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Chinese International Film Encounters: Closing the Gaps with Hollywood with Soft Power Appeal at Home and Abroad (中国电影与韩国的国际碰撞-中国电影通过软实力追赶好莱坞)

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Publication Details

Yecies, B. (2014). Chinese International Film Encounters: Closing the Gaps with Hollywood with Soft Power Appeal at Home and Abroad (中国电影与韩国的国际碰撞-中国电影通过软实力追赶好莱坞). In H. Wang, B. Lu & X. Niu (Eds.), *Creative Media, Part One* (pp. 1-22). Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press (China).

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Abstract

In this article, I aim to expand our understanding of the transnational production and increasing international appeal of contemporary Chinese cinema in 2012 and 2013; my viewpoint is from the outside looking in. To achieve this aim, I analyze two key developments that are contributing to the rapidly shifting shape and style of the Chinese film industry: 1) increasing post-production collaborations with film industry practitioners and firms from South Korea – an important trading partner for China; and 2) the popular reception of Chinese films on the international film festival circuit, in particular the responses of a diverse group of filmmakers, creative practitioners, and foreign critics at the Busan International Film Festival (hereafter BIFF), which celebrated its 18th year in 2013. Since the 17th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) began debating the Twelfth Five-Year Guideline in October 2010 at its fifth plenary session, the film industry in China has become more internationalized than ever before – to the point where we are witnessing the rise of a complex blend of local and foreign production, post-production and reception elements that is contributing to a newfound maturity for the industry. Gradually, these developments have been intriguing and exciting audiences at home and abroad, which in turn has added weight to the potential of Chinese “soft power” (ruan shili) – the universal appeal and appreciation of media products made in China and the charismatic cultural representations that are given life in visually stunning and emotionally gripping stories.

Keywords

international, film, encounters, closing, gaps, chinese, hollywood, abroad, soft, power, home, appeal

Disciplines

Arts and Humanities | Law

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English translation of: Brian Yecies (2014). “Chinese International Film Encounters: Closing the Gaps with Hollywood by Leveraging Soft Power Appeal at Home and Abroad.” Creative Media (1st series), Wang, Honghai, Lu Bin, and Niu Xingzhen (eds). Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press (China).

Please cite the published Chinese version.

Chinese International Film Encounters: Closing the Gaps with Hollywood by Leveraging Soft Power Appeal at Home and Abroad¹

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In this article, I aim to expand our understanding of the transnational production and increasing international appeal of contemporary Chinese cinema in 2012 and 2013; my viewpoint is from the outside looking in. To achieve this aim, I analyze two key developments that are contributing to the rapidly shifting shape and style of the Chinese film industry: 1) increasing post-production collaborations with film industry practitioners and firms from South Korea – an important trading partner for China; and 2) the popular reception of Chinese films on the international film festival circuit, in particular the responses of a diverse group of filmmakers, creative practitioners, and foreign critics at the Busan International Film Festival (hereafter BIFF), which celebrated its 18th year in 2013. Since the 17th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) began debating the Twelfth Five-Year Guideline in October 2010 at its fifth plenary session, the film industry in China has become more internationalized than ever before – to the point where we are witnessing the rise of a complex blend of local and foreign production, post-production and reception elements that is contributing to a newfound maturity for the industry. Gradually, these developments have been intriguing and exciting audiences at home and abroad, which in turn has added weight to the potential of Chinese “soft power” (*ruan shili*) – the universal appeal and appreciation of media products made in China and the charismatic cultural representations that are given life in visually stunning and emotionally gripping stories.

The first of these developments is adding a positive momentum to the second because it is drawing the Chinese and Korean film industries closer together, to their mutual benefit – especially since BIFF (then known as PIFF) screened Feng Xiaogang’s *Assembly* (2007) as the festival’s 2007 opening film. This action-war film and the prominent position it was given at BIFF constituted a big step forward for collaborative efforts between China and South Korea, not only because the film’s producers, the Huayi Brothers, were the most progressive private film company operating on such a large scale at the time, but also because of the

¹ I am deeply grateful to Professor Lu Bin for inviting me to become a part of this prestigious publication. It is an honor to share my views and research on Asian cinema with the *Blue Book’s* readers. I am also grateful to Stephen Cremin from *Film Business Asia* for sharing his insights on this evolving topic. The work in progress reported here builds on industry research conducted in China and Korea. Related work has been published as: Brian Yecies, Ae-Gyung Shim, and Ben Goldsmith, “Digital Intermediary: Korean Transnational Cinema.” *Media International Australia* #141 (November 2011): 137-145. Funding from the Korea Foundation, the Academy of Korean Studies, and the Australia-Korea Foundation has made research for this ongoing project possible.

heavy involvement in *Assembly* by Korean action and effects specialist – all teams who had worked together on the Korean war film *Taegukgi* (2004). This close and ongoing association between the two film industries is turning up the spotlight on Chinese cinema at BIFF – the largest festival and market in the world for Asian cinema, and a key networking location for promoting Chinese films to the global film industry. This type of global attention directed at Chinese cultural contents by non-Chinese industry leaders and players (as well as government officials) is a key ingredient in the continuing rise of China’s soft power. For soft power to be effective, it needs consumers of a nation’s cultural contents who firstly have the ability to gain access to this material, and, second, as the term implies, to freely engage with these contents by their own choice or through the recommendations of others outside the country of origin – that is, not through coercion of any kind. Thus, it is always impressive, and indeed it is one of the secrets to the success of soft power, when individuals and groups willingly engage in the word-of-mouth promotion of another country’s cultural contents. Combined, these two developments are not only furthering the transnational production of Chinese films – whether made in whole or in part inside or outside China, or co-produced with non-Chinese partners – but also enlarging the scope of what has conventionally been understood by “Chinese national cinema.”

Given the rapid changes and challenges that filmmakers, audiences and policymakers have experienced since the CPC’s fifth plenary session in October 2010, this is a fascinating and important time to take an in-depth look at the film industry in China. The production of domestic films has reached new heights, driven by international collaborations on a number of “high-concept” genre films involving a wide range of co-production and assisted production arrangements, and VFX and post-production services provided by highly skilled practitioners from around the globe. In early 2012, the number of foreign (primarily Hollywood) feature films permitted on the big screen had increased 170% from 20 to 34.² In addition, the number of multiplex screens has continued to rise, reaching more than 15,000 in 2013 – a steep increase from an estimated 11,200 screens in 2012, and 6,000 and 1500 screens at the end of 2010 and 2008 respectively. Films exhibited in 3D (as commercial undertakings rather than arthouse ventures) have risen sharply, and new box office records have been set in this area. Additionally, it has become commonplace for the end credits on both small- and big-budget Chinese films to list the company (and employee) names of a range of international special effects, post-production, and sound mixing companies as well as foreign location consultants and managers, thus revealing the true collaborative nature of a rapidly increasing number of films originating in East Asia.³

² The number of 34 foreign films refers only to profit-sharing films; there are also flat-fee films. As a result of these formal government arrangements, these 34 films were automatically privileged in terms of the higher box office share they enjoyed. However, there have been periods when flat-fee sales have been preferred, notably following the success of *Expendables* (2010) when newly emerging distributors began overpaying for the rights to Hollywood films in order to secure a diverse line-up. One of the advantages of a flat-fee system is that the film’s original foreign producer/distributor does not have to trust the local partner to report box office income accurately – a problem that plagues the global film industry. And, presumably, the foreign producer/distributor receives the fees up-front by withholding the film until full payment is made.

³ In addition to the plethora of South Korean post-production firms discussed in this chapter, companies from Thailand, such as Oriental Post, Postique, and Kantana Laboratories, are significant contributors to contemporary Chinese cinema.

Most readers will already be familiar with these statistics and their potential impact on the future of the Chinese film industry. However, what readers may not fully realize is how foreigners are attempting to make sense of these rapid developments. Unquestionably, the “opening up” of the Chinese film industry and Chinese culture in these ways has played a significant part in the increasing development and success of the domestic film industry as one of China’s new “pillar industries”. While there are many private companies contributing to this expansion strategy, in late 2013 Dalian Wanda Group Corporation (hereafter Wanda) appeared to be leading the pack through chairman Wang Jianlin’s massive investment plans to develop Qingdao into China’s newest movie hub by 2017.⁴ Because of its strength as an exhibitor – in both China and the U.S. (after Wanda purchased the U.S.-based cinema chain AMC Theatres in May 2012 for around USD \$2.6 billion) – rival cinema operators are recognizing that they need to forge links with Wanda, just as they used to have to partner up with China Film Group if they nurtured any hope of large-scale distribution. In 2013, all eyes are on Wanda and its plans for Qingdao, as China already has a great many studio facilities as well as two large national film festivals. Wanda can build it, but will people come?

In light of these developments, it hardly needs saying that all of the major Hollywood (and Chinese) players are jockeying to have a share in this rapidly unfolding economic and cultural dream. It may sound self-evident, but the internationalization and transnationalization strategies outlined above are exactly how the Chinese film industry will continue to close the gap with Hollywood – in terms of the quantity and quality of films produced – even while continuing to pursue the collaborative path.

Two films that exemplify Chinese cinema’s continuing upward trajectory are the supernatural fantasy–action romance *Painted Skin 2: The Resurrection* (2012, dir. Wuershan) – one of China’s top-performing films ever at the box office, inspired by the classic Liao Zhai Zhi Yi collection of supernatural tales – and *Journey to the West: Conquering the Demons*, a 2013 action–comedy directed by Stephen Chow and Derek Kwok Chi-Kin. Both these films are important for Chinese cinema and film history if only because, in 2012 and 2013 respectively, they became the highest grossing domestic films ever screened in China. Defeating predictions, *Painted Skin 2*’s box office takings climbed to over 700 million RMB (\$115 million USD), and *Journey to the West*’s 1.24 billion yuan profits (over \$200 million USD) nearly doubled this achievement. Both films made a significant proportion of their total revenues at the box office within the first few days of their release, and both outperformed almost all the Hollywood films released in China around the same time.⁵ According to the “China Top Ten 2012” list, *Painted Skin 2* was the third most successful film shown in China that year, beating Hollywood blockbusters *Mission Impossible: Ghost Protocol*, *The Avengers*, *Life Of Pi*, *Men In Black 3*, *Ice Age: Continental Drift*, and *Journey 2: The Mysterious Island* – but not the re-release of *Titanic* (1997) in 3D.⁶ And, according to “China

⁴ Coonan, Clifford. (21 September 2013). *Hollywood Reporter.com* “China's Wanda Unveils \$8.2 Billion Movie Fund as Hollywood A-Listers Lend Support,”) Available at: www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/chinas-wanda-unveils-82-billion-633772.

⁵ Although *Painted Skin 2* was not distributed commercially in Korea, or screened in BIFF, it appeared (rather oddly) in the “Family Cinema” section at Korea’s Gwangju International Film Festival on 9 November 2012.

⁶ See: Anonymous. (21 January 2013) *Screen Daily.com* “China box office round-up 2012: China becomes world's second biggest market.” Available at: <http://www.screendaily.com/china-box-office-round-up-2012-china-becomes-worlds-second-biggest-market/5050843.article>.

Yearly Box Office” provisional statistics for 2013, *Journey to the West: Conquering the Demons* has overtaken Hollywood blockbusters *Iron Man 3*, *Pacific Rim*, *Fast & Furious 6*, and *Man of Steel*.⁷ Little wonder that the big U.S. film industry companies and foreign critics have their eyes firmly on the big things that are happening in the Chinese film market right now.

To observers outside China, it feels as if the range of film genres produced there *is* beginning to expand – albeit slower than many would hope – as the commercial market grows. This is in spite of the exchange of “warnings” between officials from China’s State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT), which in early 2013 merged with the General Administration of Press and Publications to form a new agency called the State Administration of Press, Publications, Radio, Film and Television (*guojia xinwen chubang guangbo dianying dianshi zongju* 国家新闻出版广播电影电视总局, hereafter SAPPRFT), and major Hollywood companies. Media headlines such as “Warning from China Film Watchdog: Not Enough ‘Co’ in Co-Productions”⁸ and “China feels heat from Hollywood”⁹ are adding fuel to the debate about the utility and purpose of film, competition between local and international films intended for general release, and the future of co-productions and other types of collaboration between China and Hollywood, and China and other countries. At the same time, as most observers are aware, there are numerous points of divergence between the types of films approved for import and those green-lit for domestic production (not to mention the additional fissures separating official domestic productions and the countless international films consumed in China – streamed and downloaded (both legally and illegally) and purchased on the street).¹⁰

A counterpoint to the challenges impacting on the ancillary markets is the unprecedented expansion of integrated marketing communication (IMC) campaigns in China, involving such ventures as character licensing, merchandizing, theme park and real estate development, mobile and online gaming, product placement, and promotional tie-ins – all designed to

⁷ See *Box Office Mojo*, “China Yearly Box Office,” Available at: www.boxofficemojo.com/intl/china/yearly.

⁸ See the full article by Laurie Burkitt. *The Wall Street Journal-China: China Realtime Report*. August 27, 2012 Available at: <http://blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/2012/08/27/warning-from-china-film-watchdog-not-enough-co-in-co-productions/>. Accessed 22 November 2012.

⁹ See the article in *The Australian* on 14 November 2012. Available at: <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/world/china-feels-heat-from-hollywood/story-fnb64oi6-1226516088631>. The story was originally published in the *Times-UK* as: “Film-makers in China ordered to wage creative war on Captain America” by Leo Lewis, 12 November 2012. Available at: <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/arts/film/article3596908.ece>. Accessed 22 November 2012.

¹⁰ In a *Variety* interview with Clifford Coonan (1-7 October 2012: 8), Huayi Brothers’ President Wang (James) Zhonglei restated the well-known irony regarding the ability of Chinese importers to distribute a U.S. film [such as the supernatural fantasy adventure story *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, Part 2* of which earned \$29,716,871 USD in its first week at the Chinese box office in August 2011], and the inability of Chinese companies to make a film of the same genre due to government restrictions. See Coonan, Clifford, “Mainland’s main man,” *Variety* (1 October 2012), 428(8): 8; and “China Box Office, 1-7 August 2011,” *Box Office Mojo*. Available at: <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/intl/china/?yr=2011&wk=31&p=.htm>.

extend the commercial life and profitability of a film and the intellectual property associated with it. The major private Chinese film companies have not been slow to exploit the “one-source-multi-use” (OSMU) production and promotion strategy that spins off a variety of derivative products (e.g., online games, character pencil cases, shoes, backpacks) and tie-in campaigns (e.g., McDonald’s kids meals) from one source program. In Hollywood, this is known as the “Spielberg” or “George Lucas” treatment, that is, a full-service ancillary marketing strategy. Given the advanced state of vertical and horizontal integration in Hollywood, and the recent boom in gaming culture and the rollout of superfast broadband networks across the globe – helping to integrate online and mobile gaming – it should come as no surprise that many local and international observers are watching the online and mobile user spaces surrounding the *Painted Skin 2* multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) – developed for PC and mobile phone by Beijing-based Kylin Games, a subsidiary of Kylin Films – with keen interest. Clearly, the producers are hoping to tap into the estimated \$70.4 billion U.S. dollar worldwide gaming industry fueled by its 1.2 billion users – of which the Asia-Pacific region, and more specifically, online users in China, are dominant.¹¹

Another example of Chinese innovation in IMC is branded entertainment company Taomee Holdings (http://www.taomee.com/en_taomee.html) and its SEER animations, which are also distributed in Taiwan. Established in 2007, Taomee was one of the very first companies in China to develop an entertainment-based popular children’s educational program and franchise to complement a larger cross-media platform strategy. In 2013, Taomee is one of China’s leading children’s entertainment and media companies, and its *Mole’s World* – which the company claims is the premier online game hybrid in Greater China – and other SEER narratives (including *Legend of the Moles*) and characters draw in more than 100 million children (according to mid-2012 figures) via the virtual communities linked to its online video site, books and print magazines, live fun fairs and other events, TV animation series and feature films at the cinema. Taomee also offers a top-selling animation app for Apple iOS (in simplified and traditional Chinese, and English), which became available for download (via iPhone, iPad, and iPod touch) in Apple’s App Store in August 2012. By buying movie tickets at the cinema, children can progress in the online gameworld, a strategy which has in turn boosted box office takings. The most recent film in this transmedia franchise, *Seer III: Heroes Alliance* (2013) – a 3D digital sci-fi adventure movie about space-exploring robots bent on fighting space pirates and protecting the environment – generated RMB76.2 million (US\$12.5 million) in China in July 2013, more than the previous two SEER films combined.

Its extended IMC campaign and growing OSMU “franchise” aside, *Painted Skin* is the quintessential example of an evolving type of transnational Chinese cinema – one that is created through a range of international collaborators (for instance, South Korea’s CJ Powercast, Next Visual Studio and Lollol Media completed the VFX and 2D/3D digital intermediary work) and a bevy of active local co-producers (Huayi Brothers Media, Ningxia Film Group, Ding Longda, and Kylin Network) who between them are very familiar with China’s challenging censorship system. While international collaboration in the Chinese cinema already boasts a long history, between 2012 and 2013 it reached new heights. Projects involving Korean film companies and industry practitioners in particular have contributed to

¹¹ Peter Warman, “Newzoo Announces New Report: Global Games Market to Grow 6% to \$70.4bn in 2013,” *newzoo.com* 22 May 2013. Available at: www.newzoo.com/press-releases/newzoo-announces-new-report-and-projects-global-games-market-to-grow-6-to-70-4bn-in-2013.

this rapid ascent by helping Chinese filmmakers compete with Hollywood, albeit in an Asian way.

For the last five years, between 20 and 30 percent of the 10 top-performing films at the Chinese box office were domestic films involving one or more contributing Korean film companies. In 2009, for example, Korean companies MAGE (special effects make-up and hair) as well as Demolition and HANIL Engineering (special effects) – supervised by special effects producer Edward Chiyun Yi (aka Yi Chi Yun) – worked on John Woo’s *Red Cliff II* (and his 2008 prequel *Red Cliff*, which enjoyed one of the top all-time box office openings), as well as on director Zhang Yimou’s *A Simple Noodle Story* (aka *A Woman, a Gun and a Noodle Shop*, 2009). In 2010, MAGE, Demolition, and HANIL, along with other Korean action consultants and stunt coordinators and the Seoul-based Dolby film sound-mixing studio Bluecap Soundworks, contributed to Feng Xiaogang’s *Aftershock* (2010) – one of China’s top-performing films at the box office. In addition to these projects, the Korean staff at Beijing-based post-production firm HFR, including Lee Yong-gi (Digital Intermediary [DI] supervisor, aka Lee Yonggi), Edward Chiyun Yi (DI producer), Ethan Park (DI colorist), and several other DI technicians and project managers, helped to shape the look of Feng Xiaogang’s *If You are the One II* (2010) and Tsui Hark’s *Detective Dee and the Mystery of the Phantom Flame* (2010), for which Busan-based AZ Works (aka AZ Works on the Beach) received the visual effects award at Taiwan’s Golden Horse Awards.¹²

Between 2011 and the first half of 2013 (to June), Korean practitioners working in China continued to consolidate their position while gaining valuable experience in the rapidly expanding Chinese film industry. Firms such as Seoul-based Digital Idea and Beijing-based Lollol Media contributed production experience and digital intermediary effects to what have become some top-performing films: Tsui Hark’s 3D film *Flying Swords of Dragon Gate* (2011); *CZ12* (aka *Chinese Zodiac*, directed by Jackie Chan, 2012) – also the top-performing Chinese film of all time at the box office; *The Chef, The Actor, The Scoundrel* (2012), a period film directed by Guan Hu and produced in part by Edward Chiyun Yi; and *Say Yes 101*, a contemporary romantic comedy directed by Leste Chen and based on the Japanese drama *101st Proposal*, a hit series on Fuji Television in the early 1990s.¹³ However, by far the biggest box office sensation based on Chinese–Korean collaboration is Stephen Chow’s *Journey to the West: Conquering the Demons* (2013). For this action-packed 3D film, Korean companies Macrograph and Moneff, in concert with the 250-person Korean VFX farm run by Los Angeles-based Venture 3D, completed the stunning visual effects; Seoul-based Locus Corp. was responsible for key CGI scenes as well as the film’s ancillary character-licensing products.¹⁴ *Journey to the West* has the longest list of Korean companies and practitioners in

¹² Han, Sunhee. (14 May 2011). *Variety.com* “Korean incentives boosted to lure outside biz,” Available at: <http://variety.com/2011/film/news/korean-incentives-boosted-to-lure-outside-biz-1118036655/>. Korean companies M-Nine (3D artwork), Atom Post Production, and Kinomotive also worked on this project, and the production benefitted from in-kind support in Korea provided by the Busan Film Commission’s Post Incentive program.

¹³ The afterlife of the original Japanese TV drama is interesting in itself. In 1993, it was remade as a feature film in South Korea: *101st Proposal*, starring Mun Seong-geun and Kim Hui-ae. Then it was redone in 2003 as a 20-part Chinese–South Korean TV series, starring Korean actress Choi Ji-woo, and yet again as a 16-part South Korean series in 2006.

¹⁴ Los Angeles-based Venture 3D was established in 2008 by seasoned production and post-production creatives Marcus Englefield, George Lee, and Paul Ottosson as a joint venture between its U.S. operation and a rendering farm in South Korea under the leadership of Kim

the credits of any film produced in China, demonstrating the increasing breadth and scope of the ongoing internationalization of Chinese cinema.

By late 2013, the newly formed company Forestt Studios (画林映像) – based in the Qikeshu Innovation Park area of Chaoyang District in Beijing, and run by experienced Korean national and former HFR DI expert Ethan Park (朴相洙) as general manager and chief colorist (总经理, 首席调色师) – had completed three films, including *My Lucky Star* (非常幸运, 2013), a romance directed by U.S.-born Dennie Gordon and starring Zhang Ziyi and Leehom Wang; and director Wang Guangli and producer Wong Jing's soon-to-be-released action thriller, *A Chilling Cosplay* (制服, 2013, aka *Devil's Right Hand* (恶魔右手) and now *-197°C Murder* (冰裸杀), the name under which it is being sold in 2013 at the American Film Market by Mega-Vision Pictures). *My Lucky Star* is a prequel to the 2009 Chinese–Korean co-production film *Sophie's Revenge*, starring Zhang Ziyi, So Ji-sub, Fan Bingbing, Ruby Lin, Peter Ho, and Yao Chen, and co-produced by Beijing Perfect World Co. and CJ Entertainment. Presently, Forestt Studios has another 15 films in the pipeline for completion before mid-2014. The rapidly expanding number of films being produced on an annual basis in China is ensuring that there is no shortage of DI and visual effects work for domestic and international practitioners and firms.

Listing all the Chinese films with input from Korean practitioners is a near impossible task (although to my knowledge this article is the most comprehensively researched and consolidated list available to date). Notable co-productions completed before 2009 include: Chen Kaige's *Together* (2002), made with established Korean cinematographer Kim Hyung-goo and Korean producer Lee Joo-ik; the historical fantasy film *The Promise* (2005), also made by Chen Kaige and starring popular Korean stars – the dashing Jang Dong-gun and the beautiful young K-drama and film star Kim So-yeon; and Feng Xiaogang's *Assembly* (2007), where Edward Chiyun Yi was the executive producer responsible for bringing together a Korean team of action and stunt coordinators, special effects, special effects make-up, sound effects and sound editing – all of whom had previously worked together on the Korean blockbuster hit *Taegukgi* (2004). Since *The Promise*, other Korean actors such as Kwon Sang-woo, Kim Hee-sun, Jung Woo-sung and So Ji-seup, to name only a few, have also worked with Chinese directors, taking major roles in their films with the intention of capitalizing on their popularity as *Hallyu* stars in Asia. On the other side of the set, director Hur Jin-ho (aka Heo Jin-ho) has directed two Chinese films, *A Good Rain Knows* (2009, aka *Season of Good Rain*) and *Dangerous Liaisons* (2012).¹⁵ Both projects have created further opportunities for Korean directors to work with the Chinese film industry.

Jong-ryul (and his wife, who is a 3D film director). Kim developed the firm's proprietary stereoscopic conversion software at the Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology (KAIST).

¹⁵ The Chinese films *A Good Rain Knows* (2009) and *Dangerous Liaisons* (2012) were produced by Beijing-based Zonbo Media and directed by seasoned Korean filmmaker Hur Jin-ho, blending the visions of Zonbo's CEO and president Chen Weiming and director Hur, responsible for a number of Korean films that became hits across East Asia. Also, An Byung-ki, the Korean producer of *Speed Scandal* (2008) and *Sunny* (2011), which were box office hits in China, directed *Bunshinsaba* (2012), the "first" horror film to be released in China.

Chinese filmmakers have enabled Koreans to have had a hand in a plethora of other *wuxia* (martial arts) comedies, *wuxia* fantasies, contemporary dramas, romantic comedies, period dramas, romance films, comedy-dramas, psycho-dramas, black comedies, thrillers, war films, horror films and remakes of U.S. films (such as *What Women Want*), including: *Tracing Shadow* (2009), *Lan* (我們天上見, 2009), *Buddha Mountain* (2010), *My Belle Boss* (2010), *In a Tangle* (2010), *Color Me Love* (愛出色, 2010), *Driverless* (2010), *Love in Cosmo* 搖擺de婚約 (2010), *A Big Deal* 巨額交易 (2011), *The Warring States* (2011), *House Mania* (2011), *Love on Credit* (2011), *Legendary Amazons* (2011), *One Mile Above* (2011, aka *Kora*), *The Sword Identity* (2011), *The Purple House* (紫宅, 2011), and *What Women Want* (2011). The list also includes Wilson Yip's *A Chinese Ghost Story* (2011, aka *A Chinese Fairy Tale*) and *Magic To Win* (2011), which were both completed by Seoul-based Digital Studio 2L, and *Love in Space* (2011), a Hong Kong romantic comedy produced by Fruit Chan and Indian-born Australian filmmaker Anupam Sharma. In 2012 and 2013, this list expanded to include: *The Locked Door* (女人如花, 2012), *To My Wife* 與妻書 (2012), *Son of the Stars* (2012), the mystery-drama *Double Exposure* (2012), *Falling Flowers* (2012), *Happy Hotel* (樂翻天, 2012), *The Zodiac Mystery* (2012), *Wu Dang* (2012), *Full Circle* (2012), *An Inaccurate Memoir* (2012), *Guns and Roses* (2012), *Beijing Flickers* (2012), and *Midnight Train* (午夜火車, 2013). Koreans' contributions to such an extensive range of genres and film styles may well come as a surprise to members of the Chinese film industry as well as the Korean and U.S. film industries.

The opportunity for Koreans to work on these Chinese films – big, medium, and small – grew from the contacts and friendships (*guanxi*) that producer Edward Chiyun Yi (and a handful of other Korean film industry people) made with the sixth generation of Chinese filmmakers while studying alongside them at the Beijing Film Academy during the early-to-mid-1990s. The professional inroads made by Yi and others in China since this time have enabled them and others in their personal networks to become some of the most active representatives of the Korean film industry in China today. All have built long-term personal networks in both Korea and China and have become central players in the internationalization process, at both national and industry levels. To the outside observer, this recent trend suggests that Chinese film companies are coming to resemble Hollywood, welcoming foreign talent which they see as an ongoing source of strength rather than a threat about to "take over" the local industry. Whereas in 2012, foreign film critics agreed that Chinese companies were looking to Taiwanese directors such as Wei Te-Sheng, in 2013 the Chinese film industry has increasingly begun to woo South Korean and U.S. directors (indeed, the romance *My Lucky Star* was directed by U.S.-born Dennie Gordon, the first woman from the U.S. to direct a feature Chinese film). Clearly, Chinese film companies are now looking beyond the Hong Kong directors who have traditionally partnered with Mainland colleagues in the past.

Getting the Technical Ingredients of Soft Power Right

Against this background of large-scale collaboration, and bearing in mind that international film co-productions have become commonplace around the globe, fine-tuning the working relationships between international partners in Chinese cinema is still a challenge. In the cases of *Painted Skin 2* and *Journey to the West: Conquering the Demons*, a pinch of Korean technical skill and ingenuity has proven to be a key ingredient in producing a successful dish, especially where the creation of original and dynamic colorscales has been a critical factor. Paying attention to some of the technical innovations behind Korean cinema's soft-power appeal may hold lessons for other industries such as the Chinese film industry. After all,

cultural contents must have a sophisticated visual stylistic appeal if they are to attract a global audience.

In this section, I consider how South Korean post-production practitioners are contributing to the professionalization of Chinese cinema and enhancing the film industry's "absorptive capacity" for change.¹⁶ Chua Beng-Huat (2012) contends that the technically developed East Asian countries, particularly Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Japan, have distinct advantages when it comes to producing "quality content".¹⁷ This is NOT to say that Chinese cinema is lacking in quality! Rather, as many would agree, China is seeking to catch up with its Asian neighbors by drawing technological expertise and knowledge from outside its borders through selective collaborative ventures. Korean collaborations in particular are pushing the technological frontier in the Chinese film industry, especially with respect to high-end digital effects – most notably through the distinctive visual sensibilities and practices of Lee Yong-gi and other Korean post-production specialists whom Lee has trained or inspired both at home and abroad.¹⁸

Lee is Korean cinema's grandfather of color grading; he is a pioneer in methods of manipulating the colors of a film during the post-production and final printing processes, which are now completely digital (and known as digital intermediary or DI). DI, which has become an essential medium for filmmaking across the globe, enables filmmakers to manipulate a film and prepare it for digital projection before it is distributed to cinemas or processed for other screen formats. Between 1997 and 2011, Lee "colored" and digitized more than 200 domestic feature films (both commercial and independent) made by leading directors such as Bong Joon-ho (*Mother*, 2009; *The Host*, 2006), Park Chan-wook (*Old Boy*, 2003; *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance*, 2005; *Thirst*, 2009), Kim Jee-woon (*The Good, the Bad, and the Weird*, 2008; *A Bittersweet Life*, 2005), and Lee Myung-se (*M*, 2007). This remarkable achievement came hard on the heels of his role in pioneering Korean cinema's transition to digital equipment and workflow processes between 2002 and 2005.

In 2008, while still working on films in Korea, Lee began consulting for the Chinese-owned firm HFR in Beijing. His chief task was to purchase and install state-of-the-art digital post-production equipment, then costing upwards of \$500,000 USD (depending on the film scanner, recorder and digital projector chosen, as well as upgrades and options, but not including the cost of building a suitable studio space – a project which he also oversaw). Lee made a permanent move to Beijing in 2009, and in 2013 he and a growing number of Korean colleagues are among the most sought-after DI and visual effects experts in China. Their ambitions with regard to working in the country are clear: China is the new wild frontier, a stimulating environment which however presents Korean players with many challenges,

¹⁶ See Ernst, Dieter and Kim, Lin Su (2002). "Global Production Networks, Knowledge, Diffusion, and Local Capability Formation." *Research Policy* 31: 1417–1429; and Henderson, J., Dicken, P., Hess, M., Coe, N. and Yeung, H. W. C. (2002). "Global Production Networks and the Analysis of Economic Development." *Review of International Political Economy* 9 (3): 436–464.

¹⁷ Chua Beng-Huat (2012). *Structure, Audience and Soft Power in East Asian Pop Culture*. Hong Kong: HKU Press.

¹⁸ Among the people whom Lee has trained as digital colorists, digital intermediate technicians, and technical supervisors and producers are Ethan Park, Kim Hyeong-seok, Lee Hye-min, and Park Jin-ho – some of which currently work for Phenom-films, a new company formed by the merger of HFR-Beijing, Lollol Media, and a local Chinese VFX company.

including opportunity costs – the sharing of trade secrets and intellectual property, among other things. If industry headlines are anything to go by, then this is a small cost to pay given that there seems to be “No End in Sight for China Film Sector’s Rapid Expansion.”¹⁹

In the recent past, DI in China was a cost-prohibitive luxury offered by a small number of U.S., Canadian and Australian firms working with a select group of leading Chinese directors and their big-budget films. However, the arrival of Lee and other Korean representatives (working for Seoul-based companies such as Digital Idea, Digital Studio 2L, SK Independence, and CJ Powercast), coupled with lower costs and a high level of technical capability, has enabled both established and emerging Chinese filmmakers to utilize this key process.

Not only has Lee brought his experience and knowledge – garnered from his numerous award-winning and critically acclaimed Korean films – to China, but he has transferred state-of-the-art technology by overseeing the purchase of new equipment with which he has become very familiar through attending key annual industry trade shows such as the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) Show or the Cine Gear Expo Los Angeles. Each year Lee tries to attend at least one of these events where he can demonstrate new equipment and hold detailed discussions with technicians and their sales teams.

Lee completed the DI on one of his first blockbuster films in China, Tsui Hark’s 2010 martial arts drama *Detective Dee and the Mystery of the Phantom Flame*, in 15 days.²⁰ In fact, he created an initial color-corrected version in about 2 days – at least, according to how he thought it should look. At the peak of his career in Korea, Lee had mastered the assembly-line approach to DI that he used here; producers and directors would instruct him: “give my film the Park Chan-wook ‘Old Boy’ or ‘Thirst’ look”, which meant: keep it dark and mysterious with lots of shadows. To aid in the general goal of seeing the visual elements in Chinese films more clearly, Lee and other DI colorists and producers often work with the sound track turned off. Hence, one could say that they listen to the sounds of color – a simple but novel technique for the inexperienced colorist, as interviews with Chinese practitioners who have worked with Lee suggest.²¹

To say that Lee is a fan of David Fincher’s work is an understatement. His favorite films include Fincher’s *Se7en* (1995), *Panic Room* (2002), and *Zodiac* (2007), as well as Christopher Nolan’s *The Dark Knight* (2008). The accentuation of darkness and the gradient shades of black used in these four films had a profound influence on Lee’s color palette – even before the widespread use of digital intermediary. *Panic Room*, for instance, is set in a

¹⁹ See Coonan, Clifford (6 October 2013). *The Hollywood Reporter: Busan Daily Edition #3*. Page 2.

²⁰ With analogue equipment, it had taken about 10 days to color-grade a film – that is, to make the final creative adjustments on the master (answer) print before duplication and distribution. While working in Korea, Lee completed 40 to 50 films per year, often working on multiple projects simultaneously. In the new digital environment (at least according to Lee’s working practices), the DI process takes an average of 7 days to complete (or 5 days for a rush job).

²¹ Special thanks go to Lee Yong-gi (HFR, Lollol Media), Ethan Park (HFR, Lollol Media, Forestt Studios), Chen Pei Yu (Tsui Hark’s company), Peter Ahn (SK Independence), Lee Soo Kyung (Digital Idea), Lee Se Hoon (MonEFF), and Zenith Seo, Kim Kimoon, and Shin Sangho (Artservice Digital Studio 2L, aka Digital Studio 2L) for sharing their experiences of Korean–Chinese collaborative projects.

darkened New York brownstone terraced house during a night-time home invasion. Fincher and his cinematographer Conrad W. Hall gave a muted grey-ish non-lit appearance to the dramatic night scenes using a creative and complex mixture of minimalistic lighting, careful camera exposure settings, selective lenses, and low-contrast film stock – all critical elements for achieving a particular visual style in the pre-digital filmmaking days. Although the film’s final look was further enhanced in post-production, using DI for the high-resolution master print, most of the hard work was done using these old-school in-camera effects.²² Lee is eager to credit Fincher’s and Nolan’s films as a source of inspiration for his own work.

Despite his expertise as a digital colorist, Lee’s initial DI of *Detective Dee and the Mystery of the Phantom Flame* was rejected by Tsui (and his creative team, which hails from Taiwan and Hong Kong), and he was asked to reverse the low-contrast effect he had given it – that is, to go “back to neutral”. Adjusting to these new demands has been no easy task for Lee (and other Koreans working in China with a host of directors and producers who bring distinctive ideas and a different set of aesthetic demands to their work). Director Tsui, who spends most of his time in his Beijing office, is known to prefer a high-contrast visual style incorporating bright daylight scenes – perhaps with an eye to the younger online generation who favor image clarity and vivid colors. Tsui’s selective color sensibilities, which are also reflected in countless historical drama films made by other Chinese commercial directors, have challenged Lee’s vast experience with (and preference for) the use of deep blacks and low-contrast shadows to convey the dark and depressing emotions which are widely used in the genre-bending films for which Korean cinema is so well known.

Since his arrival in China, Lee and other Korean creative practitioners have learned to apply DI in new ways – to modify their approach (and sometimes rein in their personal tastes) in order to convey a different set of emotions, including optimism, not by applying a darkening effect but a brightening one. Clearly, what works (or has worked in the past) for Korean cinema will not automatically fit the bill for Chinese films. However, it needs to be said that international critics and audiences, as well as an increasing base of domestic Chinese audiences, are by now very familiar with the diverse aesthetics (and dynamic genre narratives) that characterize the best-known Korean (and Hollywood) films. Nevertheless, until the limited range of genres demanded by Chinese cinema and dictated by SAPPRFT policymakers expand in scope and greater latitude is given for experimenting with darker subject matter (and thus darker colors), Lee and other DI technicians will remain on a trajectory that differs markedly from that taken by Korean cinema. Thus, the so-called professionalization of post-production practices and, more to the point, the transformation of the visual sensibilities of Chinese cinema still have a long way to go to match local creative aspirations with global tastes.

With these things in mind, film collaborations in China involving media producers from countries with different levels of technological development are testing the general concept of “unequal development” – a story in the making about the knowledge, skills and processes that are absorbed at the interface of collaboration. At the same time, the work of Lee and other East Asian practitioners active in China today reflects the uneven transfer of knowledge, the result of structural conditions including intellectual property issues, political regulation and educational levels in China. In other words, the assimilation of new technology, knowledge,

²² This description is taken from *Panic Room* cinematographer Conrad W. Hall’s discussion of the aesthetic that Fincher wanted in this film. See Probst, Christopher. (March 2002). “Home invasion” *American Cinematographer* 83(3): 40-51.

and innovation is a more complex process than meets the eye. Films produced or post-produced by Korean, Hong Kong, and Taiwan filmmakers and companies in partnership with Chinese filmmakers, companies and distributors, such as *Detective Dee and the Mystery of the Phantom Flame* and Tsui Hark's 3D film *Flying Swords of Dragon Gate*, produced in 2011, are evidence of this effect.²³

However, this creative “gap” is reducing as a result of the growing number of individual content creators and production and post-production firms that are pursuing an increased level of transnationalism, not only to increase their bottom lines, upgrade their technological capabilities, build skills and expertise, and grow professional networks, but also to cross-subsidize their work on an increasing number of domestic Chinese productions. The benefits of such collaboration for individuals and companies from Korea, Hong Kong and Taiwan working in China today are being realized as the Chinese film industry “goes out” by staying home. And nowhere is this phenomenon more apparent than at the Busan International Film Festival.

The China Presence at the Busan International Film Festival

Chinese cinema created ripples at BIFF 2012 and again in 2013 – both front and center, and in industry and general conversations at all the festival venues. In 2012, and again in 2013, the local *and* international audiences were deeply impressed by the co-hosting of the opening ceremony by Chinese actress Tang Wei (with Korean veteran actor Ahn Sung Ki) in 2012, and Hong Kong star Aaron Kwok in 2013.²⁴ Tang, who became well-known to foreign and Chinese audiences alike (as well as former SARFT officials) in her provocative role in Ang Lee's arousing thriller *Lust, Caution* (2007), was the first non-Korean to host the international event, and the invitation extended to these Chinese stars for two years in a row demonstrates the Korean film industry's growing ties with China.

Interest in Chinese cinema in Korea has a long and extensive history. According to official BIFF catalogues, 197 films produced in Greater China (including collaborations with Hong Kong and also Li Yang's banned film *Blind Shaft* (2003), which is listed as a Hong Kong–German co-production) were screened in Korea between 2000 and 2012. For the present study, more than 30 interviews were conducted at BIFF 2012, one of the preeminent international showcases for Asian and World cinema and providing opportunities for networking with film industry representatives from across the globe. An analysis of their candid views on a canon of Chinese movies is used to gain a deeper understanding of the elements of recent Chinese films that appeal to a wide international audience. It is hoped that by sharing these findings, future Chinese films and filmmakers will benefit from such global perspectives as cinema becomes an increasingly important part of China's projection of soft power and its “going-out strategy” (*zou chuqu*).

²³ Lee worked on this 2011 film during his tenure at the Lollol Media post-production firm in Beijing; his apprentice Ethan Park, who has become a DI expert in his own right through his work on countless Korean and now Chinese films, was the IMAX technical supervisor. Korea's Digital Idea (visual effects supervisor Kim Wook) shared the visual effects award for *Flying Swords of Dragon Gate* at the 31st Hong Kong Film Awards.

²⁴ Aaron Kwok, who is a native Cantonese speaker, spoke in Mandarin, not Cantonese, at the 2013 BIFF opening ceremony, which the largely Korean-speaking audience would not have immediately recognized as a gesture to the government-preferred *lingua franca* for Greater China.

If the casual conversation among international (i.e. non-Chinese) attendees at BIFF in October 2012 and again in 2013 is to be believed, *Painted Skin 2* represents an increasing number of SAPPRFT-approved stories that depart from the canonical historical epics, romance dramas, war, and *wuxia* (martial arts) films for which Chinese cinema is known. Although *Painted Skin 2* had not screened at BIFF, it was nonetheless present through word-of-mouth and was seen as an exciting new prospect for filmmakers, film companies and cinephiles around the world.

One of the films to make an impact at BIFF in 2012 was Zhang Yang's "contemporary light drama" *Full Circle* (2012), an emotionally uplifting "geriatric road movie" financed by China Film Group and distributed by Fortissimo (Hong Kong) outside China. For most viewers, it is enjoyable for two major reasons. First, it tells an engaging story about an adventurous group of retirees who desert their aged-care home to audition for a Japanese TV competition being held in Tianjin, one of four municipalities directly controlled by the central government. The localization of the story satisfies Chinese audiences while simultaneously intriguing foreign audiences with universal and humanistic themes of friendship, loyalty and personal fulfillment. The film's message of "its never too late to follow your dreams" and its humor-laden insights into the older generation make the film a treat for younger audiences and mature cinema-goers alike. Second, *Full Circle* is a technically competent production made in the international language of film. Yang Hongyu's fluent editing style, San Bao's minimalistic original soundtrack, and Yang Tao's evocative cinematography all contribute to making *Full Circle* a widely accessible piece of contemporary cinema. Zhang's internationally acclaimed films *Quitting* (2001), *Sunflower* (2005), and *Driverless* (2010) were screened to capacity audiences at BIFF in 2001, 2005 and 2010 respectively.

In addition to the thirteen Chinese films screened at BIFF in 2012, Chinese directors Wang Xiaoshuai and Gao Zipeng both figured prominently at the festival's Asian Film Market project and industry networking event established in 1999 (formerly known as the Pusan Promotion Plan).²⁵ At the Asian Film Market, which is designed to link new directors and films from established filmmakers to a range of investors, Wang discussed his new drama *I Love You Arirang* (produced by Wang and Isabelle Glachant) – a socially engaged film about a North Korean woman who falls in love with a Chinese national – with potential investors. Wang's earlier film *11 Flowers* (2011) – a semi-autobiographical coming-of-age period piece, and the first official co-production between China and France – screened at BIFF 2011, with tickets selling out within minutes. Gao, who became known to BIFF's international guests and audiences following his *Lost in the Mountain* (2011), was invited to enter the festival's New Currents competition in 2011, and in 2012 used the festival to publicize his new love story *Good Season, Goodbye* (produced by Zhang Lu and Li Shanshan).

The festival screenings of "independent" Chinese films such as *All Apologies* (2012, Emily Tang), *Beijing Flickers* (2012, Zhang Yuan), *Mystery* (2012, Lou Ye), and *An End to Killing* (2012, Wang Ping), which all attracted considerable attention at BIFF, proved to be a rare opportunity because of the lack of distribution support that these and other films and filmmakers have experienced in China. Against this background, the announcement in

<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/intl/china/?yr=2011&wk=31&p=.htm>. Accessed 20 November 2012.

²⁵ See Leon Forde, Jason Gray, and Jean Noh. "Spotlight on Busan: Screen's essential guide to the 2012 festival", *Screen International* October 2012: 16-19.

December 2012 that the Chinese government was considering establishing cinemas dedicated to documentaries gives hope that this move will stimulate the screening of independent films more generally – hopefully as part of an overall strategy to promote diversity in contemporary Chinese cinema.²⁶ The evocative cinematography of the majestic landscapes around Guilin (in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region of South China) in *All Apologies*, in conjunction with the emotional tensions running through the film (reminiscent of Li Yu's controversial film *Lost in Beijing* (2007)), produced a major impact on BIFF audiences.

The harsh reality proffered in *Beijing Flickers*, and the fantasy encounter between Genghis Khan and Chinese religious leader, Qiu Chuji, in *An End to Killing* also gave festival audiences food for thought. *Beijing Flickers* exposed audiences to the rapid and relentless change that the world's biggest city is experiencing. The film sets the modernity represented by the capital's mushrooming new buildings and apartments against images of aging structures awaiting their turn for demolition – suggesting that these cityscape elements are central characters in a bigger story about the future of Chinese youth. Zhang's well-known previous film, *Little Red Flowers* 看上去很美 (2005), explored Chinese youth culture from a more upbeat perspective. Again, the historical epic *An End to Killing* provided festival audiences with a film in which the landscape takes on a life of its own. The grand mise-en-scene of the Mongolian countryside presents a magnificent spectacle, dwarfing the historical drama surrounding Genghis Khan and the influence that the Daoist priest Qiu Chuji wields over the seemingly invincible warlord. In marked contrast to these two visually confronting films is *Memories Look at Me* (2012, Song Fang), a low-key autobiographical movie that combines feature and documentary film styles – reminiscent of the 1950s Japanese golden age films of Yasujiro Ozu – to turn the camera on the filmmaker.

Other Chinese films screened as part of BIFF's Window on Asian Cinema, World Cinema, Wide Angle, and New Currents program themes in 2012 included: *The Cremator* (2012, Peng Tao), *Dangerous Liaisons* (2012, Hur Jin-ho), *Fly With the Crane* (2012, Li Rui Jun), *A Motor Home Adventure* (2012, Lu Yang), and *Tai Chi Zero* (2012, Stephen Fung). In 2013, Chinese films and filmmakers figured prominently at these various events, as well as during the festival's major networking event, the Asian Film and Project Market. Both Cao Baoping's *Einstein and Einstein* (2013), which had its world premiere here, and Jia Zhangke's *A Touch of Sin* (2013) were well received by capacity audiences. On the same program as *A Touch of Sin* was Rita Hui's *Keening Woman* (2013), Philippe Muyl's family drama *The Nightingale* (2013, just the second official Chinese–French co-production to be completed), and Flora Lau's debut feature film *Bends* (2013). Other notable films that illustrate the diversity of contemporary Chinese cinema included: Wang Bing's four-hour documentary about a mental hospital in Yunnan, *Til Madness Do Us Part* (2013), Leo Lee's vibrant children's animation *Bonta* (2013), Yu Lulai's short film *Brother* (2013), and Fei Xing's thriller *Silent Witness* (2013), starring Hong Kong star and BIFF 2013 opening presenter Aaron Kwok.

Taken together, the Chinese offerings shown at the 2012 and 2013 Busan International Film Festival showcase the vitality and diversity of Chinese cinema – a side of the film industry in China that foreign film critics and audiences alike (not to mention investors) wish to see flourish for years to come. However, the continued success of this burgeoning national

²⁶ Qiu Quanlin (5 December 2012). "Screens rise for documentary film industry," *China Daily.com.cn* Available at: http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/entertainment/2012-12/05/content_15989575.htm.

cinema is by no means guaranteed – particularly where the balance between commercial and independent and arthouse cinema is concerned. At the moment, the focus of the major Chinese film companies, such as Polybona and Huayi Brothers, is on the films that they produce themselves, and they seem unwilling to include independent productions in their international distribution mix. As a result, the playing field for commercial and so-called arthouse and independent films is not as level as it could be, and independent films will face an ongoing struggle as they compete against each other for foreign distribution deals among a small number of foreign sales agents.²⁷ Despite these difficulties, given the Korean film industry’s deep interest in and involvement with its Chinese counterpart, BIFF is likely to continue showcasing Chinese cinema – not as a display of the nation’s “ultimate soft power” as manifested at the Shanghai Film Festival, but in a distinctly Korean contributory way.²⁸

Concluding Thoughts on Chinese International Cinema, Soft Power, and China–Korea Film Encounters

Since the mid-2000s, the Chinese film industry has gradually increased levels of collaboration with Korean colleagues, enabling Korean filmmakers to become “wider, deeper, more tightly with China”.²⁹ In turn, this has had a positive impact on the technical development of the film industry in China, bringing together producers, directors, and actors as well as action, visual effects, and post-production specialists and cinematographers on an unprecedented scale. For example, the official Chinese–Korean co-production *Sophie’s Revenge* (2009, starring Zhang Ziyi and Fan Bingbing), Tsui Hark’s martial arts drama *Detective Dee and the Mystery of the Phantom Flame* (2010), and his 3D film *Flying Swords of Dragon Gate* (2011, for which Korea’s Digital Idea shared the visual effects award at the 31st Hong Kong Film Awards) all benefitted from the technical expertise of Korean digital post-production, special effects, and visual effects companies. Many other films to have benefited from Korean production and post-production expertise have been mentioned in this article – but this is by no means an exhaustive list. Perhaps the most notable Korean technical specialist currently working in China is Lee Yong-gi, former chief digital colorist and digital intermediary supervisor at Lollol Media (he previously worked at HFR Beijing and AZ Works-Busan), and mentor of numerous other Korean (and Chinese) technicians who have established themselves as leaders in their fields. These are just a few examples of the collaborative inroads that Koreans have been making in China since the early 2000s, when internationally renowned fifth-generation Chinese director Chen Kaige partnered with established Korean cinematographer Kim Hyung-goo and producer Lee Joo-ik to make the multi-award-winning feature *Together* (2002).

In this context, it is important to clarify the differences between Korean film festivals such as BIFF and the wider “South Korean film industry”. While obviously closely linked, they are

²⁷ See Clarence Tsui, “Chinese Indies Struggle Abroad”, *Hollywood Reporter*: Busan No. 6, 10 October 2012. P1/3.

²⁸ See the reference to soft power and film festivals in: DeHart, Jonathan (18 June 2013). “Shanghai Film Festival: China’s Ultimate Soft Power Fest,” *theDiplomat.com* Available at: <http://thediplomat.com/asia-life/2013/06/shanghai-film-festival-chinas-ultimate-soft-power-fest/>.

²⁹ Headlines appearing in a brief co-production report in the October 2012 issue (page 30) of *Korean Cinema Today*, a key industry trade magazine published by the Korean film Council (KOFIC) – a quasi-government agency that promotes and supports the development, production, distribution, and exhibition of Korean films at home and abroad.

quite separate in their approach to Chinese cinema and collaborations with Chinese partners. Despite the “success stories” discussed above, festival organizers still have some way to go in integrating Chinese productions into their programs. The reason more Chinese films are not shown in Korean festivals such as BIFF and PiFan (Puchon International Fantastic Film Festival) may be because long-standing programmers are either set in their ways or unduly influenced by sessions in the program that are not as well patronized as expected – indicating that audiences don’t fully understand the context of new Chinese films, either.³⁰ Under these conditions, Chinese films that have a Korean director or actor or a Korean distributor are more likely to be screened at a Korean festival because of their local connections. Because festivals can be slow to adapt, particularly in identifying and understanding the rapidly changing policy environment in China regarding the censorship of films that tackle social issues, festival programmers need to find more effective ways of promoting Chinese films.

Whilst BIFF spotlighted Huayi Brothers’ *Assembly* as the opening film in 2007, a production which represented an unprecedented level of collaboration between the film industries of both countries, and notwithstanding the warm reception accorded to an average of 15 Chinese films per year since 2000 at the festival, interest in Chinese cinema has not continued as strongly as anticipated. In fact, if anything, the various collaborations with China discussed in this article are being kept under wraps in South Korea. As a case in point, the Korean Film Council (KOFIC) recently published a directory of Korean directors and cinematographers who want to work in China, but this information was only distributed among Chinese producers; this document can’t be downloaded from the KOFIC website, which promotes itself as *the* international promotional hub for Korea’s film industry. Yet, to be fair, China’s film industry is changing so rapidly that film promoters and festival programmers are struggling to come to terms with the realities of contemporary Chinese cinema, let alone explore and exploit the opportunities it offers them. Talented independent and former underground directors – once a thorn in SARFT’s side – are now making mainstream films that are tackling social issues and passing the scrutiny of the Chinese censors. In addition, experienced independent producers are now entirely focussed on making “legal” films, as this is where the largest funding and investment opportunities lie. A wave of change is sweeping through the industry, although not everyone has yet recognized it.

For many foreigner observers, including critics and scholars, a new type of “Chinese international cinema” was born with the unexpected global success of Ang Lee’s Chinese–Hong Kong–Taiwanese–U.S. co-production *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), which generated international box office takings of around \$213,500,000 USD.³¹ This “fusion” *wuxia* blockbuster, which attracted Asian and foreign audiences alike with its blend of Eastern and Western narrative traditions and visual styles, took Chinese cinema to a level beyond the well-known auteur and underground films made by fifth- and sixth-generation Chinese filmmakers respectively, films which had proved so attractive to a more select international audience.

Today, “Chinese international cinema” means something different again. Chinese films have taken on new colors through collaboration with an army of industry professionals from across

³⁰ An example of this trend is An Byung-ki’s China-shot *Bunshinsaba 2*, which was the only Chinese film in the lineup at PiFan in 2013. Apparently, audiences for the film were much smaller than expected.

³¹ See Box Office Mojo:

<http://boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=crouchingtigerhiddendragon.htm>.

East Asia, most notably with film practitioners from South Korea, who are contributing to cultural change in China's media industry and enabling Chinese cultural producers to develop a soft power of their own. The cases of *Painted Skin 2* and *Journey to the West: Conquering the Demons*, among a long list of other co-operative ventures, exemplify how collaborations with Korean, Taiwanese and Hong Kong media entrepreneurs and companies are contributing to technological innovation and development in China. To put it another way, as some Chinese producers have admitted candidly, the less a film looks "Chinese" the more it looks "international".

In this way, Chinese filmmakers – with assistance from their Asian neighbors – have begun to fuse China's long history and traditional cultural values with East Asian popular culture, a phenomenon that scholars such as Chua Beng Huat (2012) have described as an engagement with a wider youth culture, modern lifestyles, technology, playfulness and Pan-Asian values. Hence, the face of Chinese national cinema is undergoing a major makeover as Chinese filmmakers and media companies leverage the fresh aesthetic qualities and export-oriented expertise for which South Korean cinema has become celebrated around the globe since censorship of domestic films was lifted by the Korean government in 1996.³² Here, South Korea's global experience and success with its own brand of soft power has been instrumental in developing its collaborative relationship with China.

As a concluding point, and to set the future possibilities for Chinese cinema in an appropriate context, I present a brief overview of the contemporary Korean cinema boom and the continuing global appetite for Korean films. After censorship was lifted in 1996, Korea's commercial cinema experienced unprecedented growth at home and abroad, albeit in gradual steps. Nobody could have anticipated – particularly in the wake of the 1997 IMF relief loan crisis – the extraordinary success of Kang Je-gyu's blockbuster *Shiri* (1999), which exceeded \$25 million at the box office and outsold *Titanic* to become the then-top-selling Korean film of all time. In order to survive and thrive in a fiercely competitive global market, and particularly to resist Hollywood's global dominance, Korea's national film industry has – paradoxically – adopted the business models of Hollywood, such as the high concept, big budget, special effects and saturation marketing campaigns (involving spin-offs, tie-ins, merchandizing, licensing, taglines, product placement and online supplementation). Since 2000, international film festivals including Berlin, Cannes, Melbourne, Shanghai, Sydney, Toronto, and Venice have not been able to get enough of the fresh product turned out by Korean filmmakers. Not for nothing is the Korean film industry often colloquially referred to as "Hallyuwood" – a fusion of *Hallyu* (the Korean term for the nation's contemporary wave of cultural soft power) and Hollywood.³³

By global standards, the dominance of Korean films in their own domestic exhibition market is an extraordinary cultural triumph – one that few other countries, apart from India, China and the U.S., have ever achieved. In 2006, the domestic market share of Korean films soared to an astounding 61.2 percent for that year, and in August 2013 it actually peaked above 90 percent for several days, driven by the commanding box office performance of four action-

³² For further details on the censorship of contemporary Korean cinema, see: Yecies, Brian. 2008. "Planet Hallyuwood's Political Vulnerabilities: Censuring the Expression of Satire in *The President's Last Bang* (2005)" *International Review of Korean Studies* 5(1): 37-64.

³³ For more discussion of this concept, see: Brian Yecies and Aegyung Shim, "Contemporary Korean Cinema: Challenges and the Transformation of Planet Hallyuwood." *Acta Koreana* 14:1 (June 2011): 1-15.

packed thrillers: *Snowpiercer*, directed by BONG Joon-ho and produced by Park Chan-wook (earning US\$53.6 million); *The Terror, Live*, by director Kim Byung-woo (earning US\$33.0 million); *Hide and Seek*, by first-time director HUH Jung (earning US\$17.7 million); and the disaster movie *The Flu* (earning US\$13.7 million in its opening week).³⁴ Despite the downturn suffered by the Korean film industry in 2007-2008 – the result of factors such as the halving of the Screen Quota System, the collapse of the domestic DVD and other ancillary markets, and the loss of pre-sales to Japanese distributors – in 2013 Korean cinema has continued to dominate the local exhibition market, maintaining its status as one of the strongest local film industries in the world.

I trust that this brief survey gives us something to think about in terms of the possible future growth of China's domestic and international cinema.

Bio for Professor Brian Yecies

Brian Yecies is a professor of communication and media studies at the University of Wollongong. He is the author of *The Changing Face of Korean Cinema* (Routledge, forthcoming, with Ae-Gyung Shim) and *Korea's Occupied Cinemas, 1893-1948* (Routledge, 2011, with Ae-Gyung Shim). He has published numerous articles in *Acta Koreana*, *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, *Asian Cinema*, *Australian Historical Studies*, *First Monday*, *International Review in Korean Studies*, *Journal of Korean Studies*, *Korea Journal*, *Korea Observer*, *Media International Australia*, and *Screening The Past*. Brian is a past Korea Foundation Research Fellow and a recipient of prestigious grants from the Academy of Korean Studies, the Asia Research Fund, and the Australia–Korea Foundation. In 2011, he was a visiting Isaac Manasseh Meyer Fellow in the communications and new media programme at the National University of Singapore, and a visiting professor (Academia Koreana Global Scholar) at Keimyung University in Daegu, Korea.

³⁴ See *Korean Cinema 2006*: 495; and Cremin, Stephen (22 August 2013), *Film Business Asia.com* "South Korean thrillers take 90% market share," Available at: www.filmbiz.asia/news/south-korean-thrillers-take-90-market-share.