014 were Brad Pitt, Angelina Jolie and Johnny Depp. Increasingly, Hollywood films feature China-friendly plots and



Chinese-produced *The Break-up Guru's* premiere took precedence over the opening date of *Transformers*, which was pushed back by one day

Source: Enlight Pictures Beijing

Chinese characters as a strategy for snaring one of the thirty-four annual licences. Meanwhile, co-productions have become a strategy to bypass the import quota: co-produced films fulfilling certain requirements can count as 'domestic'.

The schlocky 2012 Australian 3D film *Bait*, in which a tsunami traps shoppers and killer sharks in a mall on the Gold Coast, featured both Chinese investment and heroics by Chinese actors — and took AU\$20 million at the Chinese box office, more than any pre-

vious Australian film and more than three times as much as *Happy Feet 2*. That same year, DreamWorks Animation opened Oriental DreamWorks in Shanghai, a joint venture with three Chinese companies, to create animated and other films for China and international markets. Disney quickly followed suit, forging a partnership with the Chinese Ministry of Culture itself.

Film industries in Hong Kong and Taiwan have also benefitted from the strong mainland market. A substantial number of domestic films are co-productions with Hong Kong, including *The Monkey King* 大闹天宫, a fantasy film adaptation of the classic novel *Journey to the West* 西游记 that sat at the top of the box office in June 2014. Since 2012, import quotas for films from Taiwan have been lifted; sixteen Taiwan films made it to mainland cinemas in 2013, well up from four films in 2009. Although the media conglomerate Wanda produced *The Great Hypnotist* 催眠大师, which made RMB 250 million in box office revenue in its first twenty-one days in Chinese cinemas, both the director and the producer were from Taiwan.

Then there is non-commercial cinema. In China, non-commercial cinema may represent either the artistic

vision and socio-political agendas of an individual film-maker ('indie' film), or the state ('main melody' 主旋律 films promoting party ideals and history).

Cinema's ability to witness, analyse and mobilise society has long been central to China's cinematic tradition. Chinese film-making entered its first golden age in the 1930s, in a rapidly industrialising Shanghai divided and occupied by foreign powers, as a politically unstable nation faced the threat of Japanese invasion. In such an environment, although audiences craved diversion, or what one critic called 'ice-cream for the eyes', socially progressive writers, directors and actors considered the notion of cinema as entertainment to be frivolous and wasteful, and produced films that reflected the national crisis and promoted social and political change. With some exceptions (such as the masterful 1948 *Springtime in a Small Town* 小城之春 directed by Fei Mu 费穆) China's film culture during the Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945) and the Civil War (1946–1950) strongly favoured social realism and political engagement.

In the Mao era, heeding Lenin's dictum that cinema is the most important art, the state closely supervised and invested heavily in both

film-making and distribution, so that film-as-propaganda could reach every corner of the countryside and the frontier regions.

When the first post-Mao generation of Chinese film directors (the Fifth Generation) began making films, they worked within the state studio system; there were no other options. Their first works, including Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth* 黄土地 (1984), Huang Jianxin's *Black Cannon Incident* 黑炮事件 (1985) and Zhang Yimou's *Red Sorghum* 红高粱 (1989), were made with low budgets and little pressure to turn a profit. With their unconventional cinematic language and bold inquiries into social and political taboos, they redefined Chinese cinema, not always with the approval of the authorities — or the movie-going masses.

In March 2014, Chinese filmmakers and audiences mourned the passing of Wu Tianming 吴天明, the popular Fourth Generation director and former head of the Xi'an Film Studio who had mentored and produced so many seminal works of the Fifth Generation. Wu's own films *Life* 人生 (1984) and *Old Well* 老井 (1987) portrayed human suffering and dignity against a backdrop of rural-urban inequality and extreme poverty.

Given this long history rich in artistic, social and political aspirations, it is no wonder that many of China's best film-makers are neither motivated nor impressed by box office success. In April 2014, the Chinese Film Directors' Guild (CFDG) created a public stir by withholding prizes for the best film and the best director in its prestigious annual award ceremony ('China's Oscars'), claiming that none of the films in competition — including huge box office hits — were good enough.

In a speech announcing the decision, Feng Xiaogang 冯小刚, a veteran film-maker and head of the CFDG jury, explained that the jury made the decision collectively 'out of artistic conscience and respect for cinema'. If, more than a decade ago, Chinese film-makers put aside their artistic ideals and made commercial films out of financial necessity, he said, it was now time to 'revive our ideals, rebuild our spirit and return to the artistic meaning of film'.

Given China's rigid system of censorship, making films according to one's ideals is far from straightforward. Sensitive topics, including the representation of homosexuality and inter-ethnic conflicts, are off limits. *A Touch of Sin* 天注定 by China's leading



Li Xiantang is a renowned independent art critic and curator
Source: Baidu

Sixth Generation film-maker Jia Zhangke 贾樟柯 is a study of corruption, desperation and violence based on four real-life events. Despite winning the Best Screenplay Prize at Cannes in 2013, and being critically acclaimed abroad (including in Hong Kong), the authorities indefinitely postponed its release date on the Mainland. Without a screening at home, it was not eligible for the CFDG annual awards. Some Chinese netizens speculated that CFDG's surprise announcement was an implicit protest on behalf of Jia's film.

A small number of independent films have emerged in China in the past two decades, screening in 'underground' indie film festivals and galleries, or on DVDs passed from hand

to hand. Some have achieved international exposure and distribution. But the government has intensified its crackdown on this sector in recent years. In August 2014, the police raided the office and archive of the Beijing Independent Film Festival and detained its organisers, including the prominent art curator and critic Li Xianting 栗宪庭, who was forced to sign, as a condition for his release, a document promising not to organise any film festivals in the future.

Non-Chinese film-makers hoping to exhibit in the Chinese film market must also deal with censorship. The debate over the extent to which foreign film-makers should comply with Chinese censorship has been going on for some time, especially as they are sometimes asked not only to change scenes, but the plot as well. The makers of *Skyfall*, the latest Bond movie, had to cut a scene where 007, played by Daniel Craig, kills a Chinese security guard, and alter a plot line where the villain Javier Bardem explains that being in Chinese custody had turned him into a villain. The censors also clipped thirty-eight minutes, mostly love scenes, out of *Cloud Atlas*, a film based on a David Mitchell novel that was very popular in China.

At the National People's Political Consultative Conference in March 2014, Feng Xiaogang and Jackie Chan 成龙 called on the government to relax its regime of film censorship. Expounding on the damage censorship does to the quality of cinema, Feng complained that film-makers' most creative ideas are often rejected by clueless censors. 'We often say, film is a glass of wine, it shouldn't be water or juice... . But [the censor] just wants a glass of orange juice,' Feng said. Jackie Chan spoke about the adverse effect censorship had on the box office.

In April, Oliver Stone upset his hosts at the Beijing International Film Festival by asking when China would start making films critical of Mao Zedong and the Cultural Revolution, stating that only when these taboos are lifted could true creativity emerge, which would be a basis for genuine co-production. In fact, there have been films in China critiquing the Cultural Revolution and, implicitly, Mao Zedong, such as *Troubled Laughter* 苦恼人的笑 (1979), *Black Cannon Incident* (1985) and Xie Jin's adaptation of *Hibiscus Town* 芙蓉镇 (1986). As noted above, Cui Jian, the musician who pioneered Chinese rock music in the 1980s, debuted as a director in

2014 with the film *Blue Sky Bones*, a tale of two generations of family secrets, sexual longings and the pursuit of rock music, set both in the Cultural Revolution and the present day. With hard-to-miss references to some of the Cultural Revolution's most prominent perpetrators and victims, the film experienced delays in release but eventually premiered nationwide in October. Yet Stone still had a point — there are not many cinematic treatments of the Cultural Revolution and, of those, few have challenged the official historiography. (Tian Zhuangzhuang's 田壮壮 1993 *Blue Kite* 蓝风筝 was too challenging for the authorities: they banned it

and told the director he would never make a film again. He has.)

With censorship rules unlikely to change in the short term, film-makers continue to seek acceptable ways to express the unacceptable. After going on to win the Golden Bear for Best Film in Berlin in 2014, Diao Yinan's 刁亦男 *Black Coal, Thin Ice* 白日焰火 will screen in China without major changes. The film's depiction of working-class desperation is framed by a detective crime story told in the style of film noir, a genre to which American film-makers have turned in their explorations of the darker sides of modernity — another aspect of Shared Destiny.

This text is taken from *Shared Destiny*, edited by Geremie R Barmé,
Linda Jaivin and Jeremy Goldkorn, published 2015 by ANU Press,
The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.