Home Is Where Hollywood Isn't: Recasting East Asian Film Industries

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Abstract:

Echoing some scholars who have challenged the Hollywood-centric view with respect to East Asian film and television,² I provide an up-to-date review of the ways East Asian industries have protected their economic interests and conserved local culture through moving images. Despite strong Hollywood marketing in East Asia, local films have experienced a resurgence since 2008—especially in Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and China. While Hollywood has continued to launch blockbuster franchises—weapons of mass distraction—to capture markets around the globe, local films in East Asia have been able to survive, and even outperform, Hollywood pictures. Government protection and the rebalancing of distribution and marketing might have galvanized the revival of East Asian film industries, but, more importantly, it is audience interest in locally produced media content that has sustained the continuing growth of East Asian cinemas.

Keywords: Film, Hollywood, Localism, Marketing

In *East Asian Screen Industries*, Darrell Davis and I introduced the notion of “new localism” to emphasize the rise of modestly budgeted comedies, romance, action, and even sex pictures that worked like sleepers, helping to regenerate East Asian filmmaking and film viewing.³ By *new localism*, we mean films made with distinct local ingredients that allow the audience a sense of recognition and empowerment. New localism is different from previous local productions shielded by protectionism and the limited distribution of foreign products. New localism is a strategic move, a shrewd way that East Asian filmmakers handle commercial challenges. Though theirs were films without much transnational ambition, made to recoup their costs within a small market, they found significant contemporary resonance among local viewers. Films like *The Ring* (1997), *Christmas in August* (1998), *Needing You* (2000), *Love on a Diet* (2000), *Shaolin Soccer* (2001), *Double Vision* (2002), and *Cell Phone* (2003) were made close by, using local talent and local “premises.” The producers of these films did not react against Hollywood; rather, they registered Hollywood’s potency and tried to carve out a niche for their products in the local market, and possibly beyond. By distinguishing themselves from imported

blockbusters, they offer a communal experience that affirms local affiliation.

Two especially hot stories simmered in 2011. According to Hong Kong's official film classification, Category III refers to adult films restricted to viewers over eighteen years of age. One particular restricted "Category III" picture, *Sex and Zen: Extreme Ecstasy*, lured Chinese mainlanders across the border to Hong Kong with the promise of something racy and novel. Screening for over two months, this independent film made over US\$5.5 million and injected a rare energy into the local industry at a time when most Hong Kong filmmakers had already decamped to the new film capital, Beijing.⁴ The 3-D gimmick helped break the record set by Ang Lee's 2007 adult feature, *Lust, Caution*. In the 1990s, when Hong Kong cinema was robust, Category III was a recognized local genre on par with action, horror, and martial arts.⁵ By revisiting this familiar if outré formula, bringing it up to date with enhanced exhibition, 3-D Category III films could compete with A-list pictures.

You Are the Apple of My Eye (2011) was the first film directed by Taiwan's internet writer Giddens Ko. This low-budget (US\$300,000) youth film set new records in four territories: Taiwan, Hong Kong, mainland China, and Singapore. Most surprisingly, it surpassed Stephen Chow's *Kung Fu Hustle* (2004) to become Hong Kong's top-grossing Chinese film. This was unprecedented, as the Hong Kong market is known for picky viewers resistant to mainland and Taiwanese pictures. In China, *Apple* took in US\$10 million against strong competition from *Mission: Impossible—Ghost Protocol* (2011) and Zhang Yimou's war epic, *Flowers of War* (2011). Gory eroticism might have been the major (guilty) pleasure of the sex pictures, but *Apple* combined word of mouth with a repackaged sentimentality to successfully attract local viewers.⁶ Between sex and nostalgia, local producers in East Asia actively reengaged with local audiences. A resurgence of new localism was on the way.

Since 2009, domestic films in Japan, South Korea, and China have enjoyed 50 percent of overall market share (see table 1). Compared to figures from France (41.6 percent in 2011),⁷ Germany (22.8 percent in 2011),⁸ and Brazil (11.8 percent in 2011),⁹ these East Asian figures demonstrate Hollywood is not as global as is often assumed. Except for in 2012, domestic films have garnered over 50 percent of China's box office.

Similarly, in Taiwan, local productions have surged since 2008, representing 18.65 percent in 2011 and 11.9 percent in 2012. Domestically produced Taiwanese films increased in number from around twenty per year to forty-five in 2012.¹⁰

The popularity of these local pictures was not a short-lived, fleeting thing. In 2012 and 2013, the momentum continued. In the PRC, *Lost in Thailand* (2012), *Journey to the West* (2013), *So Young* (2013), and *Tiny Times* (2013) set new records; and Japan's *Thermae Roma* (2012, earning US\$50 million), South Korea's *Thieves* (2012), Taiwan's *Din Tao: Leader of the Parade* (2012), and gangster comedy *David Loman* (2013, "Big-assed thug" in local dialect) all played well. This is a highly varied crop of pictures, not easy to generalize. In addition to the new localism and Hong Kong eroticism, we also see government protectionism and a growing awareness of integrated distribution and marketing contributing to the high sales of East Asian pictures.

Table 1: Percent Market Share of Domestically Produced Films

Year	China %	Japan %	S. Korea %
2013	58.65	60.6	59.7
2012	48.46	65.7	58.8
2011	53.6	54.9	51.9
2010	56.37	53.6	46.6
2009	56.6	56.9	48.8
2008	60	59.5	42.1
Sources: Data from China Film Press, Chinese Film Review (Beijing: CFP, 2008–2012); Korean Cinema 2013 (Busan: Korean Film Council, 2013), 23; “Statistics of Film Industry in Japan: 2000–2013” (Tokyo: Motion Picture Producers Association of Japan, 2013).			

It is well known that the government regulates the market share of imported films in China. The box office of imported films is assumed to be capped at around 50 percent of total box office. This means that the distributors must cautiously monitor the overall performance of foreign imports. When foreign-film box office revenues approach this 50 percent mark, blackouts and delays on Hollywood releases are activated. Occasionally, Hollywood pictures may also be pulled from screens while demand is still high. This regulation has shielded Chinese pictures for many years, and the preferred domestic big-budget pictures have enjoyed a near monopoly of screens.¹¹ Policy, both explicit and unwritten, is a key factor in the high performance of contemporary PRC cinema.

However, in 2012, as a result of China's agreement to deliver on its WTO promise, the quota for Hollywood imports increased by fourteen IMAX films, raising the limit to thirty-four. This change wrought a slightly higher permissible market share for Hollywood pictures (see table 1) and directly impacted the performance of high-budget costumed pictures. This shift is a result of state protectionism submitting to global trade pressure. But, just when the Chinese industry began to worry about foreign incursions into its playing field, smaller pictures performed surprisingly well. It is almost as if the local players stepped up to slay the giant, though the reality is more complex.

Consider the pictures *Lost in Thailand* (2012), *So Young* (2013), and *Tiny Times 1.0* (2013), which had no special effects, no monsters, and no big stars. What is the reason for their huge success? *Lost in Thailand* (box office: US\$200 million), a modest comedy, actually rivaled the box office of *Avatar* (2009). Given its cost (US\$10 million) and scale, *Thailand* can be seen as decisively trouncing Cameron's 3-D leviathan. The party line explaining this victory held that a story and characters focused on common people entranced Chinese viewers. This is a veiled comment not just on Hollywood blockbusters but also on China's *dapian*, the domestic high-budget visual

effects extravaganzas that have dominated Chinese screens since 2002, such as Zhang Yimou's *Hero* (2002) and its descendants. The image of *Lost in Thailand* is again David versus Goliath: humble human interest defeats the foreign - and domestic - colossus. This is another proven instance of localism, where the stress of coping with rapid economic growth was made into a journey of self-discovery.

Vicky Zhao Wei's MFA thesis, *So Young* (2013), earned a final box office total of US\$110 million. For years, college students have voted Zhao as China's most popular female star, and her broad fan base directly contributed to the film's earning power. *Tiny Times 1.0* (2013, US\$112 million) was the directorial debut of Guo Jingming, a Shanghai-based celebrity who made his fortune from internet fiction. Like *So Young* and *You Are the Apple of My Eye*, *Tiny Times 1.0* was a presold¹² project that capitalized on the writer-filmmaker's fame and bankability.

Both *Tiny Times 1.0* and *You Are the Apple of My Eye* were adapted from popular works of fiction distributed on the internet. These digital roots promise more involvement in film production by webzines, web agencies, portals, service providers, and e-commerce facilitators. Le Vision, for example, is an internet viewing platform that invested in *Tiny Times*. Social networks—aligned with various internet companies as investors, technical checkpoints, aggregators, and game designers—are becoming an essential marketing channel for movies, audience feedback, and film criticism. It is crucial to note that a hit movie does not necessarily entail shifts in audience tastes. It is also important to trace the way a film is branded, advertised, distributed, and sold to specific market segments. Audience tastes can be shaped by canny attention to both online and offline hooks. *People's Daily* criticized *Tiny Times 1.0* for its ardent materialism (featuring rich and beautiful protagonists) and commodity fetishism (its celebration of high fashion and product placement) that exceeded the socialist norm.¹³ Despite the criticism, *Tiny Times* has raised the benchmark for Chinese cinema, bringing local products closer to an ideal commodity form capable of being exploited in ancillary markets.

The title of this article, "Home Is Where Hollywood Isn't," refers to the limitations of media imperialism approaches. However, these rising limitations do not translate into a revival of media nationalism. Far from it: recent hits in East Asia indicate that nationalism is less a factor in the growth of domestic pictures than are changing patterns in distribution, marketing, and consumption. To many young consumers, home is where their favorite social networks reside. Whether local or global, home is where the tiny smartphone is.

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² Michael Curtin, *Playing to the World's Biggest Audience: The Globalization of Chinese Film and TV* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Michael Keane, "Once Were Peripheral: Creating Media Capacity in East Asia," *Media, Culture, and Society* 28, no. 6 (November 2006): 835–55.

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- ³ See Darrell Davis and Emilie Yeh, "The New Localism: Alternatives to Blockbuster Benchmarks," chap. 2 in *East Asian Screen Industries* (London: BFI, 2008).
- ⁴ Michael Curtin, "Media Capital: Towards the Study of Spatial Flows," *Journal of International Cultural Studies* 6, no. 2 (2003): 202–28.
- ⁵ Darrell William Davis and Emilie Yeh, "Warning! Category III: The Other Hong Kong Cinema," *Film Quarterly* 54 no. 4 (2001): 12–26.
- ⁶ Darrell William Davis, "Second Coming: The Legacy of Taiwan New Cinema," in *A Companion to Chinese Cinema*, ed. Yingjin Zhan (London: Blackwell, 2012), 133–50.
- ⁷ Melanie Goodfellow, "[French Cinema Admissions Hit 45-Year, 215 Million High in 2011](#)," *Screendaily*, January 4, 2012
- ⁸ Bénédicte Prot, "[More Cinema-Goers in 2011 Thanks to German Films](#)," *Cinerupa*, March 5, 2012.
- ⁹ Elaine Guneri, "[Brazilian Box Office Climbs for Third Year; Local Titles Falter](#)," *Screendaily*, January 13, 2012.
- ¹⁰ "[Statistics of Films Passed by Censorship Board \(1996–2011\)](#)," TaiwanCinema.com, January 16, 2012.
- ¹¹ Emilie Yeh and Darrell William Davis, "Re-nationalizing China's Film Industry: Case Study on the China Film Group and Film Marketization," *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 2, no. 1 (2008): 37–51.
- ¹² *Presold* refers to the adaption of a preexisting literary work.
- ¹³ Liu Qiong, "*Tiny Times 2* and *Tiny Times 3* Must Not Be Coddled without Warnings," *People's Daily*, July 15, 2013, p. 24.

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