Sino-US film coproduction:  
A global media primer

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Abstract
This China–US case study describes the negotiation between Chinese consumer demand and the growing Chinese market for cinema, the Chinese film industry’s aspiration for international success and domestic development, the Chinese government’s soft power ambitions and the largest and most successful film industry in the world – Hollywood. This article gives a brief look at the Sino-US film coproduction history, examines the root reason for the phenomena of ‘fake’ coproduction and analyses the challenges that hurdle the deep cooperation (‘real’ coproduction) process.

Keywords
China, film, film coproduction, soft power, soft power competition, United States

Introduction
Many Chinese filmmakers see international coproduction as an opportunity to learn how to make films that will be released and widely seen outside China. This follows the learning model that China has used with foreign investment over the last 30 years. However, one of the fundamental arguments of this article is that the model of joint venturing with foreign investments that worked so well for China in its low-cost manufacturing strategy is very hard to replicate in film, which is one of the most advanced service industries in the world. It requires a deeper understanding of nuances, cultural complexity and entertainment values.

In this article, I present a history of China’s challenge to use the global film industry both as a learning model and to achieve its soft power goals. Key to understanding this challenge is the idea of soft power competition as discussed below, a term coined by the Singaporean scholar Chua (2012) to refer to the intense competition within East Asia for pop culture dominance and to describe how East Asian countries are using pop culture exports to positively influence
the opinions and attitudes of transnational audiences. Chua’s argument has turned Joseph Nye’s original diplomatic concept of soft power into a regional index of pop culture success. Chua (2012) argues that pop culture engenders ‘culture presence which offers China a strategy to become more competitive. However, China’s pop culture presence outside its borders is quite weak compared to other East Asian countries, and in particular compared to the United States. This is well recognised now by many people in China.

The Chinese government has publicly stated its ambitions to use film coproductions as a way to enhance soft power capability through transfer of knowledge capital (skills and know-how). While Chinese filmmakers are learning how to work with US partners, the United States is conceding some ground to achieve its market ambitions. The key here is that Hollywood and the United States need access to China’s growing consumer market in order to continue their own growth. Michael Curtin and others (2015), Professor of Film and Media Studies at University of California (UC) Santa Barbara, writes that several levels of complexity underpin how the China Film Group (CFG) operates to protect domestic players. Confronted with such tactics, American film companies, on one hand, are trying to partner with China to facilitate imports and distribution in China, while on the other, Hollywood is motivated to make approved coproductions (joint productions) work in China.

In other words, Hollywood studios have a number of strategies for success, including the production of local language films and partnering on investment with key Chinese entities, such as the CFG (Fast and Furious 7), Wanda (Southpaw) and Alibaba (Mission Impossible sequel). These partnerships help ensure screen penetration, online ticketing and other advantages that only major Chinese players can provide. Approved coproductions are just one area for Hollywood and are far from the most important one. Most of China’s coproductions (68.5%) between 2002 and 2012 have been with Hong Kong; China–US coproduction constitutes only 8.6% of the total (Zhan, 2013). We can understand the US approach as trying to find the right key for unlocking the doors to the Chinese market. With the booming of the Chinese film market, especially since 2012, finding such a key is increasingly coveted. One obvious reason is that, in addition to moving beyond China’s import quota, producers of imported films can share only 25% of total revenue, whereas for approved coproductions, producers of imported films can share 45% (Entgroup, 2010, p. 32)

This article principally consists of secondary data from non-academic and informal sources, as it includes a great amount of descriptive analysis of films or phenomena around or after 2012, which has not yet been paid much attention in English or Chinese academic publications. These primary data come from forums and interviews I have conducted with people within the film industry, a filmmaker currently involved in a Sino-US coproduction project, an entertainment lawyer and two government officials. I also attended the 2014 17th Shanghai International Film Festival as part of my fieldwork, which gave me a chance to hear discussions and presentations by first-tier industry people involved in Sino-US film projects. During the writing of this article, I conducted ethnographic research at Yingke, an international commercial law firm headquartered in Beijing, where I worked with many top intellectual property (IP) and entertainment lawyers mainly responsible for contract signing and other legal services associated with the most up-to-date Sino-US coproductions and cofinancing projects. In this article, I summarise the history of China–US coproduction in three stages – assisted, fake and real coproduction – although these three kinds of production overlap. First, I examine briefly Sino-US coproduction history before 2012, taking a deeper look at new trends, explore fake coproduction since 2012 and then provide further analysis of the challenges existing in real coproduction.
The rise (and decline) of East Asia and soft power competition

The discussion of Sino-US coproduction and soft power competition needs to be seen in the context of both media imperialism and the rise (and decline) of East Asian media industries. In 1980, international media expert Oliver Boyd-Barrett wrote about the imbalance of power and media flows globally and argued that American media controlled the world, a phenomenon labelled ‘media imperialism’. In more recent work, Boyd-Barrett (2014) analyses how structures of power and control still continue to regulate access to and consumption of media and argues that media imperialism still matters today. Chin Chuan Lee (1980), Head of the Department of Media and Communication, City University of Hong Kong, also examined the indicators or levels of media imperialism. Lee focused on the flows of television programmes, the adoption of foreign models and foreign investment, and the resulting cultural effects borne from such adoption. Joseph Straubhaar (1991), Professor of Communications in the Department of Radio–TV–Film at The University of Texas at Austin, casts doubt on the simple dominance of US media, suggesting the influential idea of cultural proximity as a factor in media flows through research on television, although this idea is useful in other media areas, too. In a similar vein, Straubhaar (1991) points out that ‘the increasing interdependence of the world television market seems to bear a strong regional flavour’ (p. 55) based on distinct regional cultural patterns. Language groups, as Straubhaar (1991) proposed, ‘tend to reinforce regionality’ (p. 55). Furthermore, Straubhaar demonstrated that cultural proximity can overcome language differences by looking at the success of Brazilian programming dubbed into Spanish and circulated throughout Latin America. In 1993, Thomas B. Gold, Professor of Sociology and Executive Director of the Inter-University Programme for Chinese Language Studies at the UC, Berkeley, wrote about the powerful attraction of Hong Kong and Taiwanese pop culture (gangtai) in mainland China. He wrote about the influence of trendy Taiwanese and Hong Kong content in the Chinese market, which was then dominated by political themes (Gold, 1993). In 1996, Australian leading media scholars Sinclair, Jacka, and Cunningham (1996) introduced the term ‘peripheral vision’, which argued that the rise of other peripheral media nations challenged the media imperialism thesis – research that was built on media studies expert Michael Tracey’s ‘patchwork quilt’ metaphor (Tracey, 1985), which identified a diversity of cultural flows.

More analysis of East Asian media followed, leading to the popularity of the concept of soft power. In 2002, American editor and writer Douglas McGray (2002) coined the term ‘Gross National Cool’ to describe trendy Japanese pop culture. Australian media scholars Iwabuchi, Muecke, and Thomas (2004) discussed cultural flows and consumption across different regions in Asia and the role of such flows in creating contemporary Asian national identities. Doobo Shim (2006), Associate Professor of Media and Communication at Sungshin Women’s University, Seoul, identified the rising popularity of Korean popular culture in Asia. Chua and Iwabuchi (2008) built on this by analysing an emerging regional East Asian media culture formed in part by the Korean Wave of television drama that was then washing through the region. Australian scholars Black, Epstein, and Tokita (2010) also analyse the Korean Wave and identify variations in the theme of cultural flows between Japan or China and other East Asian countries. Anthony Y.H. Fung (2013), Professor of Journalism and Communication School at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, examines different aspects of Asian popular culture, arguing that while local social formations and patterns of consumption and participation in Asia are still very much dependent on global cultural developments and the phenomena of modernity, such dependence is often concretised, reshaped and distorted by the local media to cater to the local market. Chua (2012) coined the term ‘soft
power competition’ to describe how East Asian countries use popular culture to gain a presence or influence in other countries. All of these analyses focus principally on the flows and sales of finished programmes. Collectively, they have expanded knowledge and thinking about East Asian media. For the most part, however, they do not discuss media production and soft power, or cover the kind of international coproduction relationships that are the focus of this article.

In recent years, East Asian film and television industries have faced new challenges. Hong Kong film production has declined, while the Korean Wave is showing signs of weakening. In part, this changing situation has fuelled the desire of international filmmakers to work on coproductions in China despite the problems that filmmakers encounter there, such as censorship (Chua, 2012; Fung, 2013; Keane, 2013). Unlike the vast majority of countries in the world that coproduce film, the United States has not entered into official coproductions; that is, it does not enter into any legally binding coproduction agreements or equal relationships with other producing nations – it does not need to. With that background in mind, I will show that the US relationship with China is complicated and challenging. Meanwhile, China’s soft power strategies through film are tested to their limit in dealings with the United States.

**Sino-US coproduction history**

From 1981 to the early 1990s, Sino-American coventures were almost all assisted productions, which meant that China only assisted American partners with the equipment, apparatus, sites and services in production, without taking part in creativity and investment. Sony Pictures Tristar became the first studio to discover the potential of the Chinese market and established Columbia Pictures Film Production Asia (Columbia Asia) in Hong Kong in 1998. This was part of its long-term localisation strategy to produce Chinese films for global distribution, particularly considering Chinese and culturally proximate audiences (Welkos, 1999; cited in Miller, Govil, McMurria, Maxwell, & Wang, 2005, p. 150). Columbia Asia coproduced *The Road Home* (*wo de fuqin muqin*, 1999) with Beijing New Pictures and Guangxi Film studio, and cofinanced and coproduced *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* (2000) with Huayi Brothers and Taihe Film Investment Co., as well as with the United Kingdom’s United China Vision. The international success of *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* encouraged Columbia Asia to look for more Chinese partners to develop coproductions.

After China joined the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, the threat of ‘wolf(Hollywood) coming’ reverberated within the Chinese film industry. ‘Dancing with wolves’ or ‘protecting domestic film industry’ has been heatedly debated by the people and researchers of Chinese film industry (Chen, 1998; Yu, 1995, p. 1; Zheng, 1994, p. 8). While the threat of cultural imperialism and calls for protection prevailed before 2000 (Chen, 1998; Yu, 1995, p. 1; Zheng, 1994, p. 8), the mainstream tone began to change to ‘dancing with wolves’ after joining the WTO (Su, 2011, p. 102). The introduction and release of several sets of film regulations directly facilitated the transnational film corporations. According to Wendy Weiqun Su (2011), Associate Professor of Media and Cultural Studies Faculty at University of California Riverside, ‘there was an increasingly blurred boundary between “domestic films” and “foreign films”; a new term of “transnational cinema” is gradually emerging’ (p. 197). The concept of ‘transnational cinema’ and ‘Greater China’ cinema began to be used (Yin, 2002, 2004). Some used the word ‘coopetition’ (cooperation within competition) to describe the nature of US-Sino production and predicted that Chinawood would ultimately challenge Hollywood (Li, 2006, pp. 14-19). Richard Kraus and Wan Jihong (2002) describe Hollywood and China as adversaries and allies. At the beginning of the 2000s, the Chinese
government deepened its cultural system reform, improving its policy to further promote the development of cultural industry and cultural market construction. Audio-visual industries were pushed further into the market, and more private companies were allowed to enter the film industry. In addition, more details were released about China’s legal system for coproduction. In 2007, the concept of soft power was borrowed by the Chinese government to emphasise the significance of Chinese cultural industries and to express the government’s hope to enhance China’s cultural influence and global presence. Industry commentators and scholars toed the policy line by advocating for compromise and yielding to Hollywood producers in order to achieve greater national benefit (Yin & Tang, 2008).

The release of policy in the early 2000s, which allowed private companies to enter the film industry, led to more collaboration between US and Chinese private firms. American film scholar Stanley Rosen observed that the ‘Chinese national film industry is becoming increasingly transnational’ (Rosen, 2003, p. 98). Sony Pictures Tristar, through its subsidiary Columbia Asia, was not the only multinational media conglomerate working in China. Universal Studios and Warner Bros. both have started coproducing projects with China (Miller et al., 2005, pp. 183-184). Compared with Sino-US collaboration in the 1990s, coventures in the first 10 years of the 21st century were characterised by more involvement in funding and talent from the Chinese side. During this period, Beijing New Pictures, which relied on Zhang Yimou, produced films such as Hero, House of Flying Daggers and Curse of the Golden Flower. The company utilised the distribution channel developed by Jiang Zhijiang, the film producer most famous for coproducing the wuxia (swordsmen film) film Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon in the United States (Weng, 2012). Hero, the first national commercial blockbuster in the Chinese film industry, became the flagship film of that era. Miramax marketed Hero as a second Crouching Tiger (Rosen, 2003, p. 96). In addition, some state-owned film companies, such as CFG and Shanghai Film Group, were actively exploring the opportunities presented by Sino-US coventures. Films like Red Cliff, Lust Caution, The Karate Kid, Fearless and Kung Fu Hustle were all successful at the box office. Although disagreements still exist in many areas of the China–US film coproduction relationship, accumulated experience has established a good foundation for future collaboration.

However, films that were mainly, or partially, invested in by US companies but produced by Chinese companies usually focused on the Chinese market and had little international influence. The production of other films that were successful overseas, such as The Karate Kid and The Mummy: Tomb of the Dragon Emperor, were dominated by American companies, while Chinese companies only invested and assisted in these productions via sharing the copyright in China.

The signing of the Sino-US Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) in 2012 led to the Chinese government making the following concessions: China would permit 14 premium format films (e.g. IMAX, 3D) to be exempt from the 20 film import quota that remained in place; the box office share that US studios could earn under the master contract increased to 25% from 13%. This softening of policy greatly encouraged US filmmakers. By this time, box office revenue in China had surpassed Japan, making it the second biggest market in the world. Hollywood realised that the total number of film screens were increasing throughout China and that it was time to enter the Chinese market. In the same year, the huge success of films such as Avatar (RMB 1.32 billion), Transformer 3D and Titanic 3D in the Chinese market surprised Hollywood. The establishment of Oriental DreamWorks in Shanghai, Cameron-Pace Group’s China headquarters in Tianjin, and News Corp.’s shares in Bona Film showed that Sino-US collaboration was entering a new stage. The door was beginning to open.
However, the door was far from being completely unlocked. Collaboration with China was a way to get around the quota. Adding some Chinese elements to a given film was a means to pass the government’s review, if not to appease the CFG and have the film included in the quota. This was a different way. In 2012, more blockbusters started to add Chinese elements and announce themselves as coproduction films. They began to ‘stick on’ Chinese elements and recast roles in films such as Looper, The Expendables 2 and Ironman 3, which led to the phenomenon of ‘fake’ coproduction, discussed below.

From China’s perspective, Tiedong Zhou (2012), the ex-manager of China Film Promotion International (CFPI), believed China’s overseas film market was almost entirely supported by coproduction films, especially coventures with the American big players. Hollywood’s strong distribution system and marketing channels assisted in the market success of Mummy 3 and the Karate Kid. In 2010, 47 films, including 46 coproductions, were exported, and the total revenue reached a peak of RMB 3.517 billion; however, the bulk of this revenue was earned by one feature film. The Karate Kid earned RMB 2.4 billion outside China. In 2011, 52 films, including 50 coproductions, were exported. Without blockbuster collaboration with Hollywood, export revenue declined to RMB 2.024 billion (Zhou, 2012). China clearly needed Hollywood. For China, working with the most successful film-producing country in the world definitely offers a chance to upgrade its film industry, promote its films going out into the world and enhance its cultural influence – moving closer and closer to achieving its soft power ambitions.

Zhang Xun (2013), the ex-manager of China Film Coproduction Corporation (CFCC), stated that in the previous 2-year period, more and more films emphasise collaboration from the beginning to the end, which means Chinese partners took part in the project from script development to distribution. This model is an advantage for the integration of different production styles and the promotion of Chinese culture. US filmmakers are trying to use coproduction as a key to open the Chinese market, while China is attempting to use the same key to open the global market. However, the huge differences in film industry markets, business culture and language still pose great challenges for the Western film giant and Eastern rising power to collaborate successfully. Joe Aguilar from Oriental Dreamworks said at the 2014 17th Shanghai International Film Festival that it would take a long time for Hollywood and China to get on the same page.

While there has been a great deal of discussion about Hollywood–China collaboration since 2012, ‘real’ China–US coproductions have been rare. The following section will discuss the challenges and the heated debates on the subject since 2012, including references to Looper (huangxing shizhe, 2012) and Iron Man 3 (gangtie xia 3, 2013) by DMG, Wolf Totem (langtu teng, 2015) and Man of Tai Chi (taiji xia, 2013) by CFG Corporation, Cloud Atlas (yuntu, 2012) by Dreams of the Dragon pictures and The Expendables 2 (gansi dui 2, 2012) by Le Vision Pictures.

**Fake coproductions?**

DMG CEO Dan Mintz said, ‘there are many obstacles to overcome for China-US coproduction. The process of China-US coproduction is tough for Chinese filmmakers. The contradiction of interest and culture cannot be avoided’ (cited in Yang, 2012, p. 38). Some of the challenges discussed below are common in other cases of international coproductions, but some are unique to the Sino-US case. Before going into the details, first I will look at origin of the phenomenon of ‘fake’ coproduction.

Although revenue sharing had been raised to 25% for imported films due to the MOU, ticket receipts for approved joint productions are 43%, and circumventing the quota remained attractive.
In 2012, more blockbusters announced themselves as joint productions. They included some Chinese elements and recast roles in order to achieve market success. Typical examples are *Looper*, *The Expendables 2* and *Ironman 3*. Dan Mintz, the CEO of DMG China, who can speak fluent Mandarin and who is recognised as ‘Hollywood’s Mr. China’, brought two blockbusters *Looper* and *Iron Man 3* to China (Montlake, 2012). In *Looper*, a time-travel thriller from Endgame Entertainment, many scenarios were originally set in Paris, but were changed to Shanghai after DMG invested in the film. In addition to some shooting in Shanghai, a well-known Chinese actress, Xu Qing, was invited to act as the wife of the hero, Joe (Bruce Willis); although she only had several minutes of scenes script and few lines, the producers argued that the role of Xu Qing was very important to the whole film. *Looper*’s director Rian Johnson’s time-travel epic had two versions, with the Chinese cut including a much longer montage of Joseph Gordan-Levitt’s time in Shanghai. Compared to *Looper*, the Chinese elements in *Ironman 3* (coproduced by DMG and Marvel Pictures) were even more contrived and insubstantial. *Iron Man 3* was split into two different versions. One was for Chinese audiences, with Chinese characters Wang Xueqi and Fan Bingbing as well as Chinese sequences. The official international version did not contain these sequences. Even in the Chinese version, Wang’s role seems very unnecessary and was described by microbloggers on *weibo* (China’s twitter) as ‘the walk-on of all walk-ons’. In the international version, Wang appeared for only 10 seconds in the opening scene, plus a fleeting glimpse towards the end of the film where his face cannot be seen clearly. Wang is a very respected and experienced actor in China. He told the *Hollywood Reporter* that his character was described as a major figure and the role as very challenging when he was persuaded to accept the role (Brooks, 2013). Fan Bingbing only appeared in the Chinese version.

This result was not what DMG CEO Dan Mintz intended, according to Montlake (2012). Mintz was ‘betting on getting lucrative distribution rights in China to *Iron Man 3* and using it as a calling card to court other studios circling China’ (Montlake, 2012). Although the film producers required some scenes to be shot in China, the director, Shane Black, said that neither he nor any of the film stars would visit China. ‘Basically we are setting aspects of the film in China, but we won’t be filming in China’ (Montlake, 2012). Mintz tried very hard to use his Chinese networks (guanxi) to balance the government requirements and Hollywood’s insistence. He intended to make the Chinese element fit into the Hollywood-style blockbuster and appreciated by the whole world (Mintz, 2012, cited in Montlake, 2012). The film was not appreciated by the Chinese government and also prompted condemnation from bloggers and critics in China for having two versions and for ‘not containing enough bespoke Chinese content’ (Brooks, 2013). Media suspicion abounded in anticipation of whether this film would be approved as a domestic film for screening. It was reported that the film was registered as a joint production for shooting but failed to acquire the official approval for screening. According to the Manager of the CFCC, Miao Xiaotian, it was actually registered as an assisted production at the very beginning (Miao, interview, July 2014). The Associate Manager of the CFCC, Xu Shujun, said that she received many calls and e-mails asking about the real status of these films (Xu, interview, July 2014). We do not know what happened then. There is a possibility that the film was registered as a joint production, but the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT) cancelled its qualification after seeing that the final work was not the same as what had been approved.

In the wake of the perception that Hollywood might be cynically taking advantage of China’s booming market, the coproduction film review policy was tightened. Zhang Pimin, the Deputy Director of SARFT, announced in August 2012 at a CCTV Movie Channel Workshop that coproductions would be reviewed strictly to see whether they were ‘real’ or ‘fake’ (Coonan, 2013; Tsui,
He especially mentioned *Ironman 3* and *Looper* as examples and said that ‘Some so-called coproduction movies just make superficial changes with little investment from China, and use very few Chinese elements, and call themselves coproductions. These coproductions get around the quota system, take domestic investment away, and threaten Chinese indigenous movies’ (Goldstein, 2012; R. Zhang, 2012).

*Iron Man 3* and *Looper* tested the regulations by adding superficial Chinese content. The Chinese government responded by tightening review rules in 2012. But sensing a gold rush, Hollywood continued to try to make China an integral part of a movie’s storyline. This was done not just to increase its appeal to Chinese audiences but also to garner favour with the CFG, which controls the import of foreign titles, or to pass the review of the CFCC and ultimately be certified as a domestic film, allowing filmmakers to receive a larger share of a film’s revenue in China. Examples include *The Amazing Spider-Man 2*, *X-Men: Days of Future Past* (2014), *Godzilla* (2014) and *Transformers 4* (2014). *Transformers 4* achieved a box office milestone; it was the first film to exceed US$300 million in box office revenue in China, a figure that was even higher than the film’s earnings in North America (McClintock, 2014). It is easy to see how Michael Bay’s *Transformers: Age of Extinction* tried very hard to feature a Chinese-inflected story and Chinese elements in order to meet the minimum standards of a joint production. A joint venture between Paramount Pictures, the state-owned China Movie Channel (CMC), and its distribution partner, Jiaflix Entertainment, was established. Paramount connected with CCTV through Sid Ganis, former president of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, who now serves as chairman of Jiaflix, which helps export Chinese films to overseas territories and manages the production of films in China. As Curtin, Jacks, and Li (in press) observe,

> CCTV provided Paramount with an influential partner at the epicenter of the country’s media infrastructure. Announcing their collaboration in April 2013, they pegged the film’s release for on or about 27 June 2014, which was unusual compared to most studios, which were struggling to predict release dates even six weeks prior to their PRC premieres.

Hollywood has stepped up its efforts since *Ironman 3*’s attempt to circumvent China’s quota system via a partnership with the private film production and distribution company DMG. However, the ambition of *Transformers 4* was bigger than just securing a place on the import quota. As Marc Graser, senior editor of *Variety* (April, 2013), reported, ‘Studios can file for official coproduction status, granted by the Chinese government, at a later time’.

Chinese actors (such as Li Bingbing) are not just cast in walk-on roles any more, although they are still not presented as main actors either. Many more action sequences in *Transformers 4* were set in Hong Kong and mainland China (more than half an hour’s length in total) and feature national landmarks such as the Great Wall. The heavily featured Chinese product placement throughout the film is obvious; for example, Stanley Tucci’s character drinks a popular Chinese brand of milk within the film – Yili, and Mark Wahlberg’s character uses a China Construction Bank ATM – in Texas. The film star, Mark Wahlberg, and director, Michael Bay, stayed in China for shooting. And unlike *Ironman 3*, there is only one version of *Transformers 4*. Although the film has been criticised by media and scholars for ‘its numerous Chinese product placements, generously featured Chinese landmarks, cameos by Chinese pop stars, as well as what is perceived to be a pro-Chinese-government message’ (Zhu, 2014), it can also be viewed as Hollywood’s further testing of the waters toward US–China film coproduction. That said, *Transformers 4* was still released in China as an imported film – it was still seen by the Chinese authorities as having
insufficient Chinese elements. Given Hollywood’s great desire to identify the keys towards opening up the Chinese market, it is easy to see their major studios ‘flipping through their Rolodexes to call up anyone they know in the territory’ (Graser, 2013).

There is no doubt that China is a big part of the future of movies and the Chinese market is very important. However, no matter how important it is, it will be difficult for Hollywood to change its 100-year model to suit the Chinese market. Transformers 4 illustrates ‘the delicate balancing game of Hollywood studios trying to work out what the Chinese market wants while simultaneously catering to Americans’ (Watt, 2014). According to Michael Keane, Professor of Chinese Media and Cultural Studies at Curtin University, Australia, ‘If such films aren’t handled properly, they risk alienating both audiences’ (Keane, cited in Watt, 2014). In the cases of Transformers 4 and Iron Man 3, the studios have still decided to prioritise the international market. The fake coproduction can be seen as a template during this transition stage. The template of inserting China into existing Hollywood blockbusters has mostly seen success at the Chinese box office, although the films have failed to achieve real coproduction status. In order to achieve ‘real’ coproduction status (i.e. joint production), positive Chinese elements, a significant Chinese cast presence and a greater proportion of Chinese investment are required. In this regard, China is using its market power to induce Hollywood’s cooperation and is using Hollywood’s global reach to ‘transmit favourable narratives and images about China to the Western (and Westernised) world’ (Homewood, 2014).

Zhu (2014) argues that Transformers 4 has scored big for the United States and, ultimately, sells American dreams rather than Chinese dreams in the fight for soft power. This is obviously true, but the Chinese government’s intention to take knowledge capital from Hollywood to improve its soft power globally is beginning to pay some dividends. If the development of Chinese international soft power in the film industry is to be a long march, these may be the first steps. The question is, ‘How far can Hollywood go on the prototype of East–West hybrids?’ According to one commentator, China’s leadership is ‘still in the model of centralized and unopposed government control, [and] is in a unique position to tell Hollywood bigwigs what to do by using money’ (Grady Smith, cited in Turney, 2013, p. 46).

However, if all the criteria for joint production announced by the government in 2012 are satisfied; that is, if Chinese parties take leading roles in investment and casting and if Transformers 5 and Iron Man 4 are full of Chinese, will they still appeal to global audiences? After decades, will Hollywood–China hybrids end up like those of China–Hong Kong, where audiences won’t be able to say whether a film is a Hollywood blockbuster, a Chinawood blockbuster or a Hollywood–China blockbuster? This raises a lot of questions; the following section will look at the challenges facing the real coproduction model.

The hurdles of real coproduction

After 2012, there have been many projects pitched as real coproductions; that is, projects involving sufficient Chinese investment and a cast required by the SARFT, and a deep cooperation in script development from the beginning to the end. Most projects following this model are either still in progress or have failed at the box office. Keanu Reeves’ directorial debut, Man of Tai Chi (taiji xia, 2013), coproduced by the state-backed CFG, Wanda Group, and Village Roadshow Pictures was released in 2013 and only grossed about 23 million RMB in China and US$100,000 at the North American box office. Investors lost 140 million RMB. It involved a Hollywood A-lister making a film mostly shot in China with a Chinese actor (Tiger Chen) in the lead role. CFG had high hopes for the film, which was seen as a step forward for international collaboration in China (Tsui, 2013b).
Real coproductions possess genuine and legitimate differences in business practices, in modes of storytelling, in culture and certainly in language. Bringing together two different ways of storytelling is another level of complexity. All these differences obstruct China–US real coproduction, not to mention censorship and piracy problems. The following section looks further at these obstructions.

**Language difference and cultural differences**

Language differences are easy to recognise but always underestimate how much of a challenge they pose for film production. Misunderstandings arise due to translation, and such differences in meaning raise questions as to whether a film should be filmed in English or in Mandarin. Jianxin Huang, one of the fifth generation of Chinese directors, refused to produce a Chinese story in English, believing that the end result would be cultural conflict. However, American audiences do not fully appreciate a film if it is made in Mandarin. Feng Xiaogang, one of the leading directors in China, said,

> Our films speak Mandarin which is the mainstream culture in China, but not in the whole world. Most of the audiences in the world are used to English films. Moreover, American audiences do not like watching the subtitles in a film. That is why it is hard for our films to go out. We are dancing with shackles. (Tang, 2012, p. 58)

Actually, the choice of language for a film directly reflects a film’s target market. Ellen R. Eliasoph, the CEO of Village Roadshow Entertainment Group, believes that ‘It is unrealistic to produce a film loved by everyone. Chinese directors should focus more on telling a good story and directing a good film, rather than meeting the taste for everyone’ (Eliasoph; cited in Yang, 2012, p. 46). Terence Chang agrees with Eliasoph,

> You can only concentrate on one market. It is not a wise idea to make compromises for audiences from different countries in the coproduction. If it is a film for the American market, then make it more American, and vice versa. (Chang; cited in Yang, 2012, p. 46)

As Dr. Yingchi Chu, Senior Lecturer in Communication and Media Studies at Murdoch University, has shown, cultural differences can lead to different expectations among audiences (Chu, 2014). Chinese audiences tend to be interested in historical drama, while American audiences appreciate contemporary settings. The different literary traditions give rise to differences in storytelling between the two cultures. Americans mostly use the Western European form of storytelling, with an emphasis on conflict. Generally, the main character attempts to reach a goal but is confronted with opposition. A series of clashes are refined into a three-act or five-act structure. The story may sometimes express moral lessons. In China, storytelling is heavily affected by the ethical and philosophical system of Confucianism, with an emphasis on moral lessons delivered in subtle or obvious ways that can be learned from the story (Nemschoff & Yu, 2014). Neither way is better, but finding common ground between the two traditions is not easy.

The business cultures of the two sides are also very different. Chinese are used to developing guanxi (relationship) and shengyi (business) by drinking and eating. Americans may need to sit down with lawyers. In terms of deal-making, Chinese often send subordinates to negotiate before the executives sign the contract. This can create conflict as the American parties may not
understand the Chinese style. As Robert Cain and Dan Harris (2012) point out in their law blog, the contract styles in both countries are very different: ‘Chinese companies are uncomfortable with well-written complete contracts that tie them down on most or all key issues. They generally prefer vague contractual commitments that allow for constant re-negotiating and clarifying of deal points as the transaction progresses’. This is exactly what the foreign side attempts to prevent (Cain, 2012).

**Film system differences**

Hollywood has developed a comprehensive industrial system over the past 100 years, and this system is supported by a well-developed legal, financial and accounting practice. In comparison, China’s system, or the infrastructure for making films, is still in a relatively early stage. ‘There are fundamental differences for China and US film systems. We need to make these two systems compatible for Sino-US collaboration’, stated Zhang (2012), CEO of Le Vision Pictures.

The completion guarantor for film production as applied in the United States, Europe and Australia is not used in China due to its underdeveloped film mechanism. The accounting systems used in the United States and Europe do not apply in China, which has its own accounting laws and regulations. Even in production management there are differences. For example, Chinese crews are used to working 24 hours continuously, or even longer, in order to catch up with a schedule. However, some American crews have the right to work only 8 hours per day, and this is protected by labour laws. As a result, the freedom of the director decreases and the cost of the film increases significantly, resulting in discontent for the producer. If these problems are not solved properly, conflict will surely follow.

Conflict can also be seen in copyright division and revenue sharing. The big studios are cautious about copyright. If the Chinese side has funded a film and the copyright of the work is not shared, it leads to discontent from the Chinese partner. In early times, the copyright of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and *Warriors of Heaven and Earth* belonged to Hollywood, although Chinese partners invested funds and labour. The copyright issue is a reflection of relative power. In the early 2000s, China’s film industry was much less able to compete for copyright. In contrast, Allen Wang, a leading entertainment lawyer at Yingke, states, ‘in terms of the Sino-US production he is involved in now, the Chinese side basically all have the copyright of the coproduced or cofinanced films’ (Wang, personal communication, July, 2014).

Another issue is differences in practices of revenue sharing. Sino-US productions basically have adopted regional revenue sharing as their way of doing business. This means that the Chinese party will receive revenue from the Chinese market and foreigners will take revenue from the overseas market. He Ping, ex-consultant and producer of Columbia Pictures Film Production Asia, established coventures with Huayi Brothers for several films since early 2000. According to Ping,

Chinese investors prefer the regional sharing way rather than global sharing with America. The reason is that the profit obtained by Chinese investors by global sharing is very low, sometimes only 10 to 20 thousand USD. American distributors would give you a big bill and then charge their agency fee, so the rest of the revenue was only a little. (He, cited in Tang, 2012, p. 65)

Since 2012, global revenue sharing is gradually applying to Sino-US coproductions, as both markets are too big to lose profits. However, according to the author’s ethnographic experience at the
Yingke Law Firm with team of top IP and entertainment lawyer Allen Wang, the Chinese party is still very confused about the ways of Hollywood’s revenue sharing and its ‘creative accounting’.

The revenue-sharing model adopted by *The Expendables 2* was also that of regional sharing. According to Le Vision Pictures CEO Zhao Zhang, he was not confident enough to accept a global revenue-sharing plan. First, the financial cost for the global revenue sharing was too high and could even exceed the film’s projected revenue. Second, many Chinese film companies have accounting fraud problems, which may result in lawsuits if they are involved in global revenue sharing. The Chinese system is not prepared for international rules in terms of accounting and legal issues. Hollywood can do business globally because it has vast experience in controlling the rules of the game, and hence, most of the world uses the US dollar as its payment currency. Their legal and financial system is well developed, and they have rich experience in coproduction with many regions of the world. It will take decades for China to develop such a mature market mechanism as Hollywood has. Zhao Zhang’s purpose of coproducing with Hollywood was to become familiar with Hollywood’s system, such as its financial and insurance regulations. If Hollywood spends US$100 million on production, how do they spend it and how do they get the money back? (Z. Zhang, 2012).

**Who listens to whom?**

When a coproduction project is confronted with differences in film systems and production process, who should listen to whom?

Americans have not made the best partners in coproductions, and historically their industry has not needed help from outside. Americans often try to control all aspects of a project and see the other participants as just sources of money or locations, not as full and equal partners contributing to every aspect of a production. For Chinese-American coproduction to succeed in the long run, there needs to be mutual respect and a real working relationship between the parties on both a creative and economic level. (Nemschoff & Yu, 2014, p. 12)

However, when it comes to interest conflict, respecting each other may end up as just rhetoric. Quite often the complaints being heard from the Chinese film industry are that Hollywood studios are too arrogant to cooperate with, and the law and regulations involved are too complicated, although independent producers in the United States are more understanding and cooperative (Geng, personal communication, July 2014). Eben Davidson from Paramount Pictures pointed out two problems in the 17th Shanghai International Film Festival Forum (SIFFFORUM) in 2014: first, the Chineseness of content, and, second, the process of production is different in China. American representatives in the forum say it needs to change, to be more like the Hollywood model. This is highly unlikely to happen for China; that is, China fully changing to the Hollywood model, although the idea of learning from Hollywood is supported by many industry people in terms of learning its creative skills, technology, distribution system, budget control, accounting and so on.

Box office editor Phil Contrino pointed out that Chinese filmmakers are getting better at making films that connect with Chinese audiences (Turney, 2013, pp. 46–47). Contrino’s observation can be demonstrated by local films made by the sixth generation of directors, which knocked off Hollywood blockbusters from the top of box office revenues, such as *Lost in Thailand* (*renzai jiongtu zhi taijiong*, 2012) and *Tiny Times* (*xiao shidai*, 2013). In the 2014 China–Australia film coproduction forum, Miao Xiaotian, the Manager of CFCC, was asked by director Pang Hong
whether the government could release policy to let the Chinese film industry have more opportunities to coproduce with, and learn from, Hollywood. Miao (2014) fundamentally disagreed with the idea that Chinese filmmakers should learn systematically from Hollywood. Instead, Miao said, China is not that fancy about blockbusters as before, especially since last year. Some local films like Finding Mr. Right (Beijing Yushang Xiyatu) and American Dreams in China (Zhongguo Hehuoren) achieved a better box office than Hollywood films. China’s domestic box office has exceeded the American box office in the past two years, this is quite rare in the world, only Korea and India have had similar success. Ten years ago, when we asked for cooperation with Hollywood, they would say: you fix your piracy problem first. But since last year, the big studios have all come to China to look for cooperation opportunities. One of the big studios’ CEO, as I know, has come to China six or seven times in half a year. I believe that China’s film industry is now an integral part in the global film industry chain. I have confidence in China’s film.

So now it appears that China’s filmmakers are no longer satisfied to just learn from Hollywood; they are seeking to be equal and willing collaborators.

Conclusion

Film coproduction between China and the United States is challenging. The United States has the world’s most dominant film industry. It has attempted to test the convictions of the Chinese film authority by playing with coproduction rules, hoping to gain more market return with less sacrifice. The results have led to the ‘fake’ coproduction phenomenon. The CEO of Le Vision Pictures, Z. Zhao (2012), said, ‘coproduction with Hong Kong has promoted the development of domestic film for the past ten years; the coproduction with US will support us for fifty years in the future’ (p. 54). Chinese filmmakers want to learn from Hollywood and make use of its global distribution system. The Chinese government wants to borrow the Hollywood ‘boat’ to send Chinese culture around the world. A precondition for China’s soft power to become attractive to foreign audiences is in how it is received. The acceptance of Chinese culture and elements by international audiences is therefore based on two conditions: channels to distribute these products, and the packaging and marketing of products. The United States possesses ample room for meeting both conditions. Although real coproduction between China and the United States is full of challenges, it has the promise of blue-sky rewards.

At the moment, it seems that Hollywood tent-pole films are not providing sufficient Chinese elements to please the authorities. In contrast, China-led productions are full of Chinese content and are, therefore, granted approval much more readily. However, China-led productions are harder to distribute globally and rarely achieve strong box office returns overseas. Hollywood films now seem to speak louder about Chinese soft power than China’s own films or China-led productions. According to Rosen (2011), ‘Hollywood blockbuster films have in fact been far more effective in promoting China’s public diplomacy initiatives than China’s own films’. Hollywood blockbusters ‘have a financial interest in making China look good as deviations from a China-friendly strategy are punished either by the Chinese public at the box office or by film authorities through outright bans’ (Rosen, 2011). No matter how many obstacles or challenges exist for Sino-US collaboration and no matter whether the infrastructure for international film coproduction in China is ready, Hollywood is setting its course for China at full speed. From the Chinese side, according to the leading entertainment lawyer Allen Wang (personal communication, July, 2014),
there is a new trend that some Western companies, especially Hollywood’s Big Six\textsuperscript{10} studios, are trying to sign a slate of projects with Chinese film companies. Even for some films that are not going to be released in China, the Chinese companies are willing to do some investment in Western film or European film to get some market share outside of China. It is a really rapid development of media cooperation and film coproduction in China and outside

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**Notes**

1. Soft power is a concept that was coined by Joseph Nye in 1990 to describe a nation’s capacity to exert influence through foreign policy, political values and culture (Nye, 1990). China’s soft power model places heavy emphasis on its cultural influence.

2. Approved coproductions refer to Sino-US film coproductions that are approved and released by the Chinese government as domestic (and not imported) films.

3. Zhang Yimou is a Chinese film director, producer, writer, actor and former cinematographer. He is counted among the Fifth Generation of Chinese filmmakers, having made his directorial debut in 1987 with *Red Sorghum*. Zhang has won numerous awards and recognition, with Best Foreign Film nominations for *Ju Dou* in 1990, *Raise the Red Lantern* in 1991, and *Hero* in 2003 and so on.

4. Assisted production (协拍, or *xiepai*) refers to when a foreign party invests in production in China, and the equipment, apparatus, sites, services and so on, are provided by the Chinese party; that is, Chinese companies are contracted to provide services to the foreign party.

5. State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT), incorporated within The General Administration of Press and Publication in 2013, is now referred to as the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT). It is an executive branch under the State Council of the People’s Republic of China. Its main task is the administration and supervision of state-owned enterprises engaged in the television, radio and film industries. In China, the authorities directly responsible for regulating international collaborations are the SARFT and the China Film Coproduction Corporation (CFCC). SARFT is mainly responsible for film production, distribution and export, and also for implementing policies formulated by the central government. The CFCC is authorised by SARFT and is responsible for the administration of Sino-foreign cooperative films, and for providing coordination and other services.

6. In the whole process of China–foreign film coproduction, the CFCC will intervene twice, approving the script before production, making sure that the finished film has adhered to the script. The CFCC mainly reviews the script (Chinese translation), the financial status of the foreign coproducer and the basic structure of the project (which includes a review of crew personnel, investment and the locations for production work). The script is also reviewed by the CFCC and SARFT for compliance with China’s complex censorship rules. In most cases, changes to the shooting script are required before pre-production. SARFT has the right of final approval and final cut. Understanding and adhering to what has been approved previously are very important. If the final work does not adhere to what has been approved, films cannot be counted and screened as domestic releases in China.

7. The China Movie Channel (also known as CCTV-6) is under CCTV, a state-owned media giant under the umbrella of SARFT.

8. Yingke and Allen Wang’s team has provided legal service for several cases of Sino-US coproductions, such as the slate financing arrangement between TIK Films (China) and Lions Gate Entertainment (United States) beginning early 2015.

9. A tent-pole is a movie that is widely released and heavily promoted, expected to be very successful and thereby able to fund a range of related products or a series of subsequent movie releases.
10. The ‘Big Six’ are as follows: 20th Century Fox, Warner Bros., Paramount Pictures, Columbia Pictures, Universal Pictures and Walt Disney Pictures.

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