Review of *Hollywood in China*

Behind the Scenes of the World's Largest Movie Market by Ying Zhu, New Press, 2022

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Ying Zhu's *Hollywood in China: Behind the Scenes of the World's Largest Movie Market* is one of the newest additions to the Sino-Hollywood film industry corpus and their entanglements, conflicts, cooperation, and controversies over the past century. Zhu examines the vicissitudes of the two largest film industries in the world by chronicling their histories against prominent global political and cultural changes, from early Republican-era China to the (post-)COVID-19 era. Through archival research, case studies of popular films and film companies, and interviews with media practitioners, Zhu unveils the dynamic relationship between China and US film industries and its ramifications to the global political and cultural hierarchy.

In 2012, many trade journals predicted that China would surpass the United States and become the world's largest film market by 2020. These predictions came to pass, but only amid the pandemic in 2020, when most of the world's cinemas were under serious restrictions. Since the early 2000s, increasing numbers of scholars[1] have shed light on the marketization and

1. Michael Curtin, *Playing to the World's Biggest Audience: The Globalization of Chinese Film and TV*, 1st ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Darrel William Davis, "Market and Marketization in the China Film Business," *Cinema Journal* 49, no. 3 (2010): 121–25; Darrel William Davis, "Marketization, Hollywood, Global China," *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 26, no. 1 (2014): 191–241; Emilie Yueh-yu 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 (January 1, 2008): 37–51;

globalization of contemporary Chinese film and media industries and analyzed the cultural and political ramifications of these changes. As the Chinese market made itself very attractive to foreign investors beginning in the early 2000s, Hollywood explored more ways to access it and explored various approaches to collaboration and coproductions. However, gradually increasing political tensions between China and the United States since 2017 reversed the "honeymoon" period between China and the Hollywood film industry. In the past two decades, scholars[2] have assessed and questioned China's "soft power" and "going-out" strategy and their complications and consequences by focusing on the contemporary China and Hollywood relationship.

Zhu's framework for analyzing the shifting dynamic between China and Hollywood centers on the impacts of local and global political interventions and how these interventions further impacted global political and cultural discourses. Through nine chapters, Zhu moves through historical roots back to the semicolonial period of cosmopolitan Shanghai and documents the most recent moment of global expansions of China and Hollywood amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Written in chronological order, the book can be generally divided into four sections. Chapters 1 and 2 conjure up a path of early Republican-era China to the 1940s postwar Shanghai film industry; chapters 3 and 4 sketch out the socialist period to early Reform-era China; and chapters 5 and 6 detail

Ying Zhu, *Chinese Cinema during the Era of Reform: The Ingenuity of the System* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003); Ying Zhu and Chris Berry, *TV China* (Bloomington: Combined Academic Publishing, 2009).

2. Aynne Kokas, *Hollywood Made in China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017); Stanley Rosen, "Obstacles to Using Chinese Film to Promote China's Soft Power: Some Evidence from the North American Market," *Journal of Chinese Film Studies* 1, no. 1 (May 1, 2021): 205–21; Wendy Su, *China's Encounter with Global Hollywood: Cultural Policy and the Film Industry, 1994–2013* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2016); Yiman Wang, *Remaking Chinese Cinema: Through the Prism of Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Hollywood* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2013); Michael Berry, "Chinese Cinema with Hollywood Characteristics, or How *The Karate Kid* Became a Chinese Film," in *The Oxford Handbook of Chinese Cinemas*, ed. Carlos Rojas and Eileen Chow (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Davis, "Marketization, Hollywood, Global China."

the marketization of the Chinese film industry and its cooperation with Hollywood during the 1990s through 2010. Finally, the last three chapters examine the popular Chinese films at home and "going out," as well as the coupling and decoupling of China and the Hollywood industry from 2010 to 2021.

In the introduction, Zhu revisits the legendary Paris Theater and its romanticized portrayal in the new sensationalist writer Shi Zhecun's short story. Located in the former French Concession of Shanghai, the well-known foreign-invested theater has experienced a series of name changes. From Palais Oriental Theater (1926) to Peacock Oriental Theater (1927), to Paris Theater (1930) to the Huaihai Cinema (1951) in the socialist period and Huaihai (Times) Cinema (1993) in the heyday of real estate speculation in the 1990s, all of which reflected the changing economic, political, and social discourses of the time. The theater stands in for the vicissitudes of Shanghai under various regimes, and its history condenses the cultural and commercial exchange between the Chinese and the world. From the colonial era representing China's modern cosmopolitanism to the intensification of post–Cold War globalization to the decoupling amid deepening political polarizations in the COVID-19 era, Zhu argues that "Hollywood has become . . . more a clearing house for global financial and creative forces gathered under the corporate rubric of the 'Hollywood Way,'" and China has "redeployed the Way with Chinese characteristics."[3]

In the first two chapters, Zhu argues that Shanghai, where Hollywood's global expansion met the local buildup and protection, occupies a central position in the Chinese film industry in the Republican era. Drawing upon archival research, Zhu conveys the prevalence of Hollywood films and their popularity in Shanghai and notes the early reliance of Chinese film productions on foreign (mainly Western) investment, technology, and

3. Ying Zhu, *Hollywood in China: Behind the Scenes of the World's Largest Movie Market* (New York: New Press, 2022), 8.

popular genre conventions. From the first Chinese feature film, *The Difficult Couple* 难夫难妻 (dir. Zhang Shichuan 张石川 and Zheng Zhengqiu 郑正秋 1913) to social-realist melodramas and costume dramas in the 1920s, Zhu argues that it was waves of "westernization" under the influence of the May Fourth Movement and sanitization that formed the initial enthusiasms of cinema audiences in China.[4] Zhu also analyzes the political interventions of the governing parties in the Chinese film industry and argues that the film industry's "entanglements with political parties" during the 1920s and 1930s was voluntary, a drastic difference from the post-1949 period.[5] Moreover, regulators' early involvement in the operations of the Shanghai industry mainly engaged in content censorship and placed restrictions on the distribution and marketing of foreign films (mainly from Hollywood and Europe).[6]

Zhu continues to illuminate how political interventions directly and indirectly impacted the film industries and their personnel. Chapters 3 and 4 cover the formation of a newly centralized socialist film industry and the attendant film culture, which was guided by the leading party's ideology and the nation's shifting diplomatic relationships during the Cold War. Zhu shows how the Chinese government's admiration for the Soviet Union's approach to the nationalization of industry, including the film industry, resulted in tightened control of socialist political ideology over film productions. This sharp ideological turn not only "painted the city of Shanghai red," to use Yomi Braester's phrase,[7] but also discontinued distribution and public screenings of Hollywood films. Zhu singles out two key characteristics of the socialist-era film industry. First, during the socialist period, domestic films were evaluated and criticized based on political motifs and stances. Second, the distribution and screening of foreign films in the People's Republic of

4. Zhu, *Hollywood in China*, 38.
5. Zhu, 25.
6. Zhu, 34.
7. Yomi Braester, *Painting the City Red: Chinese Cinema and the Urban Contract* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

China (PRC) were restricted due to changing diplomatic relations. Although barred from public screenings, Hollywood films were screened in small, private settings among the top leadership and for selected filmmakers to aid in the production of model opera films. Zhu focuses on the invisible yet continuing influence of Hollywood in China through the so-called internal reference films. Behind the screening of many "poisonous films"[8] stands the work of Shanghai Film Dubbing Studio, which includes translation and dubbing of those internal reference films.

Restrictions on imports of foreign TV and film productions gradually relaxed in the Reform era, which is the focus of chapters 5 and 6. Hollywood popular media and culture reentered public life through TV screens in the 1980s and occupied a substantial portion of the foreign film quota since 1994. In these two chapters, Zhu depicts the post-socialist Chinese film industry's continuous marketization process and the competing political and cultural powers involved. Zhu argues that turning to Hollywood was an inevitable step for regulators in the mid-1990s to reinvigorate the declining domestic film market.[9] The method to reignite China's domestic market through the importation of Hollywood films worked well, and the audience in China embraced these films. However, as Zhu observes, the popularity of Hollywood films raised serious concerns about potentially shrinking the market share of domestic films. As regulators presented more protective measures, Chinese filmmakers were eager to learn from Hollywood how to produce diversified popular films for local audiences.

Many film scholars[10] have linked the emergence of Chinese high-concept blockbusters, *dapian*, to Zhang Yimou's *Hero* (2002). In contrast, Zhu argues the model extends back to the 1995 productions; for instance, *Red Cherry* 红樱桃 (dir. Ye Daying 叶大鹰, 1995). In addition to analyzing

8. Zhu, *Hollywood in China*, 99.
9. Zhu, 133.
10. Yiman Wang, "Remade in China: Cinema with 'Chinese Elements' in the Dapian Age," in *The Oxford Handbook of Chinese Cinemas*; Yeh Davis, "Re-Nationalizing China's Film Industry," 37–51.

the rising popularity of blockbusters, Zhu also examines the evolution of the government's regulation of the film industry and a cultural policy that prioritized "soft power" and a media "going-out" strategy. As China grew to become the second-largest economy in the world, it became important to build a more robust infrastructure to facilitate film-market expansion. During this time, China and Hollywood successfully explored coproduction and coinvestment models, allowing both to reach their individual goals of cultural expansion and financial returns.

In chapters 7 and 8, Zhu presents the recent examples of popular films in the PRC market. Through case studies from two prominent mainstream film directors' work in the past decade, Zhu examines the box office success of the New Year films directed by Feng Xiaogang and "Lost in" series of comedy road films by Xu Zheng. After answering the question of why some films perform phenomenally in China's domestic market, Zhu tackles the more difficult question of the industry's largely failed attempts at "going out." Specifically, Zhu explores why mainland films are not popular in the United States.[11] Eventually, Zhu interprets the Xi-era global vision and cultural expansion through the "Belt and Road" initiative and the expansion of the film market in new regions of the world, compared with the Shaw Brothers in the 1920s and 1930s[12] and the ambition of Shaw in the 1960s.[13] The last part of the book captures the current tensions between the two states and the ramifications on the two film industries with narrowed market access and significantly reduced coproductions and collaborations, which all point to a final post-pandemic uncertainty.[14] Zhu ultimately views the temporary decoupling of Sino-Hollywood positively, as it will "allow for films of diverse style, politics and cultural persuasions to flourish."[15]

11. Zhu, *Hollywood in China*, 226.
12. Zhu, 236.
13. Zhu, 238.
14. Zhu, 254.
15. Zhu, 282.

Overall, the strength of *Hollywood in China* is that the author juxtaposes the history of Chinese film and Hollywood, offering a consistently comparative perspective and capturing a complex relationship that alternates between competition and cooperation. This ambitious and comprehensive project ends with the most recent entanglements of the two states in the global-political and cultural arena. The author's reference materials are detailed and include a wide range of Chinese- and English-language historical archival material, interviews, scholarly work, trade journals, etc. These are used to support extensive case studies of prominent film theories, filmmakers, and film productions. Zhu's work is certainly an update on the current research and adds a new conversation with the others in the field.

While the book is informative and equipped with great historical details on the two big film industries in the past century, some readers might find it beneficial to have more detailed elaboration of certain key concepts—for instance, "soft power" and the "Hollywood Way." After analyzing China's soft power strategy and ambitions to grow its global cultural influence through Hollywood's China-friendly films, one challenging question left unanswered is why this strategy remains unsuccessful. Though Zhu depicts a complicated history of what forces might make a Chinese or Hollywood film "popular" in China, the lingering question remains unsolved: Why do popular Chinese domestic films with high production quality only attract domestic and limited diasporic audiences? By comparison, "Cool Japan" and "Korean Wave" media have gained global attention in the past two decades. Additionally, when discussing soft power and global cultural image, Zhu largely leaves out the role of international award-winning arthouse films mostly by fifth-generation and six-generation filmmakers. Finally, the book mainly focuses on the theatrical distribution of films. It gives little space to the digital distribution of Hollywood films in China as the streaming services took off after the 2000s.

Overall, the book will benefit a readership interested in how sociopolitical changes and negotiations between regulators, filmmakers, film

companies, and audience play out in the dynamic Sino-Hollywood relationship. The implications of (de)coupling the current two largest film industries in the world and the impact of it on cultural globalization deserve further discussion and attention.