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# Korean-Chinese Film Remakes in a New Age of Cultural Globalisation: Miss Granny (2014) and 20 Once Again (2015) along the Digital Road

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## **Keywords**

again, granny, cultural, age, miss, remakes, (2014), 20, once, film, (2015), along, digital, korean-chinese, road, globalisation:

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# Korean–Chinese Film Remakes in a New Age of Cultural Globalisation: *Miss Granny* (2014) and *20 Once Again* (2015) along the Digital Road<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Since the early 2000s, the Korean Wave (aka *Hallyu*) has influenced Greater China in enterprising and complex ways that diverge from the ways in which *Hallyu* has impacted other markets. At the same time, since China joined the World Trade Organization in 2001, art, culture and media production have been largely transformed from vehicles for state propaganda into new gateways for producing and showcasing popular commercial entertainment. Korean producers have played a significant role in this evolving transformation, albeit in a cultural space that the Government of Mainland China still uses and shapes as an important mouthpiece of the Party-state. While media headlines accentuate these progressive pathways, there is a dearth of scholarly commentary on the ways in which Korean film practitioners are contributing to this new era of cultural globalisation in China. To shed light on this emerging topic, the authors examine Chinese audiences' reception of the Korean film *Miss Granny* (2014) and the most successful Korean–Chinese co-production to date, its Chinese remake *20 Once Again* (2015). The article utilises data drawn from Douban, a major Chinese entertainment and popular culture social networking site, to assess the 'inconspicuous' impact of the cinematic component of the Korean Wave on Chinese cinema. In taking this approach, the authors seek to assess the importance of localized film content for Chinese audiences, as well as canvassing a range of hitherto unknown opinions about 'Korean' and 'Chinese' styles of storytelling.

## Keywords

Chinese cinema, Korean cinema, Korean–Chinese collaboration, co-production, user-generated content, Douban, social media in China, One Belt-One Road (OBOR)

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## Introduction

Over the past decade, South Korean (hereafter Korean) popular culture has vastly expanded its appeal, reaching out to large international audiences due to its ability to embody universal content and cross-demographic themes (Yecies & Shim 2016). The increasing popularity of the Korean Wave – also known as *Hallyu* – has expanded cultural diversity in a global industry dominated by US-derived content, where cultural globalisation plays a huge role in terms of distribution and popularity (Shim 2006; Nam 2013).

Cultural globalisation is a difficult concept to define, as both terms – ‘culture’ and ‘globalisation’ – have multiple and contested meanings. Today, a homogenised culture has a global presence as it penetrates our everyday lives, forming our identities and subjectivities, with technology playing a major role in facilitating the ways in which we gain knowledge and consume entertainment products (Tomlinson 1999; Ghosh 2011). On the other hand, globalisation has long been defined as a continuous multidimensional reality whose various facets are interconnected and inter-dependent with modern social life, occurring at an uneven rate as different parts of the world are affected in their own particular ways by cultural transformations (Robertson 1992). By combining these concepts, cultural globalisation can be defined as the shared cultural meanings we construct and experience, along with the processes involved in creating meaning through symbolic representation as the world compresses through globalisation.

Cultural globalisation impacts the film industry insofar as it is both economically driven – a film’s success is measured in terms of box office revenues – and engaged in creating cultural products, since film production and consumption assist in ‘negotiating cultural identity and articulating social consciousness’ (Gao 2009, p. 423). Many governments also appreciate the symbolic value of film as a reflection of national culture and allocate funds for film production (Crane 2014). The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) also understands the importance of film as a representation of culture and has encouraged governments to approve its 2005 convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions, which includes a clause relating specifically to film (UNESCO 2016). Since 2015, 140 countries have approved the convention including Korea and China. The US, however, has refused to sign the accord and has lobbied against the policy, instead devising Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) with more than 20 countries including Korea. Countries with small film industries have been negatively impacted as American films have begun dominating box offices as particular FTAs have abolished or reduced national film quotas and/or restrictions on promoting foreign films (Yecies 2007; Jin 2011). This has in turn created challenges for nations eager to develop their national institutions and culture, whose domestic policies are increasingly in conflict with the interests of transnational business.

Despite these real and potential conflicts, the Korean film industry has continued to thrive – in part by adopting Hollywood’s methodology of producing blockbusters with large budgets, stellar casts and extensive special effects, and utilising expensive marketing campaigns. At the same time, by retaining a uniquely Korean flavour, the industry has enhanced its appeal to audiences outside Korea (Berry 2003).

## The *Hallyu* effect in China

Since the early 2000s, *Hallyu* has penetrated Mainland China (hereafter China) in enterprising and complex ways, different from the ways that it has impacted other markets. At the same time, since

China joined the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, aspects of art, culture and media production have been transformed from a vehicle for state propaganda to a platform for showcasing popular commercial entertainment (Vlassis 2015). Over time, Korean producers of films, television programs and popular music have played a significant, albeit inconspicuous, role in this transformation. In recent years, China has begun purchasing format rights to Korean television programmes and also the remake rights to television dramas and films. Chinese television stations, as well as online and mobile platforms, have also begun to hire Korean producers, writers, actors and other specialist staff – as an alternative to importing Korean dramas – in order to bypass restrictions on foreign entertainment products mandated by the Chinese State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio Film and Television (hereafter SAPPRFT).

Looking specifically at the film industry, Korea and China have been working together in this area since the early 2000s. However, it was not until 2009 that these collaborative efforts captured public attention with the co-production feature *Sophie's Revenge* (2009), which earned approximately US\$15m – double its production budget – in China.<sup>2</sup> In 2012, the Korean Film Council (KOFIC) strengthened the bilateral relationship by opening a Korean film business centre in Beijing, providing resources for producers to cultivate co-production arrangements with Chinese colleagues.<sup>3</sup> Further strategies designed to develop the relationship were also evident at the 2014 Busan International Film Festival (BIFF), where three Chinese films were screened and BIFF hosted the first delegation of Beijing-based companies approved by SAPPRFT to attend the festival's Asian Film Market (BIFF Archive 2014).<sup>4</sup>

Next, to encourage new collaborative film productions, China and Korea signed a co-production treaty in July 2014, which had an immediate effect on the industry (Yecies 2016). Interestingly, a majority of the co-produced films that resulted have been Korean remakes catering to the needs of Chinese audiences, including *20 Once Again* (2015) – a remake of *Miss Granny* (2014) – and *The Witness* (2015), a remake of the thriller *Blind* (2011). In 2015, it was announced that the two countries would create a joint fund of around US\$200m to support film production, broadcasting and music-based projects, with financial contributions from both government and private organizations (Lee 2015). China has also been heavily reliant on Korea for post-production expertise, including arthouse and blockbuster films such as *Double Exposure* (2014) and *The Mermaid* (2016), respectively (Yecies & Shim 2016).

Given that both the Korean government and the Korean film industry have been eyeing up the potential of the Chinese film market, one important way of strengthening relationships and improving collaborative film content is to undertake research that examines Chinese audiences' opinions of Korean–Chinese film collaborations. Indeed, the primary purpose of this article is to shed light on how Chinese audiences are making sense of the Korean Wave and its cultural distinctiveness, of which the cinematic component is well known. This task appears all the more timely in view of Chinese premier Xi Jinping's rollout of the *One Belt, One Road* (OBOR) strategy, a major development initiative aimed at consolidating and expanding China's role as a major industrial and economic power on the global stage. Indeed, the present article goes so far as to suggest some ways in which the OBOR framework might be extended into the cultural realm.

In English-language studies, Korean–Chinese cinema is a neglected subject, especially in the area of audience reception. General research on Korean entertainment products focuses mainly on analysing texts or examining case studies. Nonetheless, a few earlier studies have sought to understand fans' reception of the Korean Wave through the representation and distribution of Korean entertainment products (Crisp 2012; Hübinette 2012; Kim, Mayasari & Oh 2013; Schulze 2013). The present article attempts to supplement these studies and fill a major lacuna in the literature by

analysing audiences' reception of the Korean film *Miss Granny* (2014) and the official Korean–Chinese remake *20 Once Again* (2015) by utilising data drawn from the Chinese social networking site (SNS) Douban (豆瓣). In so doing, the authors aim to advance knowledge across the interdisciplinary fields that inform the readers of *Global Media and China* as well as within Chinese and Korean cinema studies more broadly.

## **Audience: The commander of success**

Understanding audiences' opinions is important as it allows researchers to assess the success of strategies implemented by the film industry and to develop future approaches that are empirically based. Audiences have been defined as 'readers of, viewers of, listeners to one or other media channel or of this or that type of content performance' (McQuail 1997, p. 1). The influence of the audience on a given text is illustrated by the classic two-way communication model, which is based on the concept of a loop involving sender, message and receiver (Shannon 1948). Though the communication model is simple, the interpretation of the message received by a given audience will differ as a result of what have been called cultural proximity levels (Mittell 2003). Cultural proximity is the notion that audiences prefer media in their own language, from their own culture and/or similar cultures, leading to difficulties in achieving comprehensive communication (Ksiazek & Webster 2008; Straubhaar 2003). Thus, understanding particular audiences within a specific, well-defined cultural context is a desirable aim. In the broader field of media and cultural studies, the study of audience needs and preferences is focused on the convergence and diversification of individuals' comprehension of media texts and how they respond critically to dominant messages, while also paying attention to issues of cultural background and influences (Livingstone & Ranjana 2013). Against this background, this article explores the elements of text and audience with a view to understanding Chinese audiences' responses to *Miss Granny* and *20 Once Again*.

### ***Word-of-Mouth and social networking sites in China***

From the early days of cinema, mass audiences were a feature of public film screenings where large numbers of people had the ability to view the same performance and share a similar emotional experience. However, viewers have limited interaction with the onscreen 'object', whereas interaction between audience members is unrestricted, giving rise to a phenomenon known as Word-of-Mouth (hereafter WOM; McQuail 1997). WOM is defined as communication shared by target audience members about a particular product during face-to-face interactions, where they believe there is no involvement of the organisation/s responsible for marketing the product or service in question (Keller 2007). Such interactions provide valuable research data as WOM conversations are seen as spontaneous responses, providing low response bias, unlike more traditional datasets gathered from surveys and focus groups. Historically, collecting data from traditional WOM has been a complicated process. However, the process has been simplified with the advancement of technology. SNS have created new pathways for researchers and businesses to gain deeper insights into their target audiences through the analysis of their activities, putting the collection of WOM on a whole new footing. WOM delivery on the Internet is also known as electronic WOM (hereafter e-WOM).

The Internet, and SNS in particular, is seen as a significant communication tool in China, where citizens enjoy some freedom to express a variety of opinions on somewhat uncontroversial topics (deLisle, Goldstein & Yang 2016; Liu 2010). Despite this, an army of government-paid netizens

and keyword blocking tools and applications implement the censorship and deletion of media content that the Party-state dislikes – understood as defensive measures intended to steer a given conversation in a preferred direction (King, Pan, & Roberts 2013; Qiu 2000). In any case, the number of Internet users in the country has steadily increased over the past 10 years, with a record penetration rate of 50.3% involving 688 million users as of December 2015. Of Chinese Internet users, 77% are active on SNS – a clear indication of the potential impact of e-WOM activities (CNNIC 2016). Previous studies have shown the importance of SNS in China and e-WOM motivation and behaviour among young Chinese consumers. According to this research, Chinese consumers are influenced by people they ‘follow’ online, and place more trust in them. Chinese users also show high levels of engagement in e-WOM activities by actively offering, searching for and sharing opinions (Chu & Choi 2011; Yang 2013).

Although e-WOM data is currently harvested by researchers working in a variety of disciplines, e-WOM research on film has been focused on the economic, technological and marketing aspects (Liu 2006; Chen & Xie 2006; Kim, Park & Park 2013; Henning-Thurau, Wiertz & Fledhaus 2015). However, there are some exceptions to this trend within media and cultural studies, where the measurement and understanding of e-WOM includes the utilisation of surveys, analysis of audiences’ comments and the use of rating systems. Quantitative and qualitative surveys have been previously utilised to understand e-WOM behaviours and responses to films, while rating systems have been used to better understand cultural influences on consumers’ choices (Baker, Martin & Mathijs 2008; Filieri 2015; Koh, Hu & Clemons 2010; Yoon 2012).

Aware of the increasing presence of SNS in our everyday lives, we seek to augment the existing research on cinema audiences, box office statistics and films texts by including audience analysis based on social media to help readers understand what film audiences really think. Using the Chinese SNS Douban as the primary data source, we utilise the method that involves analysing audience comments in order to gain deeper insights into the views and behaviour of Chinese film audiences.

### *About Douban*

Launched in 2005, Douban is a major entertainment industry and popular culture platform that allows users to interact, review and post recommendations of films, books and music, together with the ability to create their own communities based on their personal interests. Non-registered users are able to access up to 80% of the site’s content. Registered users have the additional ability to rate, comment on posted material and reply to comments, and also to create a digital ‘exhibition’ based on their favoured content. Douban is also known as a ‘follower’ network, allowing users to follow other users without knowing them personally, and discovering users based on their interests and the content they interact with. Users are able to broadcast messages to their followers and disseminate information, ultimately creating e-WOM (Zhao et al. 2011).

Douban’s primary audience consists of the growing Internet-savvy middle class in Greater China, including white-collar workers and university students who are interested in a wide range of cultural products, including films, books and music. Douban users are generally considered to be more critical than mass audiences in China, given their heightened exposure to cultural globalisation and its effects. According to a search for audience demographics and traffic statistics on the Web analytical site Alexa.com, Douban.com is currently attracting an estimated 1,062,614 unique users each day and 387,854,110 unique users over the last 12 months. Nearly 86% of all users are located in Mainland China, while about 6% are in the US, and a further 2% are based in Taiwan and Hong Kong (1%

each). Relative to the general Internet population, the number of female visitors on Douban is higher than average (and also exceeds male visitors). In addition, the number of users who are university graduates is well above the Internet average, and is also higher than those who visit sites such as IMDB.com. Finally, Douban users appear to be accessing the site mostly at work, rather than at home or school – a logical finding given that workplaces in China often have the highest Internet speeds.<sup>5</sup>

Put simply, Douban offers a rich and ready source of information on both foreign and domestic cultural products, which are available in China either officially or through unofficial or illegal channels. Thus the site exposes users to a wide range of domestic and international content that was largely unavailable to them in the recent past. Beyond Greater China, Douban has become well known as a source of critical cultural reviews, and Western media outlets in particular have been using the site as a barometer of a film's success with Chinese audiences (Yecies et al. 2016).<sup>6</sup> Hence, Douban is seen as a reliable source by both Chinese and Western media as a space that offers critical opinions on popular content.

Looking specifically at films on Douban, the Douban Film (豆瓣电影) page allows users to categorise films added to their personal profile as 'already watched' (看过) or 'would like to watch' (想看), permitting users to interact with each other based on their shared tastes. Individual film pages also allow users to interact through three categories: 'short commentary' (短评), 'questions' (问题) and 'film review' (影评). Users can rate a film on a 5-point Likert-type scale, where one star denotes 'least satisfied' and five stars 'most satisfied.' This recommendation system was created to encourage sharing behaviour among members (Zhang & Wang 2010).

## **Analysing *Miss Granny* and the Chinese remake**

This article focuses on the Korean film *Miss Granny* and its Chinese remake *20 Once Again*, an official Chinese–Korean co-production. *Miss Granny* is a significant film for a case study as it is one of the first Korean films to implement the 'one source, multiple territory' strategy by taking an original story and localising it for different global markets, including China, Japan, Thailand, India and Vietnam. *20 Once Again* is also the first official remake under the 2014 co-production treaty that does not feature the original Korean director. Both films were produced by CJ E&M, while *20 Once Again* was also produced in collaboration with China's Beijing Century Media Culture. Two additional Chinese companies, C2M and Huace Film and TV, were commissioned as joint investors. According to Lee Ki-yeon – head of the Chinese Investment and Distribution Team of CJ E&M – the screenplay for *20 Once Again* was adapted to suit the tastes of Chinese audiences (Yoon & Ji 2015). While both films follow the same overarching narrative, they each embody various cultural nuances and the Chinese version includes Chinese cultural elements. In 2015, *20 Once Again* was ranked as the most successful Korean–Chinese collaborative film ever made, taking in US\$56m in box office revenues (Conran 2016). In Korea, *Miss Granny* was a huge hit, earning a total of US \$ 54m in 2014, ranking it at number five at the box office that year (Kobiz 2016). Perhaps unexpectedly, our data analysis revealed that *Miss Granny* currently holds the higher rating on Douban at 8.3 out of 10, while *20 Once Again* has a rating of 7.3. *Miss Granny* was directed by mid-career Korean director–screenwriter Hwang Dong-hyuk, while *20 Once Again* was directed by Taiwanese director Leste Chen. The screenplay was adapted into Chinese by Lin Xiao Ge and Ren Peng. Whereas *Miss Granny* was not officially released in China, *20 Once Again* was released nationwide on 8 January 2015.

The original romantic comedy pivots around Mal-soon, a grumpy elderly widow who finds fault with everyone, especially her daughter-in-law, whom she hassles constantly. At the same time she

takes pride in raising her son, who becomes a university professor. One day, her daughter-in-law faints due to stress and her doctors advise Mal-soon's son and his wife to live apart from his mother, whose behaviour was evidently the cause of the problem. Overhearing the conversation, and believing that she is not wanted, Mal-soon decides to take a self-portrait to be displayed at her funeral. She arrives at a mysterious photo studio, where she miraculously becomes a young woman again. With her newfound appearance and anonymity, she changes her name to Oh Doo-ri, a reference to filmstar Audrey Hepburn, whom she idolises. However, despite her youthful appearance, Doo-ri's behaviour and mannerisms remain unchanged. She eventually returns to her neighbourhood where her soulful karaoke singing unwittingly lands her a role in her grandson's university rock band, as well as other offers from a television entertainment format producer. Following some dramatic twists and turns, including a life-threatening accident involving her grandson, and the courtship of two suitors, Oh Doo-ri realises her dream of becoming a singer.

Though both films follow the same basic narrative trajectory and promote the twin messages of filial piety and treasuring one's youth, a number of changes were made in the Chinese version. *Miss Granny* opens with scenes showing men engaged in playing various sports, along with a monologue by Mal-soon which employs sports metaphors to discuss the kind of attention that men provide women as they age. *20 Once Again* replaces these references with scenes showing Guo Bin meeting his wife, getting married, starting a family and becoming a university professor, thus endowing the film with a more serious tone. A number of tweaks to the dialogue also reflect the target audience. In *Miss Granny* when Hyun-chul asks his students to suggest elderly stereotypes, he promises that those who answer will not have to turn in a mid-term paper. However, in *20 Once Again* the students react immediately, and no incentive is offered. The students' replies to their teacher also differ between the two films. In *Miss Granny* the students focus on wrinkles, liver spots and general smelliness. One student mentions that elderly people regularly gather at Tapgol Park in Seoul, providing a specific Korean reference. In *20 Once Again*, students discuss how elderly people become uglier as they age, with some admitting that they lack the courage to assist the elderly when they fall.

The two grandmothers have also chosen different celebrities as their idols. Because Mal-soon views Audrey Hepburn as her style icon, she names her younger self Oh Doo-ri (which sounds like Audrey), while Meng Jun changes her name to Li Jun after Taiwanese pop singer Teresa Teng (aka Deng Li Jun). *20 Once Again* also refers to the Cultural Revolution during a flashback scene showing how Meng Jun raised her son. The two versions also depict elderly people socialising in different ways. In the Korean version, Mal-soon and her friend Mr Park are seen working at a café catering for the elderly, while the Chinese version shows Meng Jun and Da Hai playing mah-jong at the senior recreational centre.

The next question to be addressed is whether this localisation of film content is significant – do Chinese audiences believe that there is a difference between 'Korean' and 'Chinese' styles of storytelling?

## Digital research methods

The primary dataset for this study is the 'short commentary' section of Douban Film, where users post their comments on movie pages dedicated to specific films and television programmes. The dataset was collected with the assistance of the SMART Infrastructure Facility at the University of Wollongong, using a method that involves 'scraping' the comments.<sup>7</sup> Scraping imitates the actions

**Table 1.** Most frequently used keywords in Douban user comments on *Miss Granny* and *20 Once Again*.

<i>Miss Granny</i>				<i>20 Once Again</i>			
English	Chinese	Frequency	Weighted percentage	English	Chinese	Frequency	Weighted percentage
Laugh	笑	5103	1.18%	Korea	韩国//韩	12,023	1.31%
Film	电影	4801	1.11%	Film	电影	11,730	1.28%
Korea	韩国	2899	0.67%	Actress Yang Zishan (Meng Li jun)	杨子珊/杨子珊	11,692	1.27%
Acting	演技	2780	0.64%	Version	版	11,272	1.23%
Actress Shim Eun-kyung (Oh Doo-ri)	沈恩京	2649	0.61%	Pretty good	不错	9226	1%
Tear	泪	2266	0.53%	Laugh	笑	8142	0.89%
Like	喜欢	2590	0.60%	Luhan	鹿晗/小鹿	7288	0.79%
Pretty good	不错	2247	0.52%	Acting	演技	5793	0.63%
Cry	哭	2223	0.52%	Do not have <sup>a</sup>	没有	5614	0.61%
Interesting or attractive	好看	2058	0.48%	Like	喜欢	4965	0.54%

<sup>a</sup>The phrase 'do not have' is able to show what the Chinese version is lacking in comparison to the Korean version, when users explicitly mention a comparison.

of a person surfing the Internet, acquiring data from web pages and putting it into a usable format. The comments analysed here and their associated data were scraped from Douban's publicly available application programming interface (API), which enables data to be extracted and saved. Qualitative and quantitative analysis was then conducted, allowing patterns to be observed in the comments. The data collection process was completed on 7 June 2016, with a total of 30,648 comments from *Miss Granny* available for analysis and 55,212 for *20 Once Again*.

The analysis of the comments consisted of two stages. The first stage involves identifying a list of frequently used words by utilising the word frequency query function on the qualitative data analysis application NVivo. Using NVivo enables the identification of the terms most mentioned by users without any personal bias coming into play. By using this method, the analysis reveals those aspects of the films that most resonate with Chinese audiences, as well as revealing the factors behind the higher rating achieved by *Miss Granny*. Following the identification of keywords, 10 keywords pertaining to the research question were selected for analysis, and comments containing them were analysed with the aim of clarifying the differences in audience reception between the two films.

To facilitate a comparison between the Korean original and the Chinese remake, as seen below in Table 1, several keywords were utilised in both analyses to identify Douban audiences' opinions of the two films.

## Findings and Discussion of Results<sup>8</sup>

The user comments selected for analysis reflected the ratings given to both films – the higher rating of 8.3 for *Miss Granny* and an average of 7.3 for *20 Once Again*. While 10% of the comments asserted that *20 Once Again* was comparable to the Korean original, 90% preferred *Miss Granny*. Roughly 11% regards the Chinese version as an 'imitation' of *Miss Granny* rather than

a conventional remake. Despite this, most users were aware of the localisation strategy employed in *20 Once Again* and had a positive attitude to it. They also believed that the inclusion of Chinese elements provided them with a sense of familiarity, adjusting the content to Chinese audiences' taste. This included the film's references to the Chinese television series *My Fair Princess*, which aired in China between 1998 and 1999, and the culture-specific narrative and dialogue. Users commented:

"In fact, the localisation of the narrative is pretty good. If people have not seen the Korean version, they would think that this is a great heart-warming comedy.

(... 其实这部戏本土化的还算优秀, 没看过韩版的观众应该会觉得是部好看的暖心喜剧 ...)

"...The most interesting part is the *My Fair Princess* montage..."

(...意思是还珠格格那段的声音蒙太奇。)

The inclusion of Chinese elements in the film is praiseworthy

(...是胜在改编的中国元素, 还是给赞吧...)

"The film was touching and comparable with Korean-style humour, but more in line with the expressions used by Chinese people."

(...与韩国式的幽默和夸张相比更符合中国人的情感表达方式。)

Users also expressed their opinions about remakes – a relatively new type of project for the Chinese film industry, and one of the primary strategies determining Chinese–Korean co-productions. In an interview with the authors, Lee Hong-dae, manager of New Film Business at CJ E&M China, stated that Korean producers prefer remakes as they retain ownership of a film's original intellectual property rights. For their part, Chinese producers favour remakes because they greatly reduce the duration and cost of pre-production work. Although this model is favoured by both Korean and Chinese producers for economic reasons, the basic notion of a remake elicited negative responses from Douban audiences. Users investigated in the present study believe that there are already numerous good Chinese stories available that Chinese filmmakers could – and should – exploit. One user commented:

"China has so many wonderful stories – why do we need to remake the work of others? Isn't this just a blatant money-making exercise?"

(...中国自有那么多精彩的小说等着演绎, 却非要翻拍别人的作品, 这难道不是赤裸裸的圈钱行为么?)

As their ratings show, most users preferred the original version rather than the remake. Users believed that *Miss Granny* was more entertaining and humorous, and embodied a higher standard of acting:

"After watching the Korean version, I think China needs to work harder."

(看看人家韩国, 中国电影界要努力啊)

"After watching the Korean version, this version [20 Once Again] seems really terrible. It is obvious that the plot is the same, but this version seems so pale and boring with no dramatic tension. The standard of acting between the two films is vastly different."

(看过韩版再看这个，真是惨不忍睹。明明是一样的情节，却显得那么苍白无聊，毫无戏剧张力。演员的演技更是差着十万八千里...)

Although detailed criticism of the actors' performances was absent from the comments, most users drew comparisons between Shim and Yang. Many asserted that while Yang's acting skills have improved, Shim's performance won hands down, cementing their preference for the Korean original:

"The Korean version has a great reputation because of the goddess of acting, Shim Eun-kyun."

(...韩版之所以高口碑是因为主演沈恩京的神演技...)

"In comparison the Korean version provides more laughs, maybe because the Korean lead actress is invincible."

(和韩版比笑果较弱很多，可能因为韩版女主演技太无敌了。其他的，都还挺好的。天津取景，棒棒的！常德道91号哦！)

"Yang Zishan's acting really can't be compared with Shim Eun-kyung."

(杨子珊的演技还是输沈恩京一截)

Chinese singer and actor Luhan was also frequently mentioned (see Table 1) – the 7,288 references to him ranked him at number seven in the keyword frequency list. Formerly a member of the Korean–Chinese idol group EXO, Luhan left in dramatic fashion in 2014. *20 Once Again* was the first Chinese film in which Luhan had starred since leaving EXO, motivating *Hallyu* fans to watch the film. However, the Douban group were critical of his acting skills:

"Luhan only has his looks – other than that he is useless."

(...鹿晗真是除了增添颜值外不起什么作用...)

"Luhan is too inexperienced – when he acts he does not bring out any feelings."

(...鹿晗太嫩，表演无感...)

The main reasons that the Douban audience gave *Miss Granny* the higher rating was their belief that the film contained more comedic elements and a more compact narrative structure. Table 1 shows that whereas in *Miss Granny* the term 'laugh' tops the keyword list at 1.18%, it was ranked sixth for *20 Once Again* at 0.89%. 'Tears' were also present in *Miss Granny* at 0.53% but absent in *20 Once Again*, showing that the Korean film had managed to tug at more Chinese heartstrings:

"The Korean version is better – the plot flowed well and there were more comedic moments."

(确实比中国版好看，感觉更顺畅.....笑点很多...)

"In the past 10 years, China has not been able to create such a laid-back film, filled with both laughter and tears."

(中国电影再大制作十年内都拍不出这样一部轻松欢乐笑中带泪的商业片)

Looking to the future, further research and more extensive data mining can only strengthen our understanding of Douban and its various user cohorts on its film site, as well as its extensive book

and music areas. There is much for us to learn about the kinds of people who are actively generating user content and recommendations through their (short and long) comments, ratings and votes, and how they compare to general Chinese moviegoers and consumers of popular culture. More research on this expanding area and its links to global *cinophilia*, popular culture and social media trends in China is a clear desideratum.

## Conclusion

In July 2016, while the authors were conducting this study, the US and South Korean military agreed to install a new Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) anti-missile system in South Korea as a response to increased missile tests and ongoing perceived threats from North Korea. As a result of this escalating tension in the region – and presumably also China’s close relations with North Korea – the deployment of such instruments of ‘hard power’ sparked anti-*Hallyu* sentiment at both governmental and non-governmental levels in China. In August 2016, both trade and popular press sources reported that from 1 September the Chinese government was planning to restrict Korean content on domestic television channels, while from November 2016 major Chinese television networks placed a ban on Korean celebrities appearing in advertisements.<sup>9</sup> While the Chinese government has yet to make an official statement on these restrictions, vigorous chatter among the authors’ extensive industry networks in both China and Korea suggests that the Chinese government is using this tactic to pressure President Park Geun-hye to rethink Korea’s position on THAAD. Since September 2016, no official Chinese–Korean co-produced films have been approved for theatrical release, raising further concerns over the future of collaborative ventures and *Hallyu* in China more broadly.

Despite this conspicuous dark cloud looming over the Korean Wave, and questions surrounding the fate of new remakes like *20 Once Again*, this evolving story remains part of the larger conversation around China’s digital transformation and the nation’s endeavors to develop expanded cultural gateways at home and abroad. For the authors, the case study examined above can be seen as drawing a cultural parallel with Xi Jinping’s OBOR initiative, which encompasses the dual aim of expanding the ‘New Silk Road Economic Belt’ and the ‘Maritime Silk Road,’ operating at the economic and industrial/infrastructural levels. While the goal of OBOR is to transform China’s economy and to foster economic cooperation between China and its Eurasian neighbours (Ferdinand 2016), we argue that the collaborative ventures and transnational media flows explored in this study are also transforming China – via both internal and external pathways. Similar to the OBOR projects, but subsidised on a smaller scale than China’s Silk Road infrastructure fund (pegged at US\$40b), the value-added film remakes linking Chinese firms and creative practitioners with their partners across East Asia are enhancing both the productivity and quality of China’s creative and cultural industries and adding value to the Chinese economy.

As we have shown, the increasing interaction and cooperation among Chinese and Korean industry players – the late 2016 ‘ban’ on Korean content in China excepted – is contributing to the growth of China’s cultural capital and ‘soft power’ appeal among both domestic Chinese and diasporic audiences. It is also beginning to appeal to international audiences and industry stakeholders who are experiencing for themselves – or at least following reports about – the Chinese film industry’s seemingly unstoppable progress. In turn, the collaborative strategies outlined above, along with an increasing number of other informal and formal co-productions, joint ventures, and acquisitions in the US and other parts of the world, are enabling China to play a larger role in the global creative community.

At the same time, the geographical spread of users in our dataset suggests that Douban is engaging the eyes, keyboards and mobile phones of Chinese speakers throughout the diaspora, thereby reconnecting audiences through this social media platform in ways that enlarge earlier definitions of soft power as something that ‘co-opts people rather than coerces them’ (Nye & Wang 2009, p. 18). That is, rather than appealing largely to foreigners, Douban is helping China transform itself into a ‘socialist cultural superpower’ by strengthening connections between Mainland and globally dispersed Chinese, while enabling domestic films and the Chinese film industry to become instrumental forces in cultivating soft power and a ‘crucial mechanism to materialise such power’ (Su 2010, p. 317) both at home and abroad.

However, if the results of the present study are anything to go by, leveraging off each other’s strengths to gain the most out of collaborative endeavours will not be a straightforward task in the future. China will indeed ‘need to work harder’ and, as long as their Korean colleagues remain behind the camera and in the editing suites, collaboration is likely to continue.

Our preliminary findings show a clear correlation between the ratings and comments received by the two films studied, where the Korean original, *Miss Granny*, performed better in terms of audience reception – at least with the Douban sample. Although users believe that *20 Once Again* is one of the better recent Chinese films, it failed to oust the Korean version as this Chinese audience’s favourite.

Based on the comments analysed, however, it seems that localisation strategies do have potential, as many users related positively to the cultural nuances in *20 Once Again*. Star power was also utilised in the promotion of the film – the casting of Luhan lent the production buzz and whetted viewers’ anticipation as this was his first media appearance since leaving EXO. However, as we have seen, his performance in the role was panned. The results show that as well as the calibre of the acting, the quality of the narrative plays an important role for Chinese audiences. Overall, our analysis demonstrates the past (and possibly the future) strengths of the Korean Wave in China, a trend buttressed by an appreciation of the skills brought by Korean actors and Korean approaches to storytelling and narrative. Finally, our case study prompts further reflection on the long-term impact of the recent restrictions on *Hallyu* in China, and whether US actors and programs too may be banned as a result of the THAAD missile crisis. How will these new international arrangements play out – especially now that industry giants such as Wanda Group, Alibaba, Anhui Xinke, *Huayi Brothers*, Tencent, and Fosun Group are aggressively pursuing a range of partnerships with Hollywood?

For now, while localisation is important, the most crucial factors in successfully adapting foreign films for Chinese audiences – and supporting China’s domestic *and* international ‘soft power’ campaign – are enhancing performance standards and improving film direction and the quality of scripts. Given that an increasing number of Chinese–Korean co-productions are film remakes, it will be critical to continue exploring and refining the ways in which localisation and the addition of cultural nuances either enhance or detract from Chinese audiences’ viewing experiences. This will be necessary to help scholars, policymakers and industry stakeholders understand not only how Chinese audiences respond to Korean films in terms of cultural proximity (particularly in the post-‘ban’ era), but also some of the cross-cultural nuances that will flow from China’s growing portfolio of international collaborations, particularly involving Hollywood. From an industry perspective, more research of this kind will assist in increasing the quality of remakes and new films for Chinese audiences, satisfying both filmmakers’ and audiences’ tastes and needs as China continues its journey on the new digital and cultural roads that lie ahead.

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## Notes

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2. *Sophie's Revenge*, CJ E&M's first co-production after establishing a Beijing office in 2009, starred So Ji-seop and involved several Korean crewmembers, including digital post-production colourists Lee Yong-gi and Ethan Park (from HFR) and sound engineer Kim Seok-won (Bluecap Soundworks). Although it was a box office success in China, some Korean critics panned the film for aping the conventions of Korean romantic dramas. See Lee, Hyo-won. "Sophie's Revenge' Satisfies to a Point." *The Korea Times* (20 August 2009), Accessed 2 March 2017. Available at [http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/art/2009/08/135\\_50426.html](http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/art/2009/08/135_50426.html).
3. KOFIC is a self-administered organization supported by the state, under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism in Korea. KOFIC is tasked with overseeing international co-productions.
4. *Gangster Pay Day* (2014) was one of the films chosen to close the festival, while *Coming Home* (2014) and *The Golden Era* (2014) were screened in the Gala Presentation section.
5. This search is current as of 8 March 2017. See <http://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/douban.com>.
6. Recent examples of Western journalists using Douban film ratings to gauge the success of a film in China include Brzeski 2016; and Cain 2016.
7. UOW SMART (University of Wollongong Simulation, Modelling, Analysis, Research and Teaching) is focused on applied infrastructure research.
8. For identification purposes, the comment ID and posting date of the user views published in the text are listed here in order: 880235309, 7 January 2015; 900521261, 6 March 2015; 941295330, 16 July 2015; 811716897, 7 January 2015; 880411965, 2 December 2015; 880370011, 7 January 2015; 1026692288, 31 March 2016; 880235309, 7 January 2015; 885033538, 20 January 2015; 902651048, 13 March 2015; 887584405, 27 January 2015; 1011235429, 14 February 2015; 900746071, 7 March 2015; 806716854, 14 May 2014.
9. See: Frater, P 2016, 'China Reportedly Bans Korean TV Content, Talent', *Variety* (4 August). Available at: <http://variety.com/2016/biz/asia/china-confirms-ban-on-korean-content-talent-1201830391/>; and Kim, JH 2016, 'MAMA [8<sup>th</sup> Mnet Asian Music Awards in Hong Kong] goes on despite China's hal-lyu ban', *The Korea Times* (27 November). Available at: [http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/art/2016/11/201\\_219024.html](http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/art/2016/11/201_219024.html).

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