

Crouching Tiger, Hidden Capitalist: Chinese Media and Transnational Relations

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The International Monetary Fund (IMF) announced in 2014 that purchasing power parity (PPP) had made China the world's largest economy (Zhao, 2008). It didn't take long before China was also the largest media market in the world, generating millions in profit. In 2020, Chinese ticket sales surpassed \$1.998 billion (Schwartzel, 2022: 321). That year, *Detective Chinatown 3* earned \$397 million, beating the *Avengers* by \$40 million, and *Jiang Ziya* took in \$240 million. Meanwhile, global media partnerships in China continued to expand with Sony, Warner, Disney, CJ Entertainment, and Reliance among the leading suitors. Wanda, Bona Films, Legendary Entertainment, Alibaba, Tencent, and other smaller companies have expanded production and distribution in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Europe. Legendary, producer of King Kong, Jurassic World, Pacific Rim, and other high-grossing global franchises, has become a leading transnational filmmaker. Notably, in both global releases and domestic hits, Chinese media champion the same cultural values as other transnational media corporations (TNMCs): individualism and self-interest set within the global capitalist market (albeit with a domestic authoritarian hierarchy). Thus, Chinese viewers are not simply subjected to "American" cultural imperialism. Rather, China advances a transnational cultural order based on a consolidated TNMC marketplace that promotes neoliberal capitalist options.

In 2021, China was the world's leading box office (Clark, 2022). *The Battle at Lake Changjin*, a Chinese patriotic war film, produced by transnational studios Bona, Alibaba, and the Shanghai Film Group earned \$913 million in ticket sales. Another Alibaba film, *Hi, Mom*, co-produced with several Chinese studios earned \$850 million. It seems that Chinese media "don't need Hollywood to fill seats anymore" (Fenton, 2020). China's Film Administration has plans to expand to 100,000 theaters, release 50 films a year, with 10 that are "critically acclaimed and popular," improve special effects, and promote more science fiction movies (Clark, 2022). Box office growth continued into 2023 with China still leading in ticket sales (Global Times, 2023). *Full River Red* earned \$674 million and *Wandering Earth 2* \$604 million. Two other films *Hidden Blade*, an espionage movie, and *Ping Pong*, a story of China's national table tennis victory, also attracted large audiences.

This commentary addresses China's transnational media relations with US, African, and Asian media. European and Latin American media also collaborate with Chinese media, but this requires much more elaboration than can be provided here. A modest account is provided in "Little Giants in Latin America" (Artz, 2023).

Neoliberalism and cultural imperialism

Of course, entertainment is only one part of China's participation in world trade. Many other global industries depend on Chinese workers and consumers. In 2022, Apple's Chinese sales doubled; Louis Vuitton sold \$22 million worth of products there in a single month. General Motors now sells more cars in China than the US. Starbucks has over 6000 stores in China. In short, to survive and grow, expanding capitalist corporations need China. Even Netflix licenses programming to Chinese VOD streamers like Baidu's iQiyi. Yet, China's immersion in globalization has not weakened the Chinese nation-state (Zhao, 2008).

Neoliberalism arrived in China under an authoritarian political system with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) determining and facilitating the parameters of capitalist development. While underdevelopment and economic dependency define economic relations between the US/EU and the Global South, the rapid rise of Chinese capitalism has disrupted US dominance. China is now the largest trading partner in South America, Middle East, South Africa, Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, India, and the European Union.

Miller and Kraidy's (2016) appraisal of Chinese media did not anticipate the dramatic growth of Chinese transnational media production and distribution—regionally and globally. Chinese co-productions, joint ventures, and partnerships by Legendary Films, Bona Group, Alibaba, China Film Group, and others disrupted the dominance of US/EU global media. Moreover, China's transnational partnerships have lessened the explanatory power of globalization and cultural imperialism theories which either overstate the collapse of national government power or overstate the influence of Western culture across the world, including in China.

Although cultural imperialism was first expressed as a concept in the 1960s when Herbert Schiller (1975) codified the theory, its appearance came much earlier. After WW I, US movies were already dominating Europe and Latin America. Woodrow Wilson advised US filmmakers to "make this world more comfortable and more happy and convert them to the principles of America." The US Committee on Public Information headed by George Creel expressed its goal: "What we wanted was to get into foreign countries were pictures that presented the wholesome life of America, giving fair ideas of our people and institutions." By the 1930s, US movies "were piping pro-American messaging directly into auditoriums" around the world. While Mao was drafting artists into the Chinese revolution, US movies were already transporting Western culture around the world. Frank Capra, filmmaker of anti-German propaganda during WWII, told his film crew, "This is a total war fought with every conceivable weapon. Your weapon is film! Your bombs are ideas! Hollywood is a war plant!" (Schwartzel, 2022: 27-33).

From grotesque Japanese stereotypes in Capra's films to Disney's animated Donald Duck, it was all out US propaganda, which continued into the post-war years and beyond as Hollywood sought audiences and profits in Europe, Latin America, and worldwide. The US imperialist project came disguised as "popcorn entertainment," "simultaneously a harmless form of entertainment... and a manufactured product capable of generating profits in the hundreds of millions" (Schwartzel,

2022: 42). This is now understood as cultural imperialism—whereby dominant nations spread their culture and values to overwhelm media and culture in weaker nations.

Currently, government censorship of media in China maintains a PG-13 world: no drugs, no naked bodies, no murder, no rape, limited violence, no ghosts, no time travel, and no negative outlook on life. This is remarkably similar to the Hays Code (1934-1968) that restricted movie content in the US, including no sex, no profanity, no interracial romance. Hollywood understood the guidelines and self-censored, which is how US movie studios produced films for Germany in the 1930s, and how they now willingly produce films for China following its government restrictions. Hollywood wants “greater access to a market that would save their business and please their shareholders” (Schwartzel, 2022: 124).

Action thrillers, superhero, and fantasy movie blockbusters are the most globally successful films. They promote self-interest, individualism, and hierarchy—ironically an ideological combination favored by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Although personal freedom beyond consumerism is not acceptable, Chinese officials favor capitalist ideology and desire the profits that blockbuster movies provide.

A word of caution though: action movies are not singularly Hollywood creations or primarily artifacts of cultural imperialism. As Erich Schwartzel has noted, James Bond follows the “tradition of shogun in Japan or *wuxia* in China, drawing on cultures that revered their fighters from Africa to New Zealand. The superhero movies breaking box-office records around the world had origins in Greek, Indian, and Chinese mythology that anyone could tap” (2022: 214).). Thus, *Wolf Warriors* (2017-\$854 million), *Ne Zha* (2019-\$743 million), and even Disney’s *Mulan* (1998-\$304 million) have roots in Chinese myth and narrative.

Although China has not yet had consistent global market success (Peng, 2018), *Global Times* (2023) predicted that China’s domestic box office would surpass \$8 billion in 2023, challenging US media dominance (D’Allesandro, 2022). Weiyong Peng has argued that, “The culture and strategic goals of the Chinese government and [foreign] privileged access to the Chinese market that coproductions provide are two sides of the coproduction coin” (2018: 16). Currently however, “China’s reputation as a pop culture ‘power’ pales in comparison” to Korea and Japan. Although Hong Kong’s Edko, Warner, and Sony-Colombia have all co-produced regionally successful Chinese films, Japanese and Korean film studios are contributing to a “Pan-Asian cinema” (Yeh, 2010) which Chinese media are eager to emulate.

On behalf of China’s capitalist elite, in the early 2000s President Xi Jinping introduced his “Chinese Dream” to “revitalize” China’s culture, boost national self-confidence, and stem the incoming waves of Korean, Japanese, and Hollywood pop culture (Keane and Su, 2018: 49-50). Then, in 2013, Xi announced China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) for loans and investments in 80 nations, including Central Asia, Europe, the Middle East, Africa, the Caribbean, and South America. The BRI also has a cultural component that fosters a distribution network for Chinese TV and movies. *Composer* (2019), a transnational media co-production with Kazakhstan, was an initial overture seeking cultural connections with other nations. *The China Salesman* (2017) was another BRI media offering that 30 countries purchased for distribution (Schwartzel: 257-258). As part of BRI, China Film Group co-produced *Viy 2: Journey to China* in 2019 with the Russian Media Group. In 2020, it was released on VOD as *Iron Mask* in the US. The film, set in the 18th century, follows a cartographer who encounters wizards and the Russian Czar. *Viy 2* starred UK’s Jason Flemyng, Jackie Chan, Dutch actor Rutger Hauer, and American Arnold Schwarzenegger. While

not a box office success, it demonstrated China's commitment to transnational entertainment partnerships.

China's turn to global capitalism was made even clearer in Xi Jinping's address to the World Economic Forum in 2017. He hoped for a China where "different social strata and different groups of people all share in the benefits of economic globalization" (Xi, 2017). This was "Xi's ultimate brand play—exporting his combination of authoritarianism measures and market economics" (Schwartzel, 2022: 253), expressed in transnational entertainment partnerships.

The transnational

Transnational corporations (TNCs) including transnational media companies (TNMCs) differ from international and multinational corporations by their relations of production. In *Global Entertainment Media* (2015), I defined the first two formations with media examples as follows:

International corporations sell commodities, goods, and services produced by workers in their own national factories to consumers in other nations. International corporations trade across borders, but do not own or partner with corporations in other countries. Disney is operating internationally when it distributes its US-produced films to theaters in other nations. Disney's global expansion, especially to Latin American, informed theories of cultural imperialism. An *international* media does business across national borders by selling products produced by workers in one nation to consumers in another (e.g., Comcast's Universal exports *Fast and Furious* films to China).

Multinational corporations produce and sell commodities, goods, and services produced by workers in their own national factories and in factories owned by the same corporation as a subsidiary in another nation or nations. Multinational corporations operate their subsidiaries to produce goods and services for consumers in the country of the subsidiary or for export. For example, China's Hisense Group took over Japan's Sharp TV factory in Mexico, while TCL Technology bought Sanyo's Mexican factory to produce wide screen TVs for the US market. Multinational media have subsidiaries in other countries that produce and export content, but they do not have partnerships or joint ventures with companies in other countries. Disney is operating multinationally when its Disney Star channel in India or Disney Spain produces and broadcasts television programs in those countries. Multinational media owned and based in one nation operate subsidiaries they own in another nation. The subsidiary has workers producing commodities in and for the domestic national market. Ownership, control, and profits of the subsidiary are retained by the multinational parent (e.g., Disney produces television programs for its wholly owned UTV India, while production decisions and profits remain with Disney US). Acquisitions and mergers dominated by Disney bolstered claims of cultural imperialism in the 1980s and 1990s. (27-31)

Transnational corporations are different. They are jointly owned by two or more companies from two or more nations. For example, China's Hon Hai and BOE Technology has partners in Mexico producing raw materials and parts (Zhen, 2022). Transnational media corporations (TNMCs) soon developed as short-term joint ventures or more permanent partnerships: Disney is a TNMC as 26% owner of Canada's Vice Media; as co-producer of the Indian hit, *Dangal* (2016) with Aamir Khan; and as one-third owner of Argentine film studio Patgonik.

Using the skills of thousands of cultural workers at home and abroad, ruling capitalist classes secure profits for capital owners. By the 1970s, domestic returns were declining such that corporations sought increased labor productivity through technological applications, offshore production in countries with lower wages, and expanded global markets. Governments privatized public goods and services, imposed austerity policies and cutback social services, commercialized media, and changed national regulations to favor private capital. Bolstered by neoliberal international agreements, transnational companies emerged globally. To survive, national film and TV producers sought transnational deals with media from other countries. As transnational media became more dominant and national identities and cultural values became more diffuse in the 21st century, cultural imperialism lost both its effect and descriptive value. Western cultural dominance has been superseded by a *transnational cultural order*: consumerism, individual self-interest, and authoritarian austerity are promoted by capitalist classes everywhere, including China. Market values may have multicultural inflections, but they no longer exclusively reflect US or European traits. Transnationalism has become hegemonic with consent by national governments, media owners and their multiple audiences.

US-China media deals

China-US media relations highlight the ingredients for transnational cultural production. TNMC co-productions such as *Iron Man 3* (2013), *Transformers 4* (2014), *Kung Fu Panda 3* (2016), *Jurassic World* (2018), and *Dune* (2021) rely on a popularized preexisting fantasy world. Media now comprise one part of a larger cultural spectacle. Aynne Kokas observes that transnational ventures are a means for “leveraging foreign capital and expertise to generate domestic capital and expertise as an economic development strategy that has been successful in other Chinese industries” (2017: 6). She also remarks that, “Expanding the capacity of China’s culture industries through FDI (foreign direct investment) [and transnational co-productions] is advancing the Chinese Dream” (11). For example, *Transformers 4* offered the Chinese government a major promotion opportunity through its favorable depiction of the Ministry of Defense.

Five years ago, it was observed that “China and Hollywood have intimately overlapped in financing, production, and distribution and are poised to become even more entwined” (Kokas, 2017, p, 88). Consequently, US-China “film collaborations must be understood as part of a larger cultural and technological intersection of American and Chinese media production, and, by extension, of a radical shift in global media industrial culture” (Kokas, 2017: 87). This is not a simple reflection of Western cultural dominance. Media globally contribute to a transnational cultural order of consumerism and capitalist relations (Artz, 2023).

Chinese-US collaborations may emerge from self-aggrandizing profit motives, but they nonetheless constitute transnational media in a global capitalist system—at once symbiotic and competitive. Accordingly, Aynne Kokas points out that, “considering Hollywood’s cultural imperialism in China as a unidirectional phenomenon would offer an inaccurate and limited perspective on the Chinese government and industry’s influence” (2017: 15). Thus, Disney’s vaunted Shanghai Disney Resort is a joint venture between Shanghai Shendi Group which owns 57% and Disney which owns 43%. Shanghai Disney (costing \$5.5 billion) is the largest Disney resort outside of the US. China controls the site and 30% of the management, while Disney provides the brand. Much like Disney’s removal of California farmers to build Disney World, Shanghai Disney required the demolition of hundreds of homes and the displacement of thousands.

To build its brand and attract consumers, Disney invested in English language schools in urban centers with language lessons based on Disney characters. Kokas remarks that “the park’s infrastructure is a physical manifestation of the blending of US corporate media with Chinese domestic values” (2017: 58)—contributing to a transnational culture of consumption and capitalist norms.

There are many US transnational media partnerships involving multiple Chinese media organizations. In a 2012 US-China joint venture, Oriental Dreamworks (now Pearl Studio) was founded by China Media Capital, Shanghai Media Group, and DreamWorks Animation. The Warner transnational Flagship Entertainment Group produced *The Adventurers* (2017-\$38 million), *Paradox* (2017, \$80 million), *The Meg* (2018, \$530 million), and the animated fantasy *Wish Dragon* (2021, \$39 million). *The Meg 2* was released in 2023. In a more dramatic example, Alibaba, which partnered with Amblin in 2016, has as major shareholders Goldman Sachs, Japan’s Softbank, and US investor PRIMECAP. The latter also owns shares in Baidu.

Film co-production

Domestic films bring huge profits to China’s film industry. *Wolf Warrior 2* (2017) by China Film Group and Bona Films (co-produced with Wanda, Japan’s Kadokawa, and Singapore’s Shaw Brothers) drew \$874 million in ticket sales. China Film Group also had \$700 million box office revenue for the sci-fi *Wandering Earth* in 2019. Edko’s *Monster Hunt 2* (2018) drew \$362 million. Wanda Film’s *Detective Chinatown 2* (2018) made \$544 million; and *Detective Chinatown 3* (2021), distributed by Warner, earned \$686 million. In their quest for global influence and profit, Chinese government and private media search for transnational partners to reach global audiences.

India, Korea, Japan, and China are the leading producers of popular entertainment in Asia with transnational co-productions a feature of each nation’s media strategy. Rapid growth in China’s box office corresponds with a parallel increase in co-productions, especially among regional transnational media. Although they have not yet secured the global success anticipated, “state and private media conglomerates are encouraged to seek box office success and increase artistic recognition in Western markets through coproduction” (Peng, 2018: 21). Official co-productions need at least 1/3 Chinese financing, Chinese actors in leading roles, with significant Chinese film locations or a Chinese theme (Su, 2017: 486). They are considered domestic films, have large audiences, and share 43% of revenue with the TNMC partner.

While foreign studios seek co-production partners in China for profit, Chinese media hope to learn skills and practices to reach a global audience. Several 2021 top hits in China were transnational productions: *Battle at Lake Changjin II* (\$607 million) with Bona/TSG, Alibaba/Amblin, and the China Film Group; *Jurassic World: Dominion* by Amblin/Alibaba and Perfect World Pictures; and *Avatar: Way of Water* by TSG/Bona (China Daily, 2023). Many Legendary, Amblin, Bona, and other TNMC movies have attracted large international audiences and generated huge profits for joint venture partners.

The Great Wall (2016) a US-China-Japan co-production (Legendary, Universal, Dentsu and Fuji) with global stars and great visual effects established the possibility for transnational collaboration. The film earned \$335 million at the box office, indicating the potential for transnational partnerships. The next year, Legendary and Tencent teamed on *Kong: Skull Island* (2017, \$567 million). In 2018, Legendary, Amblin, Perfect World, and Universal partnered on *Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom* which drew \$1.3 billion in ticket sales. Both films relied heavily

on monsters, transcending national identities and attracting large audiences everywhere. In contrast, Jackie Chan's action thriller, *The Foreigner* (2017) co-produced by US-UK-China studios only earned \$145 million.

Giulia D'Aquila (2022) has observed that "science fiction appears to be one of the easiest genres for international distribution," which may explain the success of these movies and others like Legendary's *Pacific Rim Uprising* (2018, \$291 million) and China's Flagship Entertainment/Warner co-production *The Meg* (2018, \$530 million). *Meg 2: The Trench* released in 2023 confirms science fiction as one means for overcoming cultural preferences.

Hong Kong studios have an advantage over other transnational media due to their close connections with other cultures, which allows a pan-Asian cultural imaginary (Chung, 2018). Martial arts movies with their spectacular scenes and stunning visuals and popular familiarity still attract large global audiences, especially in Africa. From 2015-2018, Hong Kong TNMC co-productions by Edko, Huayi, Filmko, Shinework and other studios grossed over \$1.5 billion.

Le Vision co-produced TNMC films including the *Expendables* franchise, *The Great Wall* (2016), *Bounty Hunters* (2016) with Korean and Hong Kong studios. They also animated the franchise *Boonie Bears* with Fantawild—seen by 100 million globally.

Beijing Culture co-produced the smash hits *Wolf Warrior 2* (2017) and *Wandering Earth* (2019, 2023). They also partnered with Tencent and Hong Kong's Huayi Bros Media on *Bureau 749* (2019), a sci-fi action thriller. Beijing Culture is working on the Fengshen Trilogy, *Creation of the Gods*, a \$440 million three film fantasy epic of a battle between humans and monsters based on Chinese folklore. Like most action fantasies, it represents hierarchy, authority, and heroic self-interest in defense of humanity. Film director Wuershan hopes to create a Chinese Marvel or Lord of the Rings style cinematic universe (Davis, 2019). This fits Chinese government concerns about Hollywood films that employ fewer Chinese workers and "spread Western culture, eat away at local-language product, suck revenue away from Chinese consumers... and contribute nothing to the government build-a-middle-class mandate" (Fenton, 2020: 113-114)

In the last 15 years, co-productions have grown in and with China. Studios of all sizes hope to learn how to make profitable movies. Dreams of Dragon Pictures and Le Vision co-produced films with US companies: *Cloud Atlas* (2012, \$131 million) and *Expendables* (2010, 2012, \$590 million). Hong Kong's We Pictures co-produced the Chinese drama *Better Days* (2019, \$230 M), which was nominated for an Academy Award and distributed in the US, UK, and Canada. Beijing's WD Pictures co-produced *Journey to the West* (2013), *Saving Mr. Wu* (2015), and *Skiptrace* (2016). They joined with Italy's Orisa Produzioni and Dutch Mercis to make a live action film of Miffy, an iconic children's book character. In 2018, WD Pictures partnered with Danish Zentropa and TrustNordisk to co-produce films for China, globally, beginning with *My Best Friend Andersen*.

DMG Entertainment, another small Chinese firm (which started as a Chinese-US advertising agency) turned to feature films in 2012—co-producing and financing major motion pictures with Tri-Star, Sony, and Marvel Studios. Their first picture *Looper* (2012) starring Bruce Willis and Emily Blunt, made \$177 million on a \$30 million budget. After *Looper*, DMG would go on to produce *Iron Man 3* (2013) with Marvel Studios, which became the most successful of all Iron Man movies, grossing \$1.2 billion worldwide. DMG co-produced *Transcendence* (2014, \$103 million) and *Point Break* (2015, \$135 million) with Warner Brothers, Lionsgate and then *Blockers* (2018, \$94 million) with Universal. DMG Entertainment partnered with Bona Films and Colombia Pictures on *Bloodshot* (2020) which was also streamed by Sony.

Larger firms, such as Huayi Brothers and STX Entertainment have co-produced 10 moderate box office successes. However, making movies that appeal to both Chinese, US, and international audiences remains difficult. For example, the French co-production *Wolf Totem* (2015 - \$126 million) was a huge success in China and sold well in Europe but failed to attract audiences in the US.

The search for global success continues: HBO Asia co-produced *Master of the Drunken Fist* (2016); Jackie Chan and Saban Productions drew \$137 million from *Skiptrace* (2016); LeVision Pictures has signed a series of TNMC co-productions; and Russo Brothers and Hong Kong's Huayi Brothers are partnered on an English-language franchise for releasing global films (Su, 2017: 490). These and other joint ventures, partnerships, and collaborations contribute to the emerging neoliberal transnational cultural order with content favouring authority, hierarchy, individualism, and market-based behaviors (Artz, 2015, 2022).

China and India collaborated on the historical adventure *Xuanzang* (2016, \$4.7 million) in Sanskrit and Mandarin, recounting how Buddhism entered China in the 16th Century (Peng and Keane, 2019). E Stars, the Chinese private investor, has brought big-budget Indian cinema to China; it distributed Aamir Khan's family sports drama *Dangal* in 2017, followed by his dramedy *Secret Superstar* in 2018. Those Bollywood hits earned \$190 million and \$119 million in China, respectively (Brzeski, 2018). An Indian co-production with E Stars, *The Zookeeper*, has brought in big-budget Indian cinema to China.

China's Shinework Pictures and India's Viacom 18 produced *Kung Fu Yoga* (2017, \$258 million) in Mandarin, English, and Hindi. Notably, after India and China signed a 2014 co-production deal, digital streaming of "Chindian" movies increased. Since 2018 over 10 co-produced Indian films have been released yearly in China (Karan and Schaefer, 2020).

Pearl Studio (formerly Oriental DreamWorks) relies on animation co-productions, such as *Kung Fu Panda 3* (2016, \$521 million) and *Abominable* (2019, \$188 million) with DreamWorks Animation (DWA). Further, Pearl Studio, also with DWA, produced the TV series *Abominable and the Invisible City* (2022-2023), which airs on Hulu and Peacock. Other titles include *Over the Moon* (2020) co-produced with Netflix, Sony, and Dentsu; *Kung Fu Panda: The Dragon Knight* (2022-2023) with DWA and Netflix. Pearl also collaborated on the Cartoon Network 2020 movie *We Bare Bears*.

Perfect World Pictures co-produced *Jurassic World* (2015) with Legendary and Amblin, *News of the World* (2020) with Universal for Netflix, plus *King of Staten Island* (2020) with Apatow, among its other collaborative projects. With Mattel, Huaxia Films released *Thomas & Friends: The Great Race* in 2018 across China in Mandarin. The film featured Yong Bao, a new train from China. In addition to showing in more than 4000 theaters, the film appeared on iQiyi, YouKu, QQ, LeTV, and BesTV digital platforms (McLean, 2017).

Road Pictures co-produced UK-based Cinestaan Films' Oscar winning film *Cold War* (2018) distributing the film in China. Road Pictures also collaborated with Universal on the Lebanese *Capernaum* (2019). It drew \$68 million in box office revenue, with \$54 million from China (Motion Picture Association, 2019).

Hong Kong's TVB and China Media Capital entered a co-partnership deal with Ron Howard's Imagine Entertainment producing scripted TV programs for global distribution (Lodderhose, 2017). Imagine Entertainment is currently developing *Mindscaping*, a 24-episode sci-fi TV series, co-financed by Tencent, Endeavor China, and Sequoia Capital (Brzeski, 2019).

Alibaba Pictures began investing in Hollywood films back in 2015 with its stake in *Mission: Impossible: Rogue Nation*. It was an investor in Paramount's *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Out of the Shadows* (2016, \$246 million), and co-produced *Star Trek Beyond* (2016, \$344 million). In 2016, Alibaba Pictures acquired a minority share in TNMC Amblin Partners, with India media giant Reliance, Canadian-based Entertainment One, and Comcast's Universal Pictures. Alibaba has distribution and marketing rights in China. Alibaba co-produced *A Dog's Purpose* (2017, \$205 million) with Amblin and India's Reliance Media and *Green Book* (2018, \$322 million) with Participant Media and Reliance DreamWorks.

Wanda's Legendary Entertainment a major TNMC studio is the most prolific Chinese co-producer of global TV and film. Legendary released *Warcraft* in 2016, co-produced with Tencent, Japan's Fuji, and US studio Atlas. Based on a popular video game, *Warcraft* earned \$465 million; HBO purchased VOD rights for \$24 million. Also in 2016, Legendary entered co-production agreements with Japan's Dentsu and Fuji, US studio Atlas, and China's Le Vision Pictures (they co-produced *The Great Wall*). Critiqued as a cross-cultural failure, the film still earned \$335 million. Legendary followed those successes with *Pacific Rim: Uprising* (2018) in a distribution deal with Comcast Universal. *Pacific Rim* drew \$291 million at the box office. Legendary, one of the leading TNMCs in China, has continued its co-production success domestically, regionally, and globally.

Legendary doesn't just have a continuing Warner Brothers Godzilla/Kong partnership, co-productions of Jurassic Worlds with Amblin, and collaboration on the Pacific Rim franchise with Universal. Features with Sony Pictures, including *The Book of Clarence* and *The Machine* were released in mid-2023. Wanda Pictures also signed a content deal with US streamer Tubi to distribute top Chinese films such as *Detective Chinatown* and *The King's Avatar* (Tubi, 2020).

Legendary has an impressive list of other critically acclaimed box office successes with Toho and Warner Brothers, including *Pokémon Detective Pikachu* (2019, \$443 million,) and *Dune* (2021, \$400 million). *Dune 2* was released in Fall 2023 (see Legendary films at <https://www.legendary.com/film/>). Legendary has plans for more movies in 2024 and beyond with Warner, Toho, Sony, and Netflix. Overall, Legendary Entertainment comprises other transnational relations: Japan's Softbank holds a 10% stake and Apollo Global Management bought a minority stake for \$760 million in 2022. In addition to its popular Netflix movie co-productions like *Enola Holmes* (2020, 2022), Legendary has deals with streamers including Amazon, and partnered with Apple+ in 2022 to create an original "Monsterverse" series (White, 2023).

Legendary has also invested in Library Pictures, a local language production arm of CAA Media Finance co-producing movies in India, Latin America and Spain. Malaysia, Indonesia, South Korea, and Vietnam. In 2021, Library (with Legendary funding) signed a three-year deal with Korea's Next Entertainment World and announced cofinancing deals with Korea's leading studio CJ Entertainment for productions in Indonesia, Vietnam, and Turkey (Legendary, 2021; Noh, 2020). In 2020, Legendary joined with Library Pictures and India's Andolan Studio to co-produce a Hindi-language TV young adult dark comedy for two seasons (HT, 2020). Legendary also signed a co-finance and distribution agreement with Sony Pictures in 2022.

In addition to TNMC film partnerships, Legendary has multiple TV co-productions with Amazon, NBC/Universal, Hulu, Fox, Paramount, ABC, and other networks. Recent TV programs include *Carnival Row* (2019-continuing), *Lost in Space* (2018-2021), *Pacific Rim: The Black* (2021-2022), *Paper Girls* (2022), and more (<https://www.legendary.com/television/>).

StarTimes in Africa

China, Turkey, France, and Russia are scrambling for media influence in Africa (Essoungou, 2022). Recently, StarTimes, a private Chinese telecom, satellite, and internet streaming company has become dominant. They have signed partnerships with dozens of African TV stations, broadcasting TV dramas, reality shows, children's animation, and documentaries to millions in several indigenous African languages.

Chinese TV dramas have been enthusiastically received across the region as transnational deals with African private and public TV networks continue expanding (Lei, 2019). Chinese producers offer TV dramas that are both accessible and enjoyable to viewers in Tanzania, Kenya, and Uganda (Lei: 30). Driven largely by commercial goals, Chinese TV dramas feature domestic themes and individual, personal themes—which encourage consumerism, individualism, and capitalist market values. These justify social stratification and class formation (32).

China has become the leading producer of TV dramas, which are increasingly being exported to East Asia and Africa. These productions cater to the upper and middle classes. Initially, Chinese TV drama exports were concentrated in neighboring Asian countries (Korea, Taiwan, Japan) which had historical affinities. China's drama exports to Africa deliver positive images of Chinese culture. For instance, *Daughter-in-Law's Wonderful Era*, released in Swahili in Tanzania in 2011, featured a "light-hearted plot and humorous dialogue" about a young urban middle class couple and their working-class families (Lei: 34, 40).

Like other transnational productions, Chinese drama exports depend on marketability and audience reception to gain profits. Currently, Chinese dramas about people's everyday lives, marriage, and family (which echo the shared values, beliefs, and sentiments of African viewers) are the priority for distribution agreements. Tanzania national TV has struck a partnership with Shanghai Radio and Television, Huayi Brothers, Huace Movie, and China International Television for 10 TV dramas, 52 TV movies, five cartoons, and four documentaries to air in English, French, Portuguese, Arabic, Hausa, and Swahili. The government-run China Radio International also signed the deal and later partnered with PWANI TV Kenya to screen dubbed Chinese TV dramas (Lei: 37).

StarTimes, the leading TNMC TV provider in Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, South Africa, and many other African nations, has promoted and aired Chinese dramas and movies on its satellite and streaming networks—featuring stories that turn "middle class dreams into a reality" (Zhang, 2016). Chinese TV dramas "tell the story of urban Chinese middle-class life, a dominant theme... to convey a positive image of China to African viewers" (Lei: 44). This effectively promotes neoliberal capitalism. StarTimes is available across the African and European continents and parts of Asia with 630 channels for news, movies, series, sports, entertainment, children's programs, fashion, and religion. The channels broadcast in 10 languages including English, French, Portuguese, African indigenous languages, Chinese, and Hindi. StarTimes has partnerships with Fox, BBC, Discovery, Disney, and over 200 African local media. In Africa, 75 percent of StarTimes' 5000 employees are Africans (StarTimes ON, 2023).

StarTimes' arrangement with the Kenyan government and TV networks features a 24-hour kung fu station featuring Jackie Chan classics. Another channel presents Chinese costume dramas. Game shows and children's animation are dubbed in Swahili and English. To bolster its entertainment and cultural reach, StarTimes has provided satellite dishes to 16,000 Kenyan families and more than 2,400 community locations (Schwartzel, 2022: 304). StarTimes broadcasts Nigerian videos and Swahili TV shows, game shows, Kenyan news, Bollywood movies, kung fu, the Monkey King, and

other popular programming. Chinese soap operas on StarTimes mostly show “sparkling new cities, where the young and old live together in harmony and prosperity” (315). This is not unlike the images projected by decades of US media exports and advertisements to Africa and Latin America. With Chinese TNMC co-productions, US cultural imperialism has been subdued and displaced. As a Kenyan TV regulator explains: “We don’t want to continue imbibing Western culture” (318).

Moreover, China has financed broadcasting infrastructures, expanded media co-productions, and trained African media workers. The political economy of media relations among Chinese and African private and state media is exemplified in the commercial strategies of StarTimes and its collaborations with Nigeria, Kenya, Côte d’Ivoire, and other nations. StarTimes is now the largest satellite and cable operator on the African continent, bypassing both France’s Vivendi Canal Plus and the dominance of Naspers South African Multichoice (Jedlowski, 2021: 236). The South African media giant Naspers also owns 29% of Tencent. StarTimes has broadcasting agreements in 30 African countries with 27 million users, offering the lowest price for pay-TV, inexpensive TV decoders, and free satellite installations in rural communities (Zhihui and Pengyuan, 2018).

China does not have the colonial baggage that defines the media overtures of the UK, France, and even US media. This perhaps allows it to lead in the production and distribution of African media content across the continent. StarTimes collaborated with Nigerian producers to create several local language channels in Igbo, Yoruba, and Huasa. It launched Nollywood Plus, which is also available in French and partnered with EbonyLife TV and iROKO, the leading online distributor of Nigerian films, to become the main platform for distributing African television content (Jedlowski: 241).

To establish closer affinity with African viewers, in 2018 StarTimes produced the Yoruba language series *Alagbara* (2018-2020) with Nigerian actors. It also reformatted the Chinese TV drama, *Hello Mr. Right* for Nigerian broadcast and then exported the series to Zambia, Kenya, and Côte d’Ivoire. As a Chinese entity, StarTimes finds favorable responses from Côte d’Ivoire viewers who oppose continuing French colonial interventions. Each African nation has its own complex, context-specific conditions that affect the reception of Chinese TV and movies. In general, transnational co-productions by African and Chinese media partners attract large post-colonial African audiences (Jedlowski, 2021).

Chinese transnational media corporations and Asian TV

Since 2015, after Netflix aired the Chinese drama *Empresses in the Palace*, dozens of other TV drama series have been co-produced, including the romance *Meteor Garden* (2018), the supernatural fantasy drama *Love Between Fairy and Devil* (2022), and the thriller *Ghost Bride* (2020).

In 2022, Tencent Video streamed the Korean movie, *Hotel by the River*, Anhui Satellite TV announced the return of Korean dramas to its streaming platform, and iQiyi aired Korea’s *Wise Doctor Life*, *Twenty-Five*, *Twenty-One*, and *Strong Girl Bong Soon*. This reestablished China-Korea media relations and partnerships that had been dormant since Korea’s deployment of US missiles in 2016 (Yonhap, 2022). Elsewhere in Asia, Guangxi Radio and Television have partnered with Indonesia’s RVRI to launch Drama China, a VOD streamer for Chinese TV and movie dramas, plus Miracle China, which airs documentaries. Both services are dubbed in Bahasa, Indonesia’s national language (Mingmei, 2020).

For more than 25 years, the Chinese historical drama *Bao Zheng* has been popular in Thailand. Since 2019, *The Untamed*, a fantasy action martial arts Chinese drama, was distributed on social media by WeTV and Tencent Video. This was wildly popular in China and also a hit in Thailand (with local language subtitles) and is now shared globally on Netflix and YouTube (Qiao and Duan, 2021).

Linmon Media Ltd announced plans in March 2023 for regional media collaborations on a “slate of local-language TV projects targeting Korean, Thai, Indonesian and Taiwanese markets. The company says it will produce at least 10 non-Chinese TV series for the Asia-Pacific region in the next two to three years” (Brzeski, 2023). Linmon produced the 2020 contemporary TV drama, *Nothing But Thirty*, which was later distributed worldwide by UK-based Liv.

Notably, Chinese TV dramas have presented more individualized middle-class representations of women since the government began cultivating a new market-based form of citizenship whereby the worthiest members of society are “endowed with high cultural capital and the power to consume” (Anagost, 2019: 499). The woman worker has been “replaced by a discerning, middle-class consumer who conforms to the traditional patriarchal gender order” (Wang and Miheli, 2019: 39). Three key character types dominate contemporary Chinese drama: sacrificing housewives, divorced women adapting to social change, and individualized, independent modern urbanites. Together, they effectively blend Confucian gender norms with transnational consumer culture (Wang and Miheli, 2019).

Internet

Since the arrival of the internet and mobile devices, film is no longer clearly distinguishable from television. As Keane remarked six years ago, “The next frontier for collaboration is the internet. China has the largest broadband user base and the largest online population in the world. A world awash with content, refashioned by users, and aggregated by intermediaries” (2018: xv). China’s internet giants Baidu, Alibaba, and Tencent have become primary sites for entertainment. iQiyi has a distribution deal with Netflix. Tencent has partnered with HBO, Time Warner, and Paramount. YouKu and LeTV have purchased content from South Korea and the United States. Streaming services for TV and movies now accessible on computers and cellphones have prompted Baidu, Alibaba, and Tencent to “pursue investment, production, and promotion opportunities.” They are “aiming to become major producers of ‘internet films’” (Su, 2021: 102). Baidu’s iQiyi released the fantasy adventure *Double World* in 2020, raising over \$6 million from the platform in the first three days: Baidu controls 75% of the over one billion internet users in China (Thomala, 2023).

LeTV, BesTV, and iQiyi cater to younger, affluent middle-class viewers, by purchasing and releasing popular online overseas content. As digital becomes more prevalent, it contributes to the increase in transnational media collaborations. YouKu, iQiyi, Tencent Video, Sohu, and LeTV provide internet access with content from Sony, Paramount, Universal, Disney, Lionsgate, and others (Su, 2021: 101). iQiyi has partnerships with Lionsgate, Paramount, NBC Universal, BBC, and Netflix—distributed to 100 million online subscribers. Alibaba owns China’s leading online video platform YouKu Tudou with 500 million monthly users. Tencent’s QQ claims 565 million monthly users and its WeChat app has one billion. Tencent Video, the fourth largest VOD streamer in the world, has 120 million subscribers. In 2023, it signed deal to air Disney movies and animations in China.

Tencent—31 percent owned by Naspers from South Africa—is also the world’s largest video game producer with stakes in more than 600 companies in Finland, New Zealand, US, Japan, Singapore, France, Korea, Canada, Poland, and other countries. Tencent’s QQ has a strategic partnership with Mattel to create and market toys and games (Hongyi, 2016).

As in the US and elsewhere, platforms are the “prototypical capitalist communication media of our time” (Keane and Su, 2018: 55-57). Social networking firms, game developers, video portals, and apps are structured for the interests of owners, shareholders, and profit.

From cultural imperialism to transnationalism

Reciprocal cultural exchanges among media in Asia, Africa, and Latin America for film, TV, comics, animation, and other cultural forms share themes of authority, youth fantasy, and individualism. Such collaborative relations indicate the decline of cultural imperialism based on a dominant colonizer and a weak receiving nation. China’s TNMCs represent a form of globalization managed through cultural production and exchange among non-Western nations. The circulation of consumer ideology embedded in entertainment content supplements the goals of the Chinese state and its contribution to capitalist relations. In that process, Chinese TNMCs promote a transnational cultural order infused with neoliberal ideology. Broadcasting knock-off formatted TV shows from Europe, Korea, and the US, like *Survivor* and *The Voice* do not indicate Western dominance. Rather, they illustrate Chinese innovation in the promotion of consumerism, competition, and authoritarianism. Although Chinese media may currently be more ‘copiers’ than ‘creators,’ this does not translate into US cultural dominance. Instead, it reveals the slow but continuous turn of Chinese society, economy, and culture, including entertainment, towards marketization and commercialization.

Indeed, “globalization does not necessarily imply Americanization” (Su, 2017: 3). However, it does reveal China’s participation in the emerging transnational cultural order—as the global capitalist class endeavors to collectively spread consumerism, individualism, entertaining spectacle, and free market values—crafted for every national culture by every commercial media enterprise wherever its domestic home (Artz, 2023). While “China’s policy makers have tried to use co-productions to decenter Hollywood’s power and negotiate more space to exhibit Chinese culture” (Su, 2017: 483), the underlying political and economic intent is to distribute a ‘Chinese Dream’ of capitalist prosperity directed by its capitalist-led government.

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