

Reorienting Asian cinema in the age of the Chinese film market: Introduction

SANGJOON LEE

The People's Republic of China has the fastest-growing film market in the world, having overtaken Japan in 2012 to achieve the second-largest gross box-office revenue, and expanding at an annual rate of more than thirty per cent in the last five years. In 2016 China's total number of cinema screens exceeded those of the USA, with 49,000 screens compared to the USA's 40,928.¹ Most industry experts and market analysts predict that the size of the Chinese film market will surpass that of North America by 2022. Following the phenomenal commercial success of *Zhàn Láng 2/Wolf Warrior 2* (Wu Jing, 2017), a domestic blockbuster that was made in China and grossed US\$874 million in China alone, other home-grown box-office hits such as *Hóng Hài Xīng Dòng/Operation Red Sea* (Dante Lam, 2018), *Wō Bú Shì Yào Shēn/Dying to Survive* (Wen Muye, 2018) and two mega-budget science fiction films based on short stories by the celebrated author Liu Cixin (*The Three-Body Problem*) – *Fēng kuáng dí wài xīng rén/Crazy Alien* (Ning Hao, 2019) and *Liúlàng Dìqiú/The Wandering Earth* (Frant Gwo, 2019) – have solidified the status of domestic films in the Chinese market.

As a result, in large part, of the Chinese film market's development over the past decade, the Asia-Pacific annual gross box-office total is US\$14.9 billion (2016), the highest across all continents and regions.² Moreover, high-quality Asian local products, mainly from Japan, South Korea, India and the emerging industries in Southeast Asia, have flowed

1 Weida Li, 'China has 49,000 cinema screens, solidifying its place as world leader', *GB Times*, 20 October 2017, <<https://gbtimes.com/china-has-49000-cinema-screens-solidifying-its-place-as-world-leader>> accessed 23 March 2019.

2 'Theatrical market statistics 2016', *Motion Picture Association of America*, March 2017, p. 7, <<https://www.mpa.org/research-docs/2016-theatrical-market-statistics-report/>> accessed 21 March 2019.

outwards to global film markets to connect the region with international audiences through both commercial and art-house cinemas, major international film festivals and digital platforms. Filmmakers and producers around the world increasingly look to China to expand their audience and find new co-production partners. Having witnessed the unprecedented commercial successes of Aamir Khan's biographical sports drama *Dangal* (Nitesh Tiwari, 2016), the Japanese anime *Kimi no Na wa/Your Name* (Shinkai Makoto, 2016) and *Chóng fǎn èrshí suì/20 Once Again* (Leste Chen, 2015), a remake in China of the South Korean hit *Susanghan kūnyō/Miss Granny* (Hwang Tong-hyök, 2014), regional companies began to co-produce films with their Chinese counterparts. In addition, Chinese media conglomerates have recruited regional talent – particularly technicians, performers and creative personnel – and are buying out film and media companies, theatres and television stations in the region and beyond. Asia's film industry as a whole is experiencing a significant transformation, spearheaded by the rapid development of Chinese cinema.

The exponential growth in the Chinese film industry has been mirrored by a growing body of industry and film policy forums and academic conferences in both the East and the West. Contentious issues such as China's protectionist regulations and censorship, intellectual property and piracy, blossoming film cultures, co-production, the effects of digitalization and the ways in which Chinese money and filmgoers are reshaping Hollywood (and vice versa) have been discussed at major film festivals and at universities, and by both the financial markets and government agencies. Much work nevertheless remains to be done to understand China's economic, political and artistic impact on regional film industries and cultures, particularly on some of the other major filmmaking hubs of Asian cinema – Japan, South Korea and India. This dossier, 'Reorienting Asian cinema in the age of the Chinese film market', accordingly focuses on the transformations of the regional film industry's practices, creative labour, artistic challenges, inter-Asian film co-production, regional politics and media memories juxtaposed with and in response to the Chinese film market's quantum leap, which still remains an underdeveloped research area. The dossier casts its net wide to capture the cross-national flows that cut across multiple institutions throughout Asia.

As Chris Berry and Laikwan Pang have noted, the Chinese film industry (as opposed to the aesthetics of Chinese cinema) was neglected as a scholarly subject in English-language academia until the new millennium. The discipline of cinema studies, in the words of Berry and Pang, 'has long been implicitly structured into two strata. Art films are celebrated for their aesthetic values, while commercial films generally fall in the broad domain of cultural studies.'³ But in the wake of the commercial success of Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) and Zhang Yimou's *Yīngxióng/Hero* (2002) at the North American box office and indeed worldwide, scholarly interest in Chinese

³ Chris Berry and Laikwan Pang, 'Remapping contemporary Chinese cinema studies', *The China Review*, vol. 10, no. 2 (2010), p. 96.

- 4 Ying Zhu, *Chinese Cinema during the Era of Reform: The Ingenuity of the System* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003).
- 5 Ying Zhu and Stanley Rosen (eds), *Art, Politics and Commerce in Chinese Cinema* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010).
- 6 Darrell William Davis, 'Market and marketization in the China film business', *Cinema Journal*, vol. 49, no. 3 (2010), pp. 121–25; 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*, vol. 2, no. 1 (2008), pp. 37–51; Laikwan Pang, 'Hong Kong cinema as a dialect cinema?', *Cinema Journal*, vol. 49, no. 3 (2010), pp. 140–43.
- 7 Ruby Cheung, *New Hong Kong Cinema: Transitions to Becoming Chinese in 21st Century East Asia* (New York, NY: Berghahn Books, 2016).
- 8 Leung Wing-fai, *Multimedia Stardom in Hong Kong: Image, Performance and Identity* (London: Routledge, 2014); Mary Farquhar and Yingjin Zhang (eds), *Chinese Film Stars* (London: Routledge, 2011); Luke Robinson, *Independent Chinese Documentary: From the Studio to the Street* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Gary Bettinson and Daniel Martin (eds), *Hong Kong Horror Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017); Stephen Teo, *Director in Action: Johnnie To and Hong Kong Action Film* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press 2007); Gary D. Rawnsley and Ming-Yeh T. Rawnsley (eds), *Global Chinese Cinema: The Culture and Politics of Hero* (London: Routledge, 2011); Mark Gallagher, *Tony Leung Chiu-Wai* (London: BFI Publishing/Bloomsbury, 2018); Yomi Braester, 'The spectral return of cinema: globalization and cinephilia in contemporary Chinese film', *Cinema Journal*, vol. 55, no. 1 (2015), pp. 29–51.
- 9 Aynne Kokas, *Hollywood Made in China* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017), and Wendy Su, *China's Encounter*

cinema – its cultures and aesthetics, as well as its industrial practices – has been growing exponentially. Ying Zhu's *Chinese Cinema during the Era of Reform: The Ingenuity of the System* was one attempt to raise academic awareness of the importance of the Chinese film industry. Zhu scrutinized the generative mechanism of the transition of post-Mao mainland Chinese cinema from pedagogy, to art, to commerce.⁴ With Stanley Rosen, Zhu also co-edited a volume that provides a comprehensive reappraisal of Chinese cinema, surveying the evolution of film production and consumption in mainland China as a product of shifting relations between art, politics and commerce.⁵

Looking at the unprecedented transformation of regional cinema since 2004, when the China Film Group began actively co-producing films with Hong Kong production companies, capital and creative personnel, Darrell William Davis, Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh and Laikwan Pang have argued that the Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement (CEPA) transformed Hong Kong cinema, in terms of not only its industrial structure but also its content and aesthetics.⁶ Ruby Cheung, along similar lines, has examined how Hong Kong-related Chinese-language films, filmmakers, audiences and film businesses in East Asia have become major platforms on which 'transitions' are negotiated.⁷ Scholars such as Leung Wing-fai, Gary Bettinson, Daniel Martin, Luke Robinson, Mary Farquhar, Yingjin Zhang, Gary D. Rawnsley, Ming-Yeh T. Rawnsley, Mark Gallagher, Yomi Braester and Stephen Teo have explored a variety of related topics, including Hong Kong's independent cinema and co-production practices with the mainland, Chinese film stars and stardom, cinephilia and urban space, genres and authors, and production cultures.⁸ Taking another approach, Aynne Kokas and Wendy Su have historicized China's engagement with Hollywood. They argue that Chinese creative labour is playing a more influential role in shaping the narratives made in Hollywood by Hollywood-based actors, and asked what role Chinese capital plays in the pursuit of global market success.⁹ Michael Berry, on the other hand, has examined the radical changes within the Chinese film industry from the 1990s to 2012, discussing a new model that he describes as 'Chinese cinema with Hollywood characteristics'.¹⁰ China's growing film-festival circuits have also been examined by researchers in recent years. Felicia Chan, Ma Ran, Cindy Wong, Dina Iordanova and Ruby Cheung have each contributed to this field,¹¹ while Chris Berry and Luke Robinson's *Chinese Film Festivals: Sites of Translation* is the culmination of the past decade's academic interest in film festivals in China.¹²

Last but not least, significant work has been done on regional film industries, within and beyond the Chinese-language world. Although scholars have long criticized the nation-based approach to the study of cinema, the literature on transnational Asian film and media – particularly the scholarship that embodies an industrial approach – is still fairly scant. One pioneering approach that raised the importance of Chinese cinema and its increasing influence over the region (and beyond) was Sheldon

with *Global Hollywood: Cultural Policy and the Film Industry, 1994–2013* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2016).

- 10 Michael Berry, 'Chinese cinema with Hollywood characteristics, or how *The Karate Kid* became a Chinese film', in Carlos Rojas and Eileen Cheng-Yin Chow (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Chinese Cinemas* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013).
- 11 Felicia Chan, 'The international film festival and the making of a national cinema', *Screen*, vol. 52, no. 2 (2011), pp. 253–60; Ma Ran, 'Rethinking festival film: urban generation Chinese cinema on the film festival circuit', in Dina Iordanova and Ragan Rhyne (eds), *Film Festival Yearbook 1: The Festival Circuit* (St Andrews: University of St Andrews Press, 2009), pp. 116–35; Dina Iordanova and Ruby Cheung (eds), *Film Festival Yearbook 3: Film Festivals and East Asia* (St Andrews: University of St Andrews Press, 2011); Cindy Wong, *Film Festivals: Culture, People and Power on the Global Screen* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011).
- 12 Chris Berry and Luke Robinson (eds), *Chinese Film Festivals: Sites of Translation* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).
- 13 See Sheldon H. Lu and Emilie Yueh Yu-yeh (eds), *Chinese-Language Film: Historiography, Poetics, Politics* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press 2005); Chris Berry and Mary Ann Farquhar, *China on Screen: Cinema and Nation* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2006); Mark Nornes, *Cinema Babel: Translating Global Cinema* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2007); Michael Baskett, *The Attractive Empire: Transnational Film Culture in Imperial Japan* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2008); Kinnia Yau-Shuk Ting, *Japanese and Hong Kong Film Industries: Understanding the Origins of East Asian Film Networks* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2010).
- 14 Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh and Darrell William Davis, *East Asian Screen*

Lu's influential anthology *Transnational Chinese Cinemas*, which informed several subsequent studies on the border-crossing and transnational history of cinemas in Asia.¹³ Through discussion of the film industries in Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan and the PRC, Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh and Darrell William Davis consider how local production has responded to global trends after China's participation in the World Trade Organisation.¹⁴ Taking a more straightforward film-industry approach to China and its regional network, Michael Curtin and Michael Keane have analysed the film and television industries in China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore, and shown how the terrain of Chinese film and television has been transformed from the Cold War to the twenty-first-century emergence of East Asian youth culture.¹⁵ Stephanie DeBoer and Wesley Jacks have traced the history of East Asian film and media co-productions, focusing primarily on the Japan–China collaboration.¹⁶ More recently, Michael Kean, Brian Yecies and Terry Flew's co-edited book, *Willing Collaborators: Foreign Partners in Chinese Media*, explores the Chinese state's recent 'willingness' to consider collaboration with foreign partners, including Hollywood, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan and South Korea.¹⁷

Having reflected on the trajectory of Chinese film industry studies in English-language academia, the five essays in this dossier offer new approaches to understanding and reconfiguring critical perspectives in Asian cinema. Victor Fan's opening essay, 'What is a "Chinese film market?"', examines the definition of the market and the way it affects our epistemic space and critical language. Fan uses the concepts of 'zone of exception' and 'extraterritoriality' to rethink the relationship between the 'Chinese film market' as it is understood by China's State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT) and Hollywood, and the conception of the market as a public space suggested by independent filmmakers, spectators and festival curators in China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and beyond. In '*Doraemon* and *Your Name* in China: the complicated business of mediatized memory in East Asia', Alexander Zahlten investigates how nation and region, proximity and distance, and commonality and difference are negotiated through film in East Asia today. His study maps the intersection of official policy, business strategy and the reception of collective media memory in East Asia by closely examining the recent commercial successes of two Japanese media products – *Stand By Me Doraemon* (2014) and *Your Name* (2016) – in the Chinese film market. In the third essay, 'The Chinese film market and the *Wolf Warrior 2* phenomenon', Stephen Teo argues that *Wolf Warrior 2*, a so-called 'main-melody' film, represents the beginning of a mature stage for China's film market, in which China has embraced Hollywood's distribution and exhibition system. This was the first time, Teo contends, that a Chinese film found massive success at the domestic box office by following a Hollywood formula. This success means that Chinese productions can be self-sustaining within the domestic market. In the

- Industries* (London: BFI Publishing/Bloomsbury, 2008).
- 15 Michael Curtin, *Playing to the World's Biggest Audience: The Globalization of Chinese Film and TV* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010), and Michael Keane, *The Chinese Television Industry* (London: BFI Publishing, 2015).
- 16 Stephanie DeBoer, *Coproducing Asia: Locating Japanese-Chinese Regional Film and Media* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), and Wesley Jacks, 'The personal, the political and the popular: Sino-Japanese film collaboration in the early reform era', *The Journal of Chinese Cinemas* (forthcoming, 2019).
- 17 Michael Keane, Brian Yecies, and Terry Flew (eds), *Willing Collaborators: Foreign Partners in Chinese Media* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018); see also Michael Curtin, 'What makes them willing collaborators? The global context of Chinese motion picture co-productions', *Media International Australia*, vol. 159, no. 1 (2016), pp. 63–72.
- 18 Patrick Frater, 'China box office overtakes North America in first quarter of 2018', *Variety*, 2 April 2018. <<https://variety.com/2018/film/asia/china-box-office-global-biggest-first-quarter-2018-1202742159/>> accessed 16 March 2019.

fourth essay, 'The South Korean film industry and the Chinese film market', Sangjoon Lee traces the trajectory of the South Korean film industry's participation in the regional film sphere, from the post-Korean War era to the present century, by scrutinizing South Korea's repeated attempts to co-produce films with the Chinese-language world in order to expand its rather limited domestic film market, exploit China's cheap and skilled workforce, and comply with the two governments' international politics. The fifth and final essay, 'China, between Bombay cinema and the world', shifts the regional focus from East Asia to South Asia and explores how China interacts with film industries there. Nitin Govil traces early phenomena of Indian cinema in China, such as Raj Kapoor's *Awaara* (1951), and expands his analysis to the contemporary cases of *Dangal* (2016) and the Indian–Chinese co-production film *Kung Fu Yoga* (2017). Govil explores how India–China knowledge production has been facilitated, staged and imagined through transnational film culture and locates these initiatives within the broader historical context of enduring Cold War tensions between the two regional powers.

We hope that this dossier will make a productive contribution to the growing field of film and media industry studies in the context of Asian cinema, and inform future research that explores the border-crossing production, circulation and consumption of cinema in the region. It was in April 2018, when the idea for the dossier was first being discussed, that China's theatrical box office officially overtook North America's to become the biggest in the world.¹⁸ Later that same month, on 28 April, Dalian Wanda's US\$7.9 billion mega-project, Qingdao Oriental Movie Metropolis, was officially opened. While the Wanda Group has been struggling since the summer of 2017 due to pressure from the Chinese government, the opening of the Qingdao Studio and the continued expansion of the domestic film market promise to transform and reshape the regional film industries in profound ways. It can be argued that the Asian film industries have now entered a new phase – the age of the Chinese film market.

This dossier emerged from the Nanyang Technological University–King's College London joint international conference on the Chinese Film Market and Asian Cinema, which was held at the National Museum of Singapore in Singapore, 25–27 August 2017.