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What Is Transnational Chinese Cinema Today? or, Welcome to the Sinosphere.

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Abstract

About a decade ago, I wrote a piece called ‘What Is Transnational Cinema? Thinking from the Chinese Situation’ (Berry 2010). It argued that knowledge is situational and perspectival; what transnational cinema is depends on when and where you are looking from and writing about. It observed and analysed two current phenomena relevant to understanding what Chinese transnational cinema was then: the growth of cross-border Chinese film production involving the People’s Republic, Hong Kong, Taiwan and more, known as ‘Chinese-language cinemas’ (*huayu dianying*); and the larger phenomenon of globalisation. This article asks what has changed since then and proposes ‘cinemas of the Sinosphere’ as an idea to encompass those changes. However, the term refers to two very different phenomena. First, it responds to the higher profile of films that are part of a Chinese cultural sphere but not in a Sinitic language, rendering the idea of ‘Chinese-language cinemas’ inadequate. Second, it acknowledges the re-emergence of the nation-state and what some people call the ‘Second Cold War’ or what I call a ‘Two Globalizations’ phenomenon, and it refers to the cinema of the People’s Republic of China under the conditions of the Belt and Road Initiative *and* the non-Chinese cinemas that respond to it.

Keywords

Sinosphere, Chinese-language cinemas, Belt and Road Initiative, Second Cold War, Two Globalisations, transnational cinema

About a decade ago, I wrote a piece called ‘What Is Transnational Cinema? Thinking from the Chinese Situation’ (Berry 2010). In it I argued that all knowledge is situated and perspectival: what we research is historically and spatially located, and we only know about those things from a particular time and place. Therefore, what transnational cinema is varies depending on what transnational cinema you are examining and where and when you are looking from. This emphasis seems to fit well with what some are calling ‘the second phase of transnational cinema studies’. Rather than creating a binary opposition between the national and the transnational, in the second phase emphasis is placed on acknowledging that the transnational always intersects with the national and must be understood through specific cases (Yang, Clini and Dasgupta 2020). Bearing these precepts in mind, this article asks, what is Chinese transnational cinema today (September 2021), over a decade later, and what has changed?

Ten years ago, my article noted that in Chinese Film Studies, some people had argued that, because cinema came from overseas, Chinese cinema had always been transnational and that therefore the idea was too general to be of any critical use. The article pushed back against that argument by observing and analysing two specific and recent phenomena. The first was the growth of cross-border Chinese film production involving filmmakers and producers from the People’s Republic of China (PRC), Hong Kong, Taiwan and elsewhere working together increasingly often. Twenty years earlier, in the 1980s, the cinemas of Hong Kong, Taiwan and the PRC were quite separate. As a result of all the new links, people needed a word for this kind of transnational Chinese cinema. The term, ‘Chinese-language cinemas’ (*huayu dianying*), became very commonly used to cover this growing transborder Chinese cinema as well as more locally specific cinemas.

Second, my article published in this journal in 2010 also addressed the issue of globalisation itself. Following Anna Tsing (2000), it argued for a distinction between the transnational and globalisation. Tsing sees the transnational as the bigger, umbrella term that covers all sorts of border-crossing activity or, in her terminology, ‘transnational projects’. She sees globalisation as one kind of huge transnational project, namely the neoliberal corporate fantasy of one world market with smooth, unimpeded flows of trade. But she also argues there are many other non-profit-driven cross-border projects. Something like genre cinema in the Hollywood mode, including Chinese commercial cinema, would be the cinematic part of the globalisation transnational project, whereas art cinema and the festival circuit might be an example of a less market-driven transnational project.

So, what has happened since the earlier article appeared? This essay returns to the two phenomena identified as transnational cinema from the Chinese situation a decade ago and argues that there have been important changes in both cases. It proposes the term, ‘cinemas of the Sinosphere’, to encompass those changes, but in two very different senses. First, it refers to growth of films that could be considered as transnational Chinese cinema but are not in a Sinitic language. In this sense, it is a term that replaces ‘Chinese-language cinemas’ to denote the totality of what we might consider as in some sense Chinese films. Second, it refers to the impact of the PRC’s globalisation project, both in general and specifically in the cinema. The PRC’s globalisation is known broadly in the PRC as the ‘going out’ (*zouchuqu*) policy since 1999, and it has been complemented by President Xi Jinping’s ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ (*yidai yilu*) since 2013. This second sense of the ‘Sinosphere’ recognizes and responds to the changing practices and understandings of globalisation over the last ten years or so. Instead of counterposing globalisation in the singular to the national, we now live in a ‘Two Globalisations’ world of

competing transnational trade policies anchored in the United States and the PRC, as well as various reactions against globalisation in its two major forms.

Sinosphere 1: Beyond Sinitic Languages

What has happened since 2010 to necessitate replacing ‘Chinese-language cinemas’ with ‘cinemas of the Sinosphere’ to designate the totality of films that we might recognise as part of a transnational Chinese cultural world? My earlier article pointed out the turn to a language-based definition of ‘Chinese cinema’ as a response to the growth of cross-border production and consumption that the established classification system based on the boundaries of separate territories and polities could not accommodate. Since, then, two things have occurred to trouble that model. One is the adoption of a second and more controversial language-based term, ‘Sinophone cinemas’ (for example, Yue and Khoo 2014). The second is the proliferation of films that are ‘Chinese’ either culturally or in terms of the place in which they were made but are not predominantly in Sinitic languages. I use the term ‘polity’ to recognise both the complexity of the ‘one country, two systems’ policy that Hong Kong operates under and the fact that Taiwan is not recognised as a nation-state by the PRC and many other nation-states. I use the term ‘Sinitic languages’ to recognise the fact that, although the use of Chinese characters for writing is shared, there are many different spoken forms, which are often mutually unintelligible.

The idea of the ‘Sinophone’ was originated by Shu-mei Shih in *Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations Across the Pacific* (2007) as a way of highlighting the legacy of imperial China in the spread of Chinese culture and its historical and contemporary articulations. Where the ‘Chinese-language’ in ‘Chinese-language cinemas’ is intended to be as neutral and as

inclusive as possible, the ‘Sinophone’ in ‘Sinophone cinemas’ points to something more specific. Indeed, it is a narrower definition. The Sinophone designates ‘a network of places of cultural production outside China and on the margins of China and Chineseness, where a historical process of heterogenizing and localizing of continental Chinese culture has been taking place for several centuries’ (Shih2007,4).

This definition of the Sinophone that excludes China has been highly controversial. It resonates with contemporary tensions between PRC Chinese people and those who are not PRC citizens. Furthermore, Shih’s definition is derived from the idea of the francophone, which in literary studies designates literature written in French outside France itself (unlike the idea of the anglophone, which is all-inclusive). But the history of the development of Chinese empire has been very different from the history of European imperialism under modernity, which was driven by a logic of capitalist exploitation of territories far distant from the metropolitan homeland. As Sheldon H. Lu sums up in his critique of the Sinophone, ‘China is not France’ (Lu 2012,22).

Even critical commentators acknowledge the importance of how the concept of the Sinophone emphasises resistance to power differences articulated through Sinocentric values. Furthermore, the debates about the accuracy and usefulness of Shih’s idea as a conceptual tool have been ongoing, and the idea itself has been frequently modified. However, not only does the Sinophone in Shih’s original definition not enable the kind of all inclusive, umbrella coverage of the transnational that motivated the origination of the term ‘Chinese-language cinemas’, but also more recent developments have undermined any definition based on the presumption of shared Sinitic languages as implied by the term ‘Sinophone’.

In the last decade, a number of high-profile films have been produced and circulated around the world that have reminded us that not all Chinese culture is in the Chinese language.

This phenomenon takes two primary forms: films from non-Chinese people living in Chinese-majority polities and territories; and films produced by Chinese people but not predominantly in a Sinitic language.

Films from Chinese-Majority Polities not in Sinitic Languages

To take the question of films produced in Chinese-majority polities and territories but not in Sinitic languages first, we should note that there are substantial minority ethnic populations within the Chinese-majority polities. In the past, a combination of market-driven practices and national policies meant that films were monolingual, regardless of the mix of spoken Sinitic and other languages one might hear on the street. Market considerations included a concern with literacy levels in the past, which might have discouraged audiences from watching films that required reading of subtitles, even if only for part of the film. As a result of all these factors, just as everyone in *Casablanca* (Curtiz 1942) speaks English, everyone in Chinese films set in, say, Inner Mongolia or Xinjiang, spoke Mandarin, as did indigenous characters in Taiwan. Even when films were made in Sinitic spoken languages other than Mandarin, such as Cantonese or Minnanhua (also known as ‘Taiwanese’ [*taiyu*]), everyone in the film spoke Cantonese or Minnanhua, however implausible such a monolingual situation might seem.

With rising literacy levels and changing policies, this monolingual practice has waned over the decades. In recent years, it has resulted not only in the production of films in a mixture of Sinitic languages, but also in films dominated by non-Sinitic languages. I will give two examples. First, before the arrival of sizeable numbers of people from mainland China beginning in the last seventeenth century, Taiwan was already inhabited by people who are believed to have

originated from Polynesia and today are recognized as the Indigenous inhabitants of the islands. Along with democratisation following the end of martial law in 1987 and the rise of community-based politics, Indigenous filmmaking has developed rapidly. It started out with local community-based videos that rarely circulated transnationally and were mostly documentaries. But now Indigenous dramatic feature filmmaking is becoming a more prominent part of the commercial film industry, too, and these films circulate more widely outside Taiwan.

After the production of a number of dramatic features about Indigenous people but directed by Han Chinese in the first decade of this century (Frangville 2011), Indigenous Taiwanese also started to take up more prominent roles behind the camera. In 2011, Han Chinese director Wei Te-Sheng's megahit *Seediq Bale* depicted the Wushe Uprising against the Japanese colonial occupiers in 1930 by the Seediq people as a kind of Taiwanese foundation myth, and the film was largely in the Seediq language. Numerous Indigenous Taiwanese had behind the camera roles on the film, which remains the most successful Taiwanese film ever at the box office. In 2014, Wei produced another high-profile and popular film set during the Japanese colonial era about a multi-ethnic Taiwanese baseball team called *Kano*. Although Indigenous characters and language were not particularly prominent, the film was directed by Seediq filmmaker and actor Umin Boya, who had starred in *Seediq Bale*. Perhaps the film that best exemplifies this trend to Indigenous participation both in front of and behind the camera in feature filmmaking is the 2015 film *Wawa no Cidal* (Mandarin: *Taiyang de Haizi*), also known as *Panay*. Panay is the name of the main character, and the alternative title means 'children of the sun'. Co-directed by Han Chinese Cheng Yu-Chieh and Pangcah Indigenous Taiwanese Lekal Sumi, the film tells of a struggle over land and culture concerning the Amis people, and it features a mix of Mandarin

and Amis languages. (For further discussion of indigenous people and Taiwan cinema, see Berry 2019).

A second example that has come to prominence is the Tibetan cinema that has emerged around the director Pema Tsenden (in Mandarin: Wanma Caidan) and his associates. Pema was the first Tibetan student to graduate from the Beijing Film Academy (Yeung and Yau 2017, 6). His first feature-length film, *The Silent Holy Stones* (*Jingjing de Manishi*, 2006), won the Best First Film prize at the 2005 edition of the national Golden Rooster Awards. In a recent online after-film conversation I hosted (Chinese Film Season London, 6 March 2021), he remembered being proud to win but also struck that the appearance of the first Tibetan film in Tibetan and directed by a Tibetan was not until the hundredth anniversary year of Chinese film production. Since then, he has gone on to make a string of other features. All of them are set in predominantly Tibetan populated areas, and Tibetan is the dominant language in his films and those of other Tibetan filmmakers who have followed in his wake, such as Sonthar Gyal and Lhapal Gyal. From the very beginning, this new Tibetan cinema has captured international attention and circulated on the international film festival circuit, winning many awards.

Culturally Chinese Films not in a Sinitic Language

If the global circulation of films from Chinese polities and territories in non-Chinese languages is one reason for moving beyond language-based definitions of ‘transnational Chinese cinema’ and ‘Chinese cinema’ in general, the appearance of prominent films that can be understood as part of global Chinese culture but are made in non-Chinese languages is another. Ien Ang’s *On Not Speaking Chinese* considered the issue of language and Chinese cultural

identity in detail back in 2001, pushing against any idea that Chinese language was necessary to Chineseness. This issue has come to the fore again in recent years, perhaps most prominently with *Crazy Rich Asians* (Chu 2018), which moves between Singapore, London, and the United States, and is largely in English. A hit in many countries, it was rejected by People's Republic of China audiences both critically and in terms of box office, perhaps because of discomfort with its ostentatious display of wealth (Bodeen 2018). Less controversial but also with a large dose of English was *The Farewell* (Wang 2109). Also relevant to this discussion would be Singapore director Anthony Chan's 2013 Cannes winner, *Ilo, Ilo*, where English is the lingua franca in a Chinese household with a Filipina maid.

In an international order of nation-states where everything is understood as belonging in one nation's borders, Chu and Wang's films would probably be designated 'USA' and Chan's 'Singapore'. But in a transnational world order, as the narratives of all these films illustrate, belonging is multiple and not solely aligned with states. What was once 'either or' can now be 'both and', and these films are certainly part of a Chinese cultural realm as well as American and Singaporean ones. Where it gets more complicated is when films can be claimed for Chinese cultural authorship but have no self-evident Chinese narrative. I have previously argued that Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) has a 'Chinese side' (Berry 2007). If Ang Lee rewrote the cowboy film with shepherds, now Chloe Zhao's *Nomadland* (2020) is a Western with retirees and campervans. But does it, despite its one hundred per cent American content and English language, also have a 'Chinese side'? Gina Marchetti has teased out the film's intertextual layers to suggest that it does (Marchetti 2021). Indeed, the first definition of 'cinemas of the Sinosphere' as the widest possible umbrella term for 'Chinese cinema' challenges us to ask just how far we can stretch the idea of 'Chinese cinema'.

Sinosphere 2: In an Era with Two Globalisations

In relation to Anna Tsing's distinction between the transnational as an umbrella term covering all manner of transnational projects and globalisation as a specific albeit huge transnational project (2000), the first sense of the Sinosphere discussed above corresponds to the search for an all-encompassing umbrella term to cover 'Chinese' transnational cinema in all its forms and meanings. Under this umbrella, there are indeed many specific transnational projects, to use Tsing's term, from Chinese cinema's participation in different film festival circuits to co-production agreements. But the second sense of the Sinosphere takes us back to the issue of globalisation itself, which Tsing distinguishes from the umbrella term of the transnational. When Tsing was writing, it was taken for granted that globalisation meant one thing: the post-Berlin Wall triumph of an American liberal democratic order premised on minimising the state, including tariffs and other border-based trade regulations, to allow for the maximization of the capitalist transnational project. As Tsing points out, this is an ideology. But for true believers like historian Francis Fukuyama, it was the 'end of history' and the peak of human evolution (Fukuyama1992).

Over the last decade, it has become clear that history is not over. The neoliberal order of globalisation has encountered strong pushback from within. For example, Donald Trump was elected on the basis of his 'America First' nationalist opposition to globalism and multilateral agreements in favour of bilateralism (Lacatus, 2021), a position that marks a step away from the transnational world order of globalisation and back to an international world order based on nation-states. The British vote to withdraw from the European Union in 2016 could be cast in a

similar light. But at the same time, the People's Republic of China has affirmed its commitment to globalisation, most notably in Xi Jinping's speech at the Davos World Economic Forum in 2017, the year after Trump was elected (Xi 2017).

Not only is history not over, but I also argue that we are now living in an era with two globalisations – two transnational projects of wealth accumulation based on market capitalism, each grounded in a national polity. One is American globalisation. This is the old small state model driven by transnational corporate capital that we are all familiar with, where national liberal democratic governments are subordinated to transnational megacorporate interests and compete for investment. Despite all the pushbacks against this model from within, it continues apace. The other globalisation is a big state model, driven by the Chinese Communist Party, leading the transnational corporate entities that it has fostered. In recent years, a series of events has communicated forcefully that no business leader or corporation is beyond the reach of the party-state. The highest profile downfall has been that of Jack Ma of Alibaba (McMorrow and Yu 2021). But his case has been the culmination of a series of disciplinary moves designed to let everyone know that 'the state runs business' in China and not the other way round (McGregor 2019).

This second, Chinese globalisation is also known variously as the 'going out' (*zouqichu*) strategy to promote Chinese investment overseas (Wang and Hu 2017), and the more well-known Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which envisages a revived set of overland and sea links binding together Chinese interests around the world (Huang 2016). The escalating tension as the USA-based and PRC-based transnational projects of globalisation contest for zones of influence is generating a 'Second Cold War' discourse. Whether it will become more than a discourse

remains to be seen, but my second sense of ‘cinemas of the Sinosphere’ refers to the impact of Chinese globalisation as it is manifested in the cinema.

This second sense of the Sinosphere as a Chinese-centred transborder realm goes back to the original idea of the ‘Sinosphere’ itself. The term ‘Sinosphere’ is used by the Canadian scholar of modern Chinese history, Joshua Fogel, in *Articulating the Sinosphere* (Fogel2009). This book examines the history of Sino-Japanese relations from the earliest times up to the outbreak of the first Sino-Japanese War in 1895. It marks a time before the modern era of supposedly equal and sovereign nation-states, defined by clearly demarcated borders. Fogel notes that the 1871 Treaty of Amity was the first time China and Japan subscribed to a legal instrument that designated them to each other as modern nation-states. But 1895 was also the point where Japan abandoned the old Sinocentric ethos of the Sinosphere that, at least formally, recognized China as not only the cultural, political, and economic centre of the known world but also the source of civilisation. Fogel emphasizes this configuration as one where there was a clear hierarchy with China at the centre, but also one where others had agency within this order.

In the twenty-first century, we are in a new era of the Sinosphere, and one that is not only regional but global in its aspirations. How does this manifest itself in the cinema? The examples are multiple, from the efforts of the Chinese film industry to export globally to how Chinese globalisation is shown in Chinese films. But it can also mean how other cinemas engage with Chinese globalisation in various ways ranging from co-production agreements to representations in films. The latter example takes the idea of ‘Cinemas of the Sinosphere’ beyond Chinese cinema itself to a larger sphere of influence.

Chollywood and Chinese Film Exports

Back in the 1980s, like the rest of the economy, the PRC film industry underwent the transition from a command economy to a market one, and it faced a gradual opening up of the economy to trade with Western countries (Berry 1988). By the 1990s, even before the PRC's entry to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2001, its film industry was responding to the challenge of Hollywood imports by learning from them how to make and market commercial genre films, albeit in localised forms (Berry 2001). This process in itself is part of a transformation from the national to the transnational.

For the most part, this transnationalisation of the Chinese film industry has been experienced domestically. However, it has been very commercially successful. In recent years, the PRC industry has reaped the benefits of learning from Hollywood and other successful commercial industries, including Hong Kong and South Korea. It has experienced rapidly growing domestic box office revenue, numbers of screens, and various other indicators of commercial success (China Power Team, 2020). After a long period as the second most valuable market, China overtook the United States in the exceptional pandemic circumstances of 2020 to become the most valuable market in the world. Furthermore, the vast majority of that box office was earned by domestic films, which had not been the case before (Davis 2021). These trends have been continuing as I write in 2021 (Brown 2021).

These domestic successes, remarkable though they are, do not by themselves mark the development of a cinematic Sinosphere, because they continue to operate according to the logic of Hollywood and American globalization. However, the ambition to 'go out' and turn China into the hub of a new transnational industry certainly exists. One way this ambition has manifested itself is in the establishment of various kinds of infrastructure. In 2013, *The Sunday*

Times in Great Britain marked the announcement of a PRC-UK film co-production agreement with an article titled, ‘Welcome to Chollywood’ (Thring 2013). It is one of twenty-two such nation-state to nation-state agreements (Zhang 2020). In addition, there has been the desire for Chollywood to match Hollywood’s contribution to American ‘soft power’ (Voci and Hui 2017; Yang 2016).

Chinese companies have also invested overseas, laying the foundations for a transnational infrastructure. Wang Jialian’s Dalian Wanda Media Group made headlines when it acquired the American movie theatre chain AMC in 2012, and then the UK’s Odeon & UCI Cinema Group in 2016 (Anon 2016). But in recent years, this kind of ‘going out’ has been restrained and Wanda was forced to rein in its overseas investment ambitions (Isaacson 2017). In May 2021, Wang sold most of Wanda’s remaining shares in AMC and speculation has continued about the future of his investment in the Hollywood studio, Legendary Entertainment (Chimielewski 2021). A few years ago, this change was understood as part of a broader shift to constrain outflows of capital at a time of stalling domestic growth (Davies 2016). But following the high-profile disciplining of various tycoons, including most notably Alibaba’s Jack Ma as mentioned above, a new interpretation is emerging; the Chinese Communist Party fears losing control over Chinese corporations and their leaders if they become truly transnational (Zhai, Wei and Yang 2021).

If the Wanda story indicates a tension between CCP control and ‘going out’, the new emphasis on the Belt and Road Initiative may be part of the resolution of that tension. The BRI is a ‘going out’ led by and under the control of the CCP and the government, as part of the Chinese model of state-led globalisation. In these circumstances, there has been less emphasis on investment overseas by the Chinese film industry and more on exports of Chinese films. I have felt this myself. Every year I get asked by a few Chinese journalists and film critics to be

interviewed about some aspect of contemporary Chinese cinema. In recent years, without exception, they have all asked me about the appeal of Chinese films overseas. The Chinese Communist Party's main English-language newspaper, *China Daily* has expressed these aspirations regularly in recent articles with titles like 'Cinema Could Be China's Next Big Cultural Export' and 'Chinese Film Industry Looks for New Horizons in North America' (Shea 2018; Anon 2019).

So far, however, reality has not met expectations. The huge box office revenue boom experienced by PRC films has been almost entirely domestic. I will briefly analyse China's top box office film at the time of writing, *Wolf Warrior 2 (Zhanlang 2, Wu Jing 2017)*, in the next section. But here it is relevant to note that 99.7 per cent of its US\$870 million box office came from the PRC domestic market (Box Office Mojo n.d. [a]). A similar pattern emerges for all the recent PRC-produced top box office films.

The current pattern contrasts markedly with the past, when Chinese films did much better internationally. In the 1980s, Chinese 'Fifth Generation' director films like *Yellow Earth (Huang Tudi, Chen Kaige 1984)* and *Red Sorghum (Hong Gaoliang, Zhang Yimou 1988)* were regular prize winners at international film festivals, going on to successful arthouse and independent movie theatre releases around the world. At the turn of the century, a cycle of martial arts blockbusters made it into regular theatrical release. For example, Zhang Yimou's completely PRC-financed and produced *Hero (Yingxiong 2002)* was a hit both at home and overseas, getting 30.3 per cent of its overall box office domestically and 69.7 per cent internationally (Box Office Mojo n.d. [b]). It is important to note that ticket prices in China two decades ago were far lower, and there were far fewer screens, so domestic box office would not take up such a high proportion of the overall box office for a successful film as today. However, even in cash terms,

the contrast between *Wolf Warrior 2* and *Hero* is striking. *Wolf Warrior 2* earned US\$2.7 million outside China (Box Office Mojo n.d. [a]). *Hero* earned US\$124.7 million outside China. (Box Office Mojo n.d. [b]).

Given this historical shift, a contradiction has appeared. On one hand, Chinese films are now the only non-English language films in the world's 100 top-grossing films of all time, with *Wolf Warrior 2* at number 72 at the time of writing (Box Office Mojo 2021). On the other hand, one commentator has concluded that PRC films are also experiencing 'waning international appeal' (China Power Team 2020). Many reasons can be given for this unusual configuration. Michael Keane has analysed the push for China's media and cultural industries in general to succeed overseas. He has concluded that despite infrastructural achievements the audience so far is small and largely confined to the PRC diaspora, because the cultural products themselves are only aimed at Chinese audiences (Keane 2019). As long as the Chinese market is growing so rapidly and so much money can be made there, perhaps there is limited pressure on Chinese producers to reach audiences elsewhere. But Yanling Yang has also pointed to a tension between the drive for soft power and continued tight censorship limiting global appeal (Yang 2016). However, the aspiration to global audiences remains and given China's recent record in all aspects of international trade, it would be foolish to assume that knots like these will never be undone. Nearly all major Chinese feature films are released in movie theatres around the world, but the audience numbers are small and the location of the movie theatres correlates to where major Chinese sojourners are found, for example university towns, suggesting that the non-Chinese audience so far is even smaller.

Chinese Films Imagine China's Sinosphere

How do Chinese films imagine China's globalization? Understanding how PRC cinema depicts the Sinosphere is as much part of understanding transnational Chinese cinema as its trading patterns. Before the Chinese film industry boom in this century, few Chinese film productions had the budget to shoot overseas. Now it is a commonplace. Among the many films with overseas settings, two trends can serve as examples. One is an image of the world as a consumerist pleasure dome, and the other is the depiction of the outside world as a site for dangerous adventures. The first is particularly associated with romantic comedies, female protagonists and female audiences, whereas the second is more associated with male action films. We could say that the implicit message of the first trend is, "the world is your oyster," and, of the second, "the world is your proving ground."

To take the romantic comedy genre first, a highly successful early example would be *Finding Mr. Right* (*Beijing Yushang Xiyatu*, Xue Xiaolu 2013). This box office hit's Chinese title translates directly as 'When Beijing Meets Seattle', which gives away the film's lineage as *Sleepless in Seattle* (Ephron 1993) by way of *When Harry Meets Sally* (Reiner 1989), but Chinese. While most of the film is indeed set in Seattle, and there are intertextual citations that pay tribute to the earlier Hollywood films, the actual plot is not a copy. Starring Tang Wei in what might be thought of as the Meg Ryan role, pregnant mistress Jiajia comes to Seattle to give birth, because as a single mother she would face difficulties registering the baby in China. The implicit questioning of conservative Chinese family values is an interesting sub-theme, but the main narrative follows a more conventional rom com formula: Jiajia comes to realize that what matters is not money but true love. However, along the way, she displays a high consumption lifestyle including plenty of bling, a luxury city break in New York, and more.

The credits for *Finding Mr. Right* include thanks to various municipal tourism authorities. Indeed, the cooperation of countries eager to showcase destinations for Chinese tourists has helped to launch a wave of rom coms like *Finding Mr. Right*. Before the COVID pandemic, Chinese outbound tourism boomed at least as quickly as the Chinese film industry, with departures rising from 10 million in 2000 to 130 million in 2017, with expenditures of US\$115.29 billion, making the country the biggest outbound market anywhere in the world (Zhu, Airey and Siriphon 2021, 1). There are many examples of rom coms built around different destinations. In *The Old Cinderella* (*Tuogui Shidai*, Wu Bai, 2013), the female protagonist leads a tour group to Israel. The *Hollywood Reporter* wrote that Israel's Tourism Ministry was an investor in the film (Anon., 2013). Woman director Xu Jinglei's 2015 rom com *Somewhere Only We Know* (*You Yige Difang Zhi You Women Zhidao*) is set in Prague. It was also reported to be boosting tourism from China (Flora 2015). In these films, it is a significant indicator of cultural values that the young Chinese female protagonists always travel half-way round the world only to stumble across a Chinese man to fall in love with. *Somewhere Only We Know* does make a tiny break away from this pattern by having as a subplot an older Chinese woman who fell in love with a Czech man during the high socialist era and seeks him out again today.

More recently, there has been a turn towards male audience-oriented action genre films with overseas settings. By far the most controversial and successful example is *Wolf Warrior 2*. Already mentioned as China's most successful film at the box office ever, it features a *Rambo*-like hero who cannot control his temper and uses near psychotic violence to achieve justice as he rescues Chinese and Africans from terrorists in a fictional African country that is sliding into civil war. While hugely successful at the box office, online debates indicate not everyone was comfortable with this character. Other examples include *Operation Mekong* (*Meigong He*

Xingdong, Lam2016), set in the Golden Triangle with heroic Chinese narcotics officers chasing down drug smugglers who have killed Chinese ship crew members working on the Mekong River. Another example is Dante Lam's follow-up, *Operation Red Sea (Honghai Xingdong 2018)*, in which the crew of a Chinese aircraft carrier neutralize a terror plot and evacuate Chinese nationals from the fictional nation of Yewaire on the Arabian Peninsula, which is descending into civil war.

Whereas the rom coms provide an opportunity for female protagonists to deploy the Chinese consumer's spending power and enjoy all the pleasures that the planet can provide, the action films provide their male heroes with the opportunity to prove themselves as men by deploying military power in the pursuit of justice. Like *Operation Red Sea*, *Wolf Warrior 2* is set in a mythical part of Africa riven by civil war and terrorism. Director Wu Jing also plays the lead role of Leng Feng (literally 'Cold Front'), who has been thrown out of the military for being unable to control his temper and follow orders in the face of what he perceives as injustice. These echoes of Rambo play through the film, where Leng Feng metes out violent justice as an independent operator, going where the military itself will not go, but always flying the Chinese flag. In Africa, where he has an African godson and encounters Islamic terrorists and a band of white mercenaries led by someone with the very American name of Big Daddy, the violence is both racialized and shaped by the history of colonialism.

This combination of masculinity, race, colonialism and violence has inspired a great deal of critical analysis (for example, Petrus Liu et.al. 2018; Berry 2018). In the context of this essay, it is striking how the imagination of Africa in *Wolf Warrior 2* and other such films echoes familiar stereotypes. Leng Feng is a Chinese saviour, not only to the Chinese but also to his African godson and the boy's mother, who is working in a Chinese-owned factory in the interior.

African men seem to have disappeared and the women and children are vulnerable and abandoned in a chaotic and violent land. Not only do civil war and terrorism beset the territory where *Wolf Warrior 2* is set but also an Ebola-like disease that other Chinese men are trying to save the locals from by developing a vaccine. Is this vision of Africa another instance of learning from Hollywood and European cinema?

Non-Chinese Cinema Engages with China's Globalization

The idea of 'cinemas of the Sinosphere' does not only refer to PRC cinema's expansion overseas and depiction of the rest of the world in the context of China's 'going out' and BRI policies. It also refers to how other cinemas participate in and respond to the globalisation of PRC cinema – how they enter its orbit, so to speak. This also manifests itself in numerous ways, many of which require further research before they can be fully understood. For example, take the twenty-two co-production agreements mentioned earlier in this essay. What effect have they had in the other countries that have signed them? Co-productions are often imagined as hybrid films with crews and cast from both countries and plots that take characters across the globe. But co-production agreements often cover other kinds of cooperation. So, what forms has this cooperation taken so far? How have other industries changed to meet the needs of their Chinese clients? If they have invested in China, how has that experience been? More research is needed before we can begin to provide an adequate answer to this question.

The impact of China's globalisation can also be seen in the impact of filmmaking elsewhere. Although the whole world is very conscious of China's rise, Africa may be one of the places where it has been most evident and felt. In 2009 already, the PRC became Africa's largest

trading partner. The country it took over from was the USA. Between 2000 and 2014 the annual volume of Sino-African trade grew from US\$10 billion to over US\$200 billion (Anon 2017). The overall volume has been unstable since then, not least because of COVID, but China has nevertheless consolidated its position as the continent's primary trading partner. How has African cinema responded?

Alessandro Jedlowski and Michael W. Thomas (2017) have examined the appearance of Chinese characters in Ethiopian hit films like the comedies *Made in China* (*Med in China*, Haile-Eyesus and Seyoum 2012) and *Zeraff* (Gashaw 2011). In an era of increased Chinese presence on the continent, it is not surprising that Chinese characters should appear in more on-screen roles. But, as Jedlowski and Thomas argue, stereotyping continues. For example, in the former film two Ethiopians and a Chinese ex-prisoner who has learnt Amharic in jail use Ethiopian preconceptions about Chinese culture to swindle people. Those preconceptions range from the idea that Chinese possess mysterious and fearsome martial arts skills to a faith in Chinese medicine and massage as viable alternative treatments. The latter film is a marriage comedy that plays on the Ethiopian father's allergic and xenophobic reaction to everything Chinese, including his future son-in-law, after witnessing the death of his own father caused by a faulty Chinese-made electricity generator. The stereotype of shoddy Chinese goods is important here.

Although 'othering' and stereotyping persists in these Ethiopian films, it is legitimate to ask if the Chinese have a new and central role in Ethiopian film. Where Americans and Ethiopians who had grown up in America used to be the default foreigners and equally albeit differently stereotyped, it is legitimate to ask if the Chinese are 'the new Americans' in Ethiopian cinema. In an article that begins to explore that question, Michael W. Thomas and I argue that the representation of the Chinese in Ethiopian films is not only different from that of Americans,

but also more optimistic. Given the close relationship between the governments of the two countries as well as social and cultural experiences and perceptions, perhaps this is not surprising (Thomas and Berry 2021). More work needs to be done to see if and how China and Chinese characters are depicted in the cinemas of other African countries. Are they also ‘cinemas of the Sinosphere’?

One more thoroughly explored and researched aspect of this phenomenon whereby foreign cinemas also become ‘cinemas of the Sinosphere’ is Chollywood’s relationship with Hollywood. Events such as the Wanda purchase of AMC and big-budget co-productions such as Zhang Yimou’s *The Great Wall*, starring Matt Damon (*Changcheng*, 2017) have attracted a great deal of attention. Among researchers, the pioneering work of Aynne Kokas is crucial in this regard. The title of her book, *Hollywood Made in China*, highlights precisely the power of Chinese capital and the Chinese market to re-shape Hollywood films and production practices (2017).

As noted in the section on Chollywood and exports above, the PRC film industry’s investments in Hollywood have been reigned back in recent years. But Hollywood’s orientation towards China has also stuttered. *The Great Wall* was a great failure at the box office, generating commercial hesitation about a much closer commercial and creative integration between the two film industry behemoths. But, as the broader relationship between the United States and China has become much chillier, Hollywood’s process of adjusting its films so that they can enter the Chinese market have become seen as self-censorship and even evidence of China ‘taking control’ of Hollywood by conservatives in the United States (The Heritage Foundation 2018). Although this backlash may be inspiring some disengagement at the time of writing, it is also

evidence that Hollywood has been drawn into Chollywood's orbit, even though Chollywood has been in Hollywood's orbit for far longer and with more far-reaching effects (Kokas 2017).

Conclusion

Based on the premise that transnational cinema is not a fixed ontological category but a practice that varies historically and socially, this article has asked how transnational Chinese cinema has changed over the last ten years. It has proposed two senses of 'cinemas of the Sinosphere' as the answer, one based on shifting from a language-based to a cultural-based definition of multiple cinematic ways of being Chinese, and the other based on the emergence of a world with two globalizations in which PRC cinema has become part of Chinese globalisation and the responses other cinemas make to it are part of cinemas of the Sinosphere.

The article has been weighted more heavily towards discussion of Chinese globalisation and its impact on cinemas of the Sinosphere, perhaps because its manifestations are multiple, rapidly changing and perhaps a bit harder to grasp. Some are already arguing that this new Sinosphere is evidence that we are in a Second Cold War. However, I would like to conclude by pointing out that the experience of 'cinemas of the Sinosphere' indicates that the new Sinosphere is not a direct resurrection of the old one, and neither is the Second Cold War a repetition of the first one. Unlike the old Sinosphere in which China was the centre of the known world, we are now experiencing a multipolar world of overlapping and competing world orders. If Hollywood is being drawn into the Sinosphere, it is also part of many other such cultural and national "spheres." If the Sinosphere is part of a new Cold War, there is no 'iron' or even 'bamboo'

curtain coming down so far. Instead, the cinemas of the Sinosphere overlap with the cinemas of American-led globalisation, sometimes competing with it, and sometimes cooperating.

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