

Global Media Integration: Sino-US Co-productions in the Age of Globalization

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Abstract: In recent years, one of the hottest topics in film development has been co-production. It is an effective channel for connecting the non-Western film market with the international film market, as well as a new option for international film companies such as Hollywood in the age of media globalisation. Current media globalization has significantly weakened the hegemonic position of cultural empires, and Hollywood, as the most typical Western cultural hegemonic collective, has actively sought co-production with other countries to maintain its international reputation status. Regardless of whether American hegemony persists, this essay argues that co-productions provide new opportunities and growing opportunities for the global media industry. This study will begin with a definition of globalisation and Sino-US production, followed by a discussion of the challenges and benefits of Sino-US cooperation. Following that, using 'The Great Wall' and 'Iron Man 3' as case studies, discuss the global impact of Sino-US media cooperation.

Keywords: co-production, film industry, International collaboration, global culture.

1. Introduction

International collaboration is the essence of filmmaking. Filmmakers looking for exotic locations and unique storylines have long travelled the world to produce their films, and in the process, they frequently enter "co-production" filmmaking mode[1]. As a result, co-production has become one of the most hot-debated topics in film development in recent years. Co-production is a cooperation model in which two or more countries invest in and share film copyright and market revenue. And to distribute benefits and share risks according to the cooperation strategy, such as investment method, capital ratio, settlement method, and so on[2]. While co-production has spiritual and cultural significance, such as cultural dissemination and globalisation, most film companies choose co-production to maximise the benefits of the film industry, and profit is the primary driving force in international co-production. The co-production is being expanded in two directions because of this driving force. The first is production cooperation, emphasising that from the actual production level of the film, the joint creation of various countries or regions may have the requirement in the integration of each country's cultural content, as well as the aesthetics of the audiences in the two countries. The second type of cooperation is operational cooperation, which focuses on film investment and operation methods.

This essay focuses on the collaboration between Chinese film companies and Hollywood. According to the National Radio and Television Administration's "Regulations on the Administration

of Chinese-Foreign Co-production Films," only co-produced films with joint investment, co-production, mutual benefit, and joint risk-taking by Chinese and foreign countries can be regarded as domestic films and distributed in mainland China. Those that do not meet one of these four criteria can only be considered imported films, and the number of those films imported into the Chinese film market is limited each year. To summarise, co-production is defined in this study as a type of film collaboration in which firms from two or more countries co-invest, co-produce, share benefits, and share risks.

Furthermore, because of their scale of distribution and visibility of global cultural flows, films have a strong cross-cultural attribute, making them the most observable cultural commodities in global cultural flows, and Hollywood is the most typical example of media globalisation[3]. Some researchers use cultural imperialism to explain Hollywood's development in the context of media globalisation. They believe that in the process of global cultural flow, Hollywood has formed a hegemonic culture, suppressing and limiting the development of other cultures, as well as a 'media empire' cantered on American culture[4]. However, the growth of Hollywood has also aided the establishment and development of the film industry in other countries[5]. Because of the globalisation of the media industries, Hollywood has transformed its film production into "co-production" to reach a larger global market and maintain its dominance in the global film industry. In addition, the Chinese film market is a critical component of Hollywood's globalisation strategy. In recent years, the Chinese film market has grown rapidly, surpassing the United States to become the world's second largest film market[6]. However, due to the complexities of the Chinese film market, such as the strict content review system and aesthetic differences between Chinese and Americans, collaboration between Hollywood and Chinese film companies is fraught with danger. In this context, the debate over the Sino-US co-production model has both practical and research implications.

2. The challenge of Sino-US productions

Sino-US co-production is an approach to follow the trend of media globalisation. Furthermore, Hollywood's desire for the Chinese market is strong, as is the Chinese film industry's desire to go international. However, the cultural and linguistic differences between China and the United States, as well as the Chinese government's strict policies and immature cooperation model, have created significant challenges for the implementation of China-US co-production. The cultural and linguistic differences between China and the United States, as well as the Chinese government's strict policies and immature cooperation model, have created significant challenges for the implementation of China-US co-production.

The first difficulty stems from linguistic differences. The film industry consistently underestimates the effect of language differences, but sound and subtitles are two of the most important aspects of a film's integrity, and they are easy to spot[7]. The question of which language to use in filmmaking has become a serious one. Chinese director Huang Jianxin, for example, refuses to make English-language films. However, foreigners are frequently "lost in translation" when watching Chinese-language films[7]. Furthermore, most of the the world's audiences are accustomed to English-language films, and many foreign audiences are not interested in films that require subtitles to understand.

The second challenge is the cultural divide between China and the United States, regardless of political attitudes between China and the West, there are significant differences in the cultural products acceptance among people in various countries, which may diminish but cannot disappear[8]. On the one hand, the Chinese leadership is hostile to Western culture, particularly Hollywood culture, and they see the culture and values propagated by Hollywood films as a form of 'cultural imperialism'[9]. On the other hand, due to different daily habits, Chinese moviegoers and American moviegoers are interested in different types of movies. For example, Chinese audiences prefer

historical dramas, whereas American audiences prefer science fiction films. Take, for example, Chinese director Zhang Yimou, whose early films depicting the country's impoverished, immoral sex were beloved by American audiences but banned in China. However, his later commercial film, which was a box office success in China, was criticised by Western audiences as a "vulgar film combining business and politics"[10]. To summarise, cultural differences can lead to different expectations for movies[9], making it difficult to meet the expectations of audiences from different countries in a co-production.

Furthermore, differences in political ideology and censorship make collaboration between China and the United States difficult. Transnational films that collaborate must undergo increasingly stringent cultural and awareness scrutiny before entering the global market[11]. Especially in the Chinese film market, where there is no grading system. To protect its national culture, the Chinese government must strictly censor all films released in the country[12]. Specifically, films regulated by the China Film Co-production Company (CFCC) must adhere to the restrictive principles of the Chinese Constitution, which include, but are not limited to, stories about demons or supernatural phenomena, crime circumstances, and demeaning the People's Liberation Army and the police. According to the CEO of the CFCC, censorship of film content is very important, and stories and scenes about violence, pornography, religion, and discrimination against other countries will be removed or modified. She stated that, "We don't want to see images of China involved in drug trafficking or brawls on the streets. We want to see a 'bright' image of China in movies after the Chinese economic reform." Some American filmmakers argued that refusing to portray a negative image of China in co-productions or refraining from mentioning certain historical events would limit Sino-US co-productions. However, racism and white supremacy preferences do exist in Hollywood film culture. In Sino-US co-productions, for example, white males frequently play the protagonist and the hero roles in the story.

Not only is the Chinese government's strict censorship of content a major challenge for Sino-US cooperation, but so are strict regulations on "co-production." The CFCC allows only 34 foreign films to be imported into the Chinese market each year, and the revenue-sharing system allows producers of these imports to receive 25% of the total revenue. However, co-productions are not subject to quotas and can be released as domestic films, earning up to 43% of total revenue. Thus, Hollywood studios are eager to enter the Chinese market through co-productions to maximise profits while reducing competition from other foreign films. However, the CFCC has gradually increased the requirements for "co-productions," such as the proportion of investment, the proportion of Chinese actors, and the proportion of Chinese elements, which is another challenge for Sino-US co-productions[13].

3. The Benefits of Sino-US Productions

Despite numerous challenges, Sino-US cooperation remains a trend in the context of globalisation, because co-production benefits national economic development, soft power development, and global talent training.

First, in today's media, movies are portrayed as powerful and effective tools for nation-building, implying that Sino-US cooperation can boost China's cultural soft power and cultural dissemination. According to Kokas, China's co-production with Hollywood is motivated in part by a desire for Chinese films to "become visible" to a global audience, or to gain recognition, prestige, and influence outside of China[14]. Furthermore, Sino-US co-production is part of the Chinese film industry's early 2000s strategy of 'borrowing a boat to go overseas'. Its goal is to transform China's film industry, export Chinese culture, and strengthen China's soft power[15].

For Hollywood, the co-production model has resulted in more money and the elimination of the need to compete with other foreign films for a small import quota. For the first time, mainland China's

box office revenue surpassed that of the United States in 2020, making it the world's largest movie market.

Furthermore, co-production between China and the United States has facilitated talent communication between the two countries and cultivated globalised film professionals. Several global filmmakers have been cultivated as a result of Sino-US productions. They do not make a living in China or the United States, but instead work in trans-international film production[14].

To summarise, American filmmakers are attempting to unlock the Chinese market through co-production, while China is attempting to unlock the global market through the same mechanism.

4. Case studies

4.1. The Great Wall

Zhang Yimou's 'The Great Wall' is a notable example of Hollywood film co-production with Chinese film companies. 'The Great Wall' is a Sino-US co-production co-produced by Hollywood's Legendary Pictures and Universal Pictures, Dalian Wanda, and China Film Group. Because the film is supervised by the CFCC from production to distribution, it is considered a local Chinese film, and the distribution does not require it to be introduced as an imported film, so it is consistent with the Sino-US co-production film defined by this research. 'The Great Wall', Hollywood's first entry into the Chinese market through Sino-US co-production, underperformed at the box office. The film will eventually lose more than \$75 million, with Universal Pictures liable for at least \$10 million in damages. Although it underperformed both domestically and internationally, it outperformed other popular Chinese-language films in the US film market, grossing more than \$45 million, second only to 'Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon'[14]. As a result, 'The Great Wall' is useful for studying the challenges and benefits of Chinese-American Co-production.

'The Great Wall' is a martial arts monster film set in ancient China that tells the story of European mercenaries who travel to medieval China in search for gunpowder and assist the Chinese army in repelling an invasion of monsters from beyond the Great Wall[16]. The film revolves around the meeting of Eastern and Western cultures as the selling point, which is co-produced by the Hollywood production team and CFCC. The cast includes well-known Hollywood and Chinese actors, and the film is directed by Zhang Yimou, a prominent member of China's fifth generation of directors. In addition to the actors and directors, the majority of the film's creative team is from Hollywood and includes well-known industry professionals. Furthermore, this US\$150 million Sino-US co-production has several main goals, one of which is to promote and upgrade the Chinese film industry in the international market. The second one is to assist Hollywood in opening up the Chinese market and entering it in the form of local Chinese films. The third goal is to demonstrate Chinese cultural values to the rest of the world and strengthen Chinese culture's soft power. And, in this age of globalisation, create opportunities and space for transnational film production.

Furthermore, there are two major reasons for the failure of 'The Great Wall'. The failure of the choice of film actor is the first one. The male actor in the film is white Hollywood actor Mark Damon, and the story in the Chinese background uses 80% English dialogue, which may detract from the film's natural atmosphere. Furthermore, the casting of this film exemplifies the trend in Chinese-Hollywood Co-productions of using Hollywood actors as "vases" to attract international audiences to Chinese films[12]. It did, however, reinforce 'White supremacy' and 'Colourism' resulting in the marginalisation of darker-skinned actors. Constance Wu, an Asian-American actor, emphasised that "the racist myth that only white people can save the world should be dispelled. We like our skin color and culture, have our own stories, and do not need white heroes to save us"[15]. Furthermore, the fact that white male protagonists appear in more than half of Sino-US co-productions suggests that, while the Chinese market is appealing to the Western film industry, 'Cultural imperialism' and 'Cultural

hegemony' still exist[12]. Another reason for the failure of 'The Great Wall' could be the 'bluntness' of its story. At the time of filming, director Zhang Yimou believed that 'The Great Wall' would strike a balance between cultivating the Chinese culture's dignity and catering to the Western imagination. However, Western critics graded the co-production as a failed blend of sci-fi and oriental mystical elements, and Chinese viewers were also dissatisfied with its blunt commercial positioning[16]. The director, Zhang, wanted to emphasise China's strong military power and cultural heritage, but he avoided a detailed historical retelling. He purposely blurred the historical period and political information, and just introduced the nature of China's political rights through a flat narrative that may bore audiences.

'The Great Wall', on the other hand, embodies some of the advantages of Sino-American collaboration. The production of 'The Great Wall', for example, includes some film talents and stars from several well-known films. Through this, it has cultivated some film workers who are now involved in Sino-US co-productions. As an example, E. Bennett Walsh, executive producer of 'The Great Wall,' has more experience working in China than many Hollywood producers with the same level of qualifications in the filming of Sino-US co-productions, which will serve as a foundation for his subsequent cross-border efforts in the era of media globalisation.

4.2. Iron Man 3

'Iron Man 3' is a 2013 American superhero film based on Marvel Comics that serves as the seventh instalment in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. In 2012, China Disney and American Marvel Studios announced a Sino-US partnership to finish the film. DMG Entertainment, the main production company, stated that the filming will take place in China, with the Chinese actors participating. If the collaboration is successful, Iron Man 3 will be the first superhero film produced jointly by China and the United States. However, due to the 'fake co-production,' the film did not meet China's co-production film standards. 'Iron Man 3' was eventually cancelled as a domestic film and could only be imported into the Chinese market as a foreign film.

Exploring the failed Sino-US co-production experience of Iron Man 3. Their goal is to circumvent the allocation of foreign films, drain Chinese domestic investment, and endanger local Chinese films. Although the Chinese government has increased the revenue share ratio of imported films, the annual quota remains limited. Co-production is still a popular way for Western film companies to enter the Chinese market. However, some Western film companies are wary of incorporating too many Chinese elements into their production. According to a China Daily article titled "Don't Be Coaxed by Hollywood," Chinese audiences should not ignore the fact that "Iron Man 3" was implanted with Chinese elements for box office performance, and this is 'Fake co-production' mode. Despite filmmakers' promises to film live-action films in China, Shane Black, the director of Iron Man 3, stated that neither he nor any of the film's stars would visit China. "Basically, we set most aspects of the film in China, but we won't shoot there; instead, we'll use post-production technology."

Furthermore, DMG has not been truthful in its portrayal of Chinese actors. Iron Man 3 was released in two versions, one for global audiences and one for Chinese audiences only, with Chinese actors Wang Xueqi and Fan Bingbing appearing only in the Chinese version. Even in the Chinese version, the proportion of Chinese actors is minor. Wang's official bio also refers to him as 'a lackey among lackeys'. According to Wang's interview, when he was invited to film Iron Man 3, his role was described as a challenging main role. However, DMG appears to have broken this promise. Furthermore, the film's antagonist, 'The Mandarin', is a Chinese wizard who is skilled in Chinese kung fu in the comics. DMG cast a white Hollywood actor in the role. "We don't want the audience to stereotype the character 'Mandarin,' and we just wanted to make him a character with Chinese elements," the crew explained. This is obviously an unconvincing claim. In 2012, Zhang Pimin,

deputy director of the CCFC, stated that China will eliminate fake co-productions, and only films that have truly imported Chinese culture will be eligible for co-productions.

5. Implications

In the context of contemporary globalisation, Hollywood filmmaking has become an example of 'cultural appropriation,' in which cultures and themes from other countries are incorporated into filmmaking[17]. The rise of co-production has increased the popularity of Hollywood in other cultures. Furthermore, Hollywood is no longer a national cultural institution, but rather seeks opportunities to co-produce with film companies from other countries to create transnational films that will appeal to more diverse global audiences. In Addition, China's economic clout in the film industry has an impact on Hollywood's hegemonic position. Su claims that the increase in the number of US-China co-productions, as well as high-profile Chinese investments in the US film industry, indicate a shift in global power relations and a restructuring of the global media structure[15]. The Chinese film market's role in terms of audience size and financing has grown, and Hollywood has established 'Chinese standards' in financing, film type, and cast selection. As a result, the global film industry has become less influenced by Hollywood's cultural hegemony, and films have become more diverse and transnational.

Even though Hollywood films have become increasingly transnational, cultural imperialism can still be found in co-production films. Cultural imperialism in film is frequently conceived of as the dissemination of hegemonic messages, manifested in the adoption of specific depictions of ideas, warfare, gender, and race in films to maintain their cultural hegemony within them. Cultural imperialism manifests itself in the co-production of characteristic local cultures of other countries, which are frequently "de-culturalised," and the 'Individual Heroism' of the United States is added[18]. Furthermore, sci-fi movies, disasters, monster invasions, and superheroes have been identified as major themes in Hollywood films. These elements can still be seen in the two Sino-US co-productions films "The Great Wall" and "Iron Man 3.". Furthermore, hegemonic ideas about skin colour and racism are present in co-productions, which are frequently manifested through the extensive use of white male actors. However, while American cultural imperialism persists in transnational co-productions, American's ability to convey something meaningful about American society and culture vanished as a result of media globalisation.

6. Conclusion

This paper examines the advantages and disadvantages of co-production, as well as its impact on the global media industry. This study argued, using two typical Sino-US co-productions as case studies, that the main challenges of co-production stem from the differences in culture, language, and political ideology between countries. And the Chinese government's stringent review system for co-productions is also one of the major challenges. Co-production, on the other hand, has numerous advantages. It contributes to the country's soft power and the development of the film industry, as well as the cultivation of transnational film talents. The global film industry benefits from co-production because it weakens American cultural hegemony and brings Hollywood films more in line with popular culture. However, this study has several limitations, including ignoring China's changing political relationship with the United States and making no recommendations on how to proceed with the co-production. Future research in this area could consider the changing relationship between the two countries and make recommendations for the future development of co-production.

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