Hollywood movies and China: Analysis of Hollywood globalization and relationship management in China’s cinema market

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Abstract
China’s cinema market has been growing dramatically in recent years. Hollywood exports revenue-sharing movies to China to receive additional box-office revenues. Although globalization accelerates Hollywood movies’ domination in most global film markets, that is not the case in China. Hollywood studios encounter cultural and political complications in China’s cinema market. This research reviews the interplay of Hollywood globalization and the complexity of China’s cinema market, applies a relationship management perspective in analyzing Hollywood studios’ China-focused endeavors, identifies and discusses five key relations, and analyzes why and how Hollywood studios have strategically managed the key relations to boost their revenue-sharing movies’ box-office performance in China.

Keywords
China’s cinema market, globalization, Hollywood, relationship management, revenue-sharing movies

Introduction
China’s cinema market has been growing dramatically in recent years. In fact, China has become the largest cinema market outside North America (Mayyasi, 2016). Compared with the US$11.1 billion box office in North America in 2017, China’s box office reached a record of US$8.6 billion in 2017, an increase of US$2 billion from year 2016 (Frater, 2017a). It is estimated that more than
10 new cinema screens are added in China every day (Verrier, 2015). China has increased the number of movie screens from 12,407 in 2012 (Barnes, 2017) to 50,776 at the end of 2017 (Frater, 2017a), and the number is expected to reach 80,377 by 2021 according to the accounting firm PwC (Barnes, 2017). The cinema culture in China has become increasingly popular as more and more people in China become moviegoers. It is reported that more than 1.45 billion Chinese moviegoers visited cinemas in 2017, a 15% increase from 2016 (Tartaglione, 2017).

As the cinema market in China keeps developing and booming, Hollywood studios are taking the opportunity to gain extra box-office revenue by exporting revenue-sharing movies to China. Those revenue-sharing movies are usually the big-budget blockbusters produced by Hollywood’s big six studios: Walt Disney, Warner Bros, Paramount, Fox, Sony, and Universal (Papish, 2017). Currently, Hollywood studios take 25% of a revenue-sharing movie’s box-office revenue in China, with Chinese distribution and exhibition partners paying the tax and promotion cost (Lang & Frater, 2018; Richeri, 2016). In general, Hollywood movies have been doing well in China’s cinema market and accounted for more than one third of China’s box-office revenue in recent years. For example, 38.4% of China’s box office in 2015 was contributed by Hollywood movies (Brzeski, 2015). In 2016, imported foreign films (with the vast majority being Hollywood movies) accounted for 41.7% of China’s total box office (Brzeski, 2017). Some Hollywood titles achieved huge success in China. Transformers: Age of Extinction (i.e., Transformers 4) grossed US$320 million in China and became China’s best box-office movie in 2014 (Coonan, 2014a). Furious 7 made US$390 million box-office revenue in China in 2015, which even surpassed the ticket sales of US$349.3 million in North America (Verrier, 2015). The Fate of The Furious (i.e., Fast & Furious 8) grossed US$393 million in China in 2017 and became by far the highest grossing imported film in China (Tartaglione, 2017).

In spite of these successes, Hollywood studios are facing huge pressure in China’s cinema market. Not all the imported Hollywood movies grossed well in China in the past, and some productions such as Power Rangers and King Arthur: Legend of the Sword only had a so-so box-office performance in China (Barnes, 2017). Compared with their 45.5% box-office market share in China in 2014, Hollywood movies’ market share dropped in 2015 and 2016 (Brzeski, 2015, 2017). In the first 6 months of 2017, ticket sales for all of the imported films in China increased 35% over the same period of 2016, but the increase for Hollywood movies was only 1.7% (Barnes, 2017).

To improve Hollywood movies’ success in China and to secure a profitable market share of China’s box office, Hollywood studios need to have a good relationship with China. This study reviews film globalization and Hollywood domination in global markets, presents the complications that Hollywood faces in China’s cinema market, applies a relationship management perspective in analyzing the strategies and tactics Hollywood studios have used to appeal to China, and discusses how Hollywood studios manage the key relations to boost the success of their revenue-sharing movies in China. Through the ongoing discussion, this article contributes to the global film studies literature by answering two main questions: Why has relationship management become Hollywood studios’ priority in China in the context of globalization? What relations are crucial for Hollywood studios to strategically manage to secure and improve Hollywood movies’ box-office success in China?

This study does not examine Hollywood’s option of selling films to China as flat-rate title or as Hollywood–China coproductions. Flat-rate movies are not a popular option for Hollywood studios because studios usually cannot receive additional revenue from the movie’s box-office gross in China (“China’s Film Industry,” 2016; Kokas, 2017). Coproduction has not yet become a popular option for large Hollywood studios because there are strict policies regulating whether a movie will
be recognized by Chinese regulators as a coproduction and most studios have felt the production restrictions were burdensome and not worth the potential benefits (Brzeski & Roxborough, 2017; “China’s Film Industry,” 2016; Kokas, 2017).

Scholars of global media studies and film studies may find this study helpful in introducing a systematic (i.e., relationship management) approach to analyze and examine the interplay between the globalization of Hollywood and Hollywood studios’ adaptation endeavors in a local cinema marketplace (i.e., China) that resists the dominance of Hollywood culturally and politically. Newly established and small-size studios and film professionals may also find this study provides frameworks for entering and benefiting from China’s fast-growing cinema market.

Globalization of Hollywood and complexity of China’s cinema market

Globalization is a main concept in studying Hollywood cinema and its global film industry. Hollywood films have often been regarded as evident examples for discussions about globalization and its cultural impacts (Hozic, 2014). The story of film’s globalization is largely viewed as a Hollywood one (Miller & Maxwell, 2006). Globalization involves the interactions and contradictions of a variety of economical, political, and cultural forces at both global and local levels (Featherstone, 1990). On one hand, globalization pushes denationalization (Zurn, 2003), intensifies the dominance of Hollywood in the global film market (Jin, 2012), encourages spectatorial consumerism (Braester, 2015), and homogenizes the cinema culture worldwide (Braester, 2015; Gao, 2009). On the other hand, globalization leads to a multicultural diversity (Yoshimoto, 2003), brings about the revival of local cultures’ self-definition and self-identification (Featherstone, 1990), causes the emergence of the multiperspective approach as an alternative to the master narrative of globalization that Hollywood usually portrays (Manning & Shackford-Bradley, 2010), and forces national governments to adapt cultural policies to support domestic film industries and protect local cultures (Gao, 2009). Globalization has created a favorable economic environment for Hollywood studios to market their movies on a global scale. Globalization allows Hollywood to establish a highly systematic procedure for movie production, distribution, and exhibition in both domestic and global markets. However, the inherent contradictions of globalization pose challenges and uncertainty for Hollywood studios in some global markets, such as in China’s cinema market, due to the lack of control over film distribution and exhibition and due to the national government’s protectionist regulations and cultural policies on film industry. Yoshimoto (2003) argues that “what is often expected of scholars in film studies is no longer a deep knowledge of any particular national cinema” but the “expertise in the Cinema (Hollywood cinema) and a general familiarity with world cinema including Asian cinema” (p. 454). Therefore, when exploring and studying Hollywood studios’ efforts to optimize their revenue-sharing movies’ potentials in China, it is necessary to review the interplay between Hollywood globalization and the complexity of China’s cinema market.

The flow of media images and narratives across geographic locations and communities is one of the “scapes” of globalization (i.e., mediascape; Appadurai, 1990, 1996). Globalization is an inevitable force for the emergence of Hollywood’s mega film studios (Jin, 2012), and the global film markets have been controlled and led by a handful of Hollywood studios (Hozic, 2014). Globalization of Hollywood film industry accelerates the opening-up of other countries’ domestic cinema markets (Jin, 2012) and sets the stage for Hollywood productions to travel to other cultural regions. Accordingly, Hollywood studios need to transform their film productions to “transnational” ones to
pursue economical success in other global film markets in which they encounter cultural challenges and resistance. To cater to the sensation-starved global audiences and maintain the dominance in other film cultures, Hollywood studios are committed to continuously producing costly blockbusters and cinematic spectacles by hybridizing their productions with other cultural specificity (Ezra & Rowden, 2006). Hollywood studios develop this type of transnational films, which reduce or eliminate cultural complexity, to be able to successfully participate in global cultural markets (Crane, 2014). Indeed, transnational films simplify cultural differences, expand references to other countries, and can be understood easily by foreign viewers (Crane, 2014; Higbee & Lim, 2010). Transnational films also combine national, international, and post-national elements together, and blend cultures and nations deliberately (Vanderschelden, 2007). Studios make movies transnational not only in terms of content but also in terms of production, by filming in English with international casts (Vanderschelden, 2007). Transnational movies utilize transnational superstars and international personnel and travel across borders more or less freely (Ezra & Rowden, 2006). Nowadays, as Crane (2014) has observed, “Hollywood films have become increasingly transnational” (p. 377).

Films are cultural products that have always been transnationally diffused (Hozic, 2014). When Hollywood movies travel to China, Hollywood studios would naturally think of how to transnationalize their movies appropriately for Chinese audiences. However, the cultural and ideological differences between the Western and Chinese audiences pose a challenge for Hollywood studios: How to make movies “transnational” enough to appeal to the Chinese audiences? There are abundant Chinese national, cultural, and historical resources that film producers can select and include in movies, and Hollywood studios did well in this respect for some movies adapted from Chinese folklore and legends (e.g., Mulan and Kung Fu Panda; Li, 2010). As for other blockbusters, the challenge is no longer to decide whether or not to include Chinese cultural specificity and elements but to figure out how to embrace and integrate them in the movie to attract and appease Chinese audiences.

Globalization has led to Hollywood’s domination in most of the film markets worldwide, but Hollywood has not yet claimed its domination, box-office wise, in China’s cinema market. In recent years, China has been able to limit and control Hollywood movies’ share of China’s annual total box office to around 40% through specific protectionist regulations and policies such as import quotas, blackout periods, short promotion windows, and stacked-up releases (Frater, 2017b). Compared with other global film markets, Hollywood movies travel less freely across borders to China’s cinema market. The Chinese government currently only allows a quota of 34 revenue-sharing foreign movies, 14 of which are required to be in special 3D or IMAX formats, to be imported and screened in China every year (Kokas, 2017; Richeri, 2016). Imposing the import quota is one of China’s cultural policies to protect its domestic film industry and local cinema market (Crane, 2014). Although it has been argued that the cancellation of the import quota could accelerate the China’s domestic film industry’s globalization process (Li, 2010), current political and economical situations indicate the import quota will continue to be at play for a while. Actually, Hollywood has been expecting to renegotiate the terms with China via US trade representatives in the year of 2018, since the 5-year agreements (including the import quota) between US and China film industries were set to be renegotiated after the year of 2017 (Bloomberg Businessweek, 2018; Frater, 2017b). Hollywood also wants to raise the box-office revenue share to at least 28%, even though that would be still less than the 40% Hollywood usually receives in most other global markets (Detrick, 2018). China has signaled a willingness to negotiate to increase the foreign film import quota and possibly allow foreign studios to have a larger share (more than the current 25%) of imported films’ box-office receipts (Pierrepont, 2018). However, the renegotiation talks have been stalled due to the escalated trade tension and tariff
disputes between the United States and China since March of 2018 (Bloomberg Businessweek, 2018; Lang & Frater, 2018). It remains unclear when the renegotiation will resume and whether a new agreement will eventually be reached. These uncertainties call for Hollywood studios to continue complying with the current film import policies and regulations.

Before released to global markets, Hollywood transnational movies “must be subjected to increasingly thorough forms of cultural and ideological cleansing” to assure the mainstream inoffensiveness of the movies (Ezra & Rowden, 2006, p. 2). This is particularly true for Hollywood movies entering China’s cinema market. China imposes strict censorship on all imported films as a means to protect its national culture while resisting conflicting Western values in the context of film globalization. Movies that do not pass the censorship regulations cannot be distributed or screened in China. If Hollywood studios want certain movies to be played in China, they first need to submit those movies for import review by the Chinese media regulation and censorship agency (Kokas, 2017). State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT) used to be the government agency which controlled foreign film imports and decided which foreign films could be screened in China (Fish, 2018; Richeri, 2016), but SAPPRFT was abolished by Chinese government in March of 2018 and film industry regulation is now assigned to the Propaganda Department of the Communist Party’s Central Committee (Frater, 2018; Tartaglione, 2018). Some of the key duties of the Propaganda Department on film regulation include reviewing movie content, supervising imported and exported movies, and guiding movie production, distribution, and screening (Tartaglione, 2018). The change signals a more rigid censorship over foreign films and a tighter regulatory control of film sector (Fish, 2018; Frater, 2018; Tartaglione, 2018). Under the current changes, there is a need for Hollywood studios to cooperate with the new content-censorship state institute, understand the new rules in censoring process, and rethink how their transnational movies could pass the likely stricter review process and obtain screening approval.

Globalization has pushed Hollywood major studios to become global capitalists that have control over the distribution and exhibition network in many global film markets by owning some of the local film distributing and exhibiting corporations through vertical and horizontal integration (Jin, 2012). Indeed, the success of Hollywood movies in global film markets can be attributed to the extensive networks of distribution which are owned and operated by Hollywood studios (Jin, 2012; Miskell, 2016). Controlling the international distribution and exhibition has given Hollywood studios additional control over their audiences (Miller, Govil, McMurria, Maxwell, & Wang, 2005). However, Hollywood does not have these controls in China’s Cinema Market. Hollywood and foreign studios are not allowed to distribute their movies independently in China, but are required to partner with Chinese distribution companies (“The CFI Guide to Film Production in China,” 2016; Mayyasi, 2016). Even though a Hollywood movie is approved for distribution and screening in China, Hollywood studios then face another challenge—the short notice window and promotion period. Currently, Hollywood studios usually would not know if a revenue-sharing movie can be screened in China and would not be notified by China’s Film Bureau/China Film Group until 4 to 6 weeks prior to the movie’s China release date (Frater, 2017b; Lang & Frater, 2018). The short-time notice frustrates Hollywood studios and dramatically limits their marketing campaigns (Frater, 2017b). With these restrictions, Hollywood studios would have to work on their relationship with the Chinese film distribution and exhibition partners to ensure their movies will be well promoted.

In the current film globalization context, complexity of China’s cinema market is largely caused by China’s cultural policies and regulations. It restrains Hollywood studios’ autonomy to fully control movie content and their ability to promote the box-office-promising titles, which consequently affects Hollywood’s dominating potential. In addition to handling the complications in China’s cinema
market, Hollywood starts to face increasing competitions from Chinese domestic films. Globalization makes Hollywood movies a global success, but meanwhile it has promoted the circulation of cutting-edge film production techniques and technologies to other film industries. Hollywood’s blockbuster formula of using mega budget, outstanding digital visual effects, and superstars has been more or less adopted by Chinese film industry. The success of *Avatar* motivated Chinese film industry leaders to use the blockbuster model for Chinese cinema which has focused on emulating Hollywood (Braester, 2015). Chinese film industry has plentiful talent resources to pose a long-term competition (Li, 2010). Recently, Chinese filmmakers have presented a few successful made-in-China blockbusters which can battle with Hollywood blockbusters in terms of box-office performance. According to IMDb, the recent Chinese domestic movies *Wolf Warrior 2* (2017) and *Operation Red Sea* (2018) grossed at US$870M and US$568M, respectively. Thus, China’s domestic film industry has started to set pressure on Hollywood studios and their blockbusters.

Whether or not the US–China renegotiation on import quota, revenue sharing, distribution controls, and other terms will resume or regardless how long it will take to reach a new agreement, it is time for Hollywood studios to strategically rethink their roles, positions, and situations in contemporary China. It has been clear that Hollywood revenue-sharing movies’ box-office performance now depends heavily on how well Hollywood studios are able to appease Chinese audiences and how successfully they can collaborate and cooperate with the key players of China’s cinema market. Hollywood has been exporting movies to China for more than two decades, and Hollywood major studios have accumulated ample experience in this market and already established some relationship networks. Facing the constant uncertainties, restrictions, and competitions, managing relations is more crucial than ever in the current macro market environment for Hollywood to foster and expand consumer foundation and obtain further support from their Chinese audiences, business partners, government and state regulating agencies, and the local media. Hollywood studios appear to strategically switch the priority in China’s cinema market from economic domination to relationship management to sustain and possibly improve Hollywood movies’ box-office performance.

**Relationship management in China’s cinema market**

Relationship management enables corporations to establish and maintain mutually beneficial relations with the key public, audiences, and players (Ledingham, 2006; Phillips, 2006) and the relations in turn could affect the corporations’ mission direction and goals (Dozier, Grunig, & Grunig, 1995). This is particularly true for Hollywood Studios in China’s cinema market, especially since Hollywood does not, or more precisely, is unable to dominate there as in other global markets. It is a reciprocity-based win–win situation for both Hollywood and China if Hollywood studios can manage to build mutually beneficial relations with the key players of China’s cinema market to assure their movies’ readiness to achieve box-office success. On one hand, Hollywood studios can benefit economically from the additional box-office revenues collected from the world’s second-largest cinema market. On the other hand, China uses Hollywood productions to stimulate its film market, and Chinese film professionals and media corporations can take the opportunity to learn from Hollywood through frequent, close collaborations. Detailed discussion (see the previous section) on the interplay between Hollywood globalization and the complexity of China’s cinema market has subtly revealed the kind of relations Hollywood studios need to manage strategically. Applying the relationship management perspective in examining a global cultural industry’s (i.e.,
Hollywood’s) expansion in a foreign local market (i.e., China’s cinema market) is an unorthodox but complementary attempt to further understand the economic impacts of globalization on both the industry and the local market through analyzing the cultural and political representations and renditions. Analysis of relationship management provides meaningful frameworks for interpreting Hollywood’s coping mechanism for maximizing profit in a global film market in which cultural resistance and government interventions are prevalent.

Vast evidence suggests that there are five key relations that Hollywood studios are attempting to manage in China in hope of helping their revenue-sharing movies achieve box-office success: government relations, general audience relations, fan-based community relations, investment/promotion partner relations, and media relations. Although Hollywood movie marketing around the globe is considered as highly standardized (Eliashberg, Elberse, & Leenders, 2006), Hollywood studios have utilized specific China-focused strategies and tactics to manage these five relations and to adjust to the constantly changing market environment. Indeed, corporations create programs and activities that can promote and benefit relationships to gain support from the other parties, meet their expectations, and achieve the corporations’ goals (Ledingham, 2006). Hollywood studios aim to “sell” their revenue-sharing movies as cultural products to the China market and secure box-office success. Possessing these mutually beneficial relations would gain the studios the support they need and could help their movies be effectively approved, promoted, distributed, exhibited, and received. These relations thus can be viewed as the nonmonetary cultural capital that the studios invested in China’s cinema market, given that the studios could potentially maximize box-office profit through managing the relations and possibly enhance the reputation and visibility of “Hollywood-made” productions, especially within a relatively short promotion period.

The five relationship managements of Hollywood studios are discussed in the following section. Facts, data, and research findings were collected from journal articles, mainstream news media (e.g., Hollywood Reporter, Fortune, Washington Post, etc.), and a US government report (created by the US Congress) on Hollywood movies in China’s film market, and used as evidence and supportive material to illustrate and analyze Hollywood studios’ relationship management efforts. This investigative method of presenting multiple exemplary real cases to support analysis and arguments allows the critical evaluation of those confirmed relationship management practices and the provision of constructive suggestions and implications, for many of the strategies, tactics, and activities implemented by Hollywood studios can be reapplied, adapted, or reinvented in other cases and situations.

Government relations

Government relations is the most crucial relationship that Hollywood studios must strategically manage, because Chinese government and its film censorship regulatory department (i.e., the Propaganda Department; previously SAPPRTF) are the gate keepers for imported films and hold the power of deciding whether or not a Hollywood blockbuster can be played in Chinese theaters. If a blockbuster cannot pass the censorship review, it will not be imported and therefore lose the chance to gain additional box-office revenues in the world’s second-largest cinema market. Hollywood studios thus need to make an effort to maintain a good relationship with the film regulation and censorship department of the Chinese government by complying with the censorship requirements to make sure the movies they intend to export would pass the censorship review and receive distribution and screening approval.
Chinese government does not want foreign films to negatively impact Chinese culture and society or to promote a Western model of society which features individualism (Richeri, 2016). Chinese government establishes self-conscious state policies to “project a positive image of China on the global stage” (Curtin, 2012, p. 7). Under government requirements and policies, films are encouraged to promote healthy culture (Gao, 2009) and positive ideas about Chinese society and government policy (Li, 2010). Film contents should not disrupt social order or threaten the interests and unity of the state (Gao, 2009) but should support social morality and uphold the principles of the Chinese Constitution (O’Connor & Armstrong, 2015). To pass the censorship, Hollywood studios have removed certain scenes that may negatively portray China from movies. For example, in Mission Impossible 3, a scene that shows clothes drying on a clothesline in Shanghai was deleted from the Chinese version of the movie, because it was not a positive portrayal of Shanghai (Langfitt, 2015). Hollywood studios also have tried to make a movie’s storyline display China in a positive light. For example, Transformers 4 depicts the Chinese Ministry of Defense favorably and shows the good relationship between mainland China and Hong Kong (Kokas, 2017).

Since there is still no film rating or classification system in China, all movies shown in China’s theaters are required to be appropriate for people of all ages (Lang & Frater, 2018). Contents of excessive violence, nudity, indecency, and inappropriate language are generally prohibited (Gao, 2009; Langfitt, 2015). Although Hollywood studios have modified the content of their movies and have visually increased and emphasized violence, action, sex, and fantasy to attract global audiences (Crane, 2014), studios have to make changes to or delete certain scenes to make contents suitable to all age groups of audience in China. Otherwise, the blockbuster may not be approved to be screened. The movie Deadpool was banned from screening in China, for it contains foulmouthed and violent contents but its studio was unwilling to clean the plot up to comply with China’s censorship regulations (Robinson, 2016). Now that film regulations have been transferred to the Propaganda Department, whose primary responsibility is to monitor content to ensure the published content is consistent with the principles of the Communist Party of China (“Agencies Responsible for Censorship in China,” n.d.), the film content censorship process is presumably to become more rigorous. Hollywood studios would need to be more sensitive to the contents of a movie to avoid offending the government officials and censorship regulators accidentally.

Maintaining good relationship with the government can potentially help Hollywood blockbuster achieve box-office success. Some Hollywood studios have even made special side deals with the government in exchange for box-office success. Disney opened a theme park in Shanghai and gave up an unprecedented amount of control of the park and merchandising rights to the Chinese government (Robinson, 2016). In return, the Chinese government allowed Disney’s movie Zootopia to be played in Chinese theaters for two extra weeks beyond the original screening of 30 days, which was a very rare extension for a Hollywood movie (Robinson, 2016). As a result, Zootopia grossed US$235 million in China and became the highest grossing imported foreign movie in China in 2016 and the highest grossing animation movie in China to date (Zhang, 2017).

To appease the government officials who are in charge of the film sector and demonstrate the willingness to cooperate and contribute to the Chinese film industry, some Hollywood studios choose to become local players in China, establish offices, and invest in China’s media industry. For example, DreamWorks Animation has partnered with Chinese state-owned businesses to found and invest in Oriental DreamWorks in Shanghai (“China’s Film Industry,” 2016; Kokas, 2017). Director James Cameron established the Cameron Pace Group company in China to provide 3D technology and production services to Chinese filmmakers (Kokas, 2017). These Hollywood major players
have invested in China under the Chinese government policies and are becoming part of Chinese media industries (Kokas, 2017). Although Hollywood studios employ these actions for their own expansion in China, they indeed please the Chinese government since these moves actually can help China’s domestic film industry develop as well as boost the cinematic economy in China.

General audience relations

Hollywood movies’ box-office performance in China highly depends on whether or not Chinese audiences choose to watch them in theaters. Film industry is one of the important US industries that can be highly affected by Chinese market (Kokas, 2017). As a result of increasing urbanization and education, more Chinese people choose film as the most important cultural product to consume (Li, 2010). Hollywood studios have applied a variety of approaches to appeal to the Chinese moviegoers—both general audiences and fans (discussed in a later section).

To pursue profits, filmmakers produce big-budget movies that can appeal to the “general movie going public,” which is the primary source of box-office revenues (Goff, Wilson, & Zimmer, 2017, p. 270). General audiences are the ordinary moviegoers who go to theaters for entertainment and choose to watch a movie that fits their schedules, or appeals to them, or has good word-of-mouth or rating, or suits the family gathering occasions. The global audiences’ movie preferences are becoming similar to those of American audiences (Fu & Govindaraju, 2010). Compared with dramas, Chinese audiences prefer large-scale action/science-fiction blockbusters and 3D-effect foreign films (Kwak & Zhang, 2011). Hollywood animation movies have also been doing quite well in China, due to the facts that they can be easily dubbed into Chinese language (Robinson, 2016; Swanson, 2015) and have relatively simple story lines that Chinese audiences enjoy as family films (Swanson, 2015). Providing what the Chinese audiences generally prefer, Hollywood studios have exported a decent number of action, science fiction, animation blockbusters in 2D and 3D (IMAX) formats to China market in recent years. With the help of those high-quality blockbusters, Hollywood is trying to strengthen Chinese audience’s trust and confidence in Hollywood movies, reintroduce the blockbuster consumerism culture to them, and possibly discourage pirated viewing via informal channels.

Chinese media audiences are diverse while expressing enthusiasm for national and local artifacts (Curtin, 2012). Hollywood studios have included Chinese elements in movies to attract Chinese audiences. Transformers: Age of Extinction utilized a significant amount of Chinese components (Owczarski, 2017) and showcased a Chongqing scenic spot and highly recognizable sites in Beijing and Hong Kong (Coonan, 2014b). It has been found that including Chinese elements in a Hollywood movie is positively related to the movie’s box-office performance in China (Kwak & Zhang, 2011). The movie Gravity portrayed the Chinese space station and space program and grossed US$71 million in China, 10% of the movie’s total gross worldwide (O’Connor & Armstrong, 2015). Hollywood intends to include Chinese elements to potentially satisfy Chinese audiences and attract more viewers to the theater. Indeed, Chinese audiences generally would feel proud and comfortable when they see Chinese elements in a Hollywood movie (Chen, 2009; Kwak & Zhang, 2011). However, the Chinese component should be integrated in the movie in a smooth and seamless way. If not, it may disrupt the storyline, be negatively perceived by audiences, and be considered pandering. For example, in the movie Independence Day: Resurgence, a Chinese milk product placement was so obviously gratuitous that the audiences rolled their eyes and accused the movie of pandering (Robinson, 2016).
Hollywood studios also have tried to accommodate Chinese audiences by having special opening days for their movies. For Hollywood movies in China, research shows that timing the release around China’s peak seasons (i.e., holidays when the Chinese family gathers) is positively related to their box-office performance (Kwak & Zhang, 2011). Moreover, a movie’s opening week sales performance is important to its success (Sussan & Chinta, 2016). About 40% of a movie’s box-office revenue is collected in the first week of opening (Hozic, 2014). Considering the opening effect (Brown, Camerer, & Lovallo, 2012), Hollywood studios have attempted, within their abilities, to request propitious opening days for movies to be shown in China’s theaters. For example, *Furious 7* had an unusual opening day (i.e., Sunday) in China, which attracted more Chinese audiences to the theaters and helped the movie set China’s new opening-day box-office record (Cunningham, 2015).

Another approach Hollywood studios have used to appeal to Chinese general audiences is to create a special version of a movie preview or of the movie itself. Movie preview videos which have most of the clips from the movie itself are considered one of the most effective and principal marketing approaches to advertise a movie (Sussan & Chinta, 2016). For Chinese consumers, Hollywood studios even make the preview more teasing. For example, when Disney promoted *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* in China, the preview trailer included footage that had not been seen before by the US audiences (Huddleston, 2015). In addition, the version of a Hollywood movie shown in China may be edited to include additional scenes to appeal to Chinese viewers, scenes which are not included in the version released in the US or other global markets. For example, the Chinese version of *Iron Man 3* added a scene in which a Chinese doctor describes Chinese medical abilities and performs life-saving surgery on the Marvel’s beloved hero Tony Frank (Wan, 2013). These attempts all demonstrate that Hollywood studios have paid extra attention to Chinese audiences and are willing to make additional efforts to maintain the respectable relationship with them.

**Fan-based community relations**

In addition to the relationship management efforts that Hollywood studios make to cater to the general Chinese movie audiences, studios especially strive to please the fans. It is not surprising that some Hollywood franchises and movie stars have a large fan base in China. The success of *Fast & Furious* movies in China may have made Hollywood studios realize that good relations with the Chinese fans’ communities could boost box-office performance. Fandom and fan culture have been widely studied as important concepts and phenomenon in research of pop culture and film studies (e.g., Barbas, 2001; Buckley, 2009; Einwächter & Simon, 2017; Harrington, Bielby, & Bardo, 2011; Orgeron, 2009; Soukup, 2006). Different from the general movie audiences, fans of movies and film franchises attend cinemas more frequently (López-Sintas & García-Álvarez, 2006), are “in the know” and knowledgeable about contents and subjects (Beaty, 2016), seek pleasure or a promise of future pleasure from film productions (Beaty, 2016), are regarded as content experts and having positive impact on the methods of productions (Liang & Shen, 2016), and can be counted upon as reliable customers (Einwächter & Simon, 2017). In similar fashion, fans of stars excessively admire and worship the stars and their personality, desire to know more about them, actively participate in star-related cultural products and activities (Barbas, 2001), and are motivated to consume the media products (Soukup, 2006). In short, fans of movie franchises are eager to see the sequels and fans of movie stars would love to watch a movie in which their favorite star plays a role.

Since some Hollywood movie franchises have cultivated loyal fans in China over the years, Hollywood studios arrange blockbuster sequels to be screened in China. According to Universal Pictures’ president of international distribution, the success of *Furious 7* in China can be attributed
to the foundation laid in the China’s cinema market by *Fast & Furious 4* in 2009 and the *Fast & Furious 6* in 2013 (Cunningham, 2015). The support of Chinese fans contributed to the franchise sequel’s success in China. Indeed, it is reported that Chinese movie viewers are more satisfied with blockbuster sequels than blockbuster nonsequels (Sussan & Chinta, 2016).

To promote a movie franchise, Hollywood studios sometimes hire Chinese celebrities for promotion purpose only and attempt to win the support of the celebrities’ fans, even though the celebrities do not play any roles in the movie. For example, considering Chinese audiences are unfamiliar with the stories of the *Star Wars* series (Leadbeater, 2017), Disney recruited Lu Han, a well-known Chinese pop star, to hype the *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* movie in China (Huddleston, 2015). Han has a huge number of fans and a massive online following in China, including 12 million fans then (47 million now) on social media Weibo (Brzeski, 2016). Even though Han did not play a role in the movie, he was hired by Disney to serve as an “honorary Jedi” ambassador to promote the movie at the marketing campaign events in China and perform the movie’s official Chinese theme song (Brzeski, 2016). Han’s fans might thus go ahead to watch the movie that they normally would not to support their idol.

To appeal to the fans of movie stars, Hollywood studios have been casting famous and well-known actors/actresses in blockbusters. Casting superstars who have international recognition really works in China, for it is reported that the reputation of the lead actor/actress is positively related to the box-office performance of Hollywood movies in China (Kwak & Zhang, 2011). Hollywood studios also strategically send the main cast to China prior to the release of a movie and arrange China tours to strengthen fan relations. Chinese fans could thus have the opportunity to meet their stars in person and interact with them. For example, the lead cast of *Furious 7*, Vin Diesel, Jason Statham, and Michelle Rodriguez, came to Beijing to attend a premiere event (Coonan, 2015). The cast members got a warm reception from their Chinese fans, and their China visit was believed to be a big contributor to the success of *Furious 7* in China’s cinema market according to Universal’s president of international distribution (Cunningham, 2015).

Hollywood studios also often cast Chinese stars in the movies that they plan to export to China. The participation of Chinese stars in a Hollywood movie is reported to be positively associated with the movie’s Chinese box-office performance (Kwak & Zhang, 2011). *Transformers: Age of Extinction* cast Chinese actress Li Bingbing to play a major role (Coonan, 2014b; Owczarski, 2017) and it had the highest box-office revenue in China in 2014 (Coonan, 2014a). The appearance of Chinese actors and actresses in Hollywood movies not only pleases and satisfies the fans but also helps generate high expectations among Chinese general audiences. Including Chinese stars in Hollywood movies is an easier approach for studios than are other types of revenue-sharing collaborations (Kokas, 2017). Hollywood studios are likely to continue using the approach to help their movies appeal to Chinese fans and audiences.

Hollywood studios also actively seek extra opportunities for the movie stars to reach out to the fans during the promotion period in China. When promoting *Transformers: Age of Extinction*, the leading cast made an online video to send good luck wishes to 10 million Chinese high school graduates on their college entrance exams (Coonan, 2014b). Fans appreciated the kind gesture and felt connected to their stars. General moviegoers might start to become fans simply due to this kind gesture.

*Investment/distribution partner relations*

To advance box-office gross in China’s growing cinema market, Hollywood studios have strong incentives to pursue collaborative deals with Chinese companies (Kokas, 2017). Hollywood studios have embraced the idea of collaborating with Chinese media companies and film agencies as
production and promotion partners. Some Hollywood movies have received production budgets from Chinese investors (Kokas, 2017). China Movie Channel (CCTV6) and its online subsidiary M1905.com were Paramount’s production and promotion partners for the movie *Transformers: Age of Extinction* (Coonan, 2014b). Through Hollywood–China collaboration, Paramount lowered its financial risk and smoothed the path for the movie into China’s cinema market (Schwartzel & Burkitt, 2014).

Collaboration with distributors is beneficial to Hollywood studios, for it helps Hollywood movies get large distribution in China’s cinema market. China Film Group, the largest state-run movie distributor in China, was a production investment partner of the Universal Pictures’ *Furious 7* and took away about 10% of the film’s revenue in China (Qin, 2015). In return, *Furious 7* played on about 70% of movie screens and had more than 90,000 show times per day in China (Qin, 2015). As a result, it grossed more from China’s cinema market than from America’s box office (Verrier, 2015). Distribution of foreign movies in China is almost entirely administered by two state-owned film distributors: China Film Group and Huaxia Film Distribution (“The CFI Guide to Film Production in China,” 2016; Lang & Frater, 2018). It is important for Hollywood studios to maintain healthy relations with these Chinese distribution partners to try to seek investment deals and secure advantageous release for their movies.

Hollywood studios also attempt to establish investment partnerships with Chinese companies by placing their products and services in movies. Chinese product placements in Hollywood movies may be largely unnoticed by American and other global audiences but are easily recognized and noticed by Chinese viewers (O’Connor & Armstrong, 2015). In the movie *Captain America: Civil War*, Tony Frank and other Avengers switched phones from LG brand to Vivo, which is a lower end Chinese phone brand that does not even sell products in the United States (Robinson, 2016). If Hollywood studios have an agreement with Chinese investment partners to display the partners’ products or services in the movie, studios should honor the agreement. Otherwise, the relationship would be affected and the movie’s distribution in China could be at risk. For example, one of the Paramount’s Chinese investors, Pangu, threatened to file a lawsuit to postpone the *Transformers 4* movie’s release in China, because its hotel did not get the 20-second appearance in the movie as the product-placement contract promised (Makinen, 2014; Owczarski, 2017). Although a last-minute negotiation between Paramount and Pangu worked and Pangu decided to not file the lawsuit to postpone the movie’s opening in China (Makinen, 2014), Paramount could have avoided the dispute if it had closely communicated with its Chinese investment partner to clarify the agreement terms.

**Media relations**

Given that Hollywood studios usually only have 4 to 6 weeks (or sometimes less) to promote blockbusters in China, good media relations is exactly what studios need to get their blockbusters well covered and promoted in various Chinese local media outlets in such a short time. When discussing globalized films’ local reception in China, Wang (2009) presented examples that illustrate media hype and media publicity events could help maximize a movie’s box-office revenue in China. Since almost all movie marketing activities are completed before the launch of a new movie (Eliashberg et al., 2006), Hollywood studios often arrange premier events, press conferences, and media interviews in China’s major cities to promote and increase the visibility of their soon-to-be-released movies. For example, before *Furious 7* was released in China in April 2015, a mini red carpet event and a press conference were held in Beijing in March, which received heavy coverage from Chinese local media (Cunningham, 2015; Loh, 2015).
When responding to media interviews, the movie director and the cast members often give what the Chinese media want to hear by expressing their friendliness and gratitude to Chinese audiences and by sharing possible future movie plans related to China. For example, when interviewed by media during the Hong Kong red carpet premiere of *Transformers: Age of Extinction*, director Michael Bay said that what impressed him most about the city were the people and the people were great (Jenkins, 2014). When giving media interviews for *Furious 7*, Van Diesel, the main cast member, hinted that China was very likely to be the setting for the next *Fast and Furious* installment (Loh, 2015).

Hollywood studios sometimes create media stunts in China, with the help of their Chinese promotion partners, by exhibiting the symbolic characters and features from the movie to receive extensive media coverage. For example, Disney created a media stunt for the film *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* by flying 500 stormtroopers to China and lining them up on the Great Wall, and billboards were set up on the Great Wall to exhibit the Chinese translation of “The Force Awakens” message (Groves, 2015).

To reach the new generations of Chinese moviegoers, Hollywood studios even try to build relations with online digital media. Some Hollywood studios have strategically used Mtime (an integrated Chinese website with a film database, movie show times, news, reviews, rating scores, and online ticket sales) to promote their movies (Barnes & Qin, 2015). For example, 20th Century Fox utilized Mtime as an online media resource when promoting *Kingsman: The Secret Service*, and Mtime generated five comprehensive editorials and heavily promoted the movie on its app within a short promotion period of 3 weeks (Barnes & Qin, 2015).

In summary, managing the five relations serves one ultimate goal of Hollywood studios: to optimize Hollywood movies’ box-office potential in China. Through the above analysis and discussion, it is obvious that relationship management penetrates through different stages of a movie’s theatrical life from production to distribution, promotion, and exhibition. Numerous examples and evidence have demonstrated that the relationship management strategies and activities can enhance the box-office performance of Hollywood movies in China. Hollywood studios will most likely continue managing these relations through film production to exhibition and also explore new and creative approaches to strengthen these mutually beneficial relations in China’s cinema market.

**Conclusion**

China’s cinema market is booming and has become the most lucrative cinema market outside North America. However, only a limited number of revenue-sharing foreign movies are imported every year by China to screen in theaters. Although film globalization enables Hollywood to dominate in most global markets, that is not the case in China. The restrictions imposed by China, such as import quotas, content censorship, short-time promotion notice, and so forth, restrain Hollywood’s expansion in this growing market. The escalated trade tension also casts enormous uncertainties on the future of Hollywood in the Middle Kingdom. Facing the complexity of China’s cinema market, the rising competition from Chinese domestic film industry, and the unpredictable geopolitical impact of trade negotiation, Hollywood studios seem to have switched gears toward actively and proactively managing relations with Chinese key players of the cinema market to ensure Hollywood movies have a good chance to achieve box-office success in such a passive, disadvantageous environment. It has been long and widely agreed among critics and theorists that globalization presents an issue of representability and it is difficult to represent the many facets and perspectives of globalization (Manning & Shackford-Bradley, 2010). Applying the relationship
management perspective in analyzing Hollywood studios’ efforts and endeavors that are made to boost Hollywood movies’ box-office performance seems to be a logical and systematical way to represent the outcomes and contradictions of Hollywood globalization in China’s cinema market.

Globalization has helped Hollywood studios become mega capitalists with extensive networks for big-budget film production, distribution, and exhibition on a worldwide scale. Globalization enhances the consumerism culture of Hollywood blockbusters among global audiences and incentivizes Hollywood studios to make their movies more transnational by incorporating superstars, international casts, and various types of multicultural content in their films. While Hollywood’s globalization has created a favorable economic environment for Hollywood studios to promote and profit from their blockbusters in many global cinema markets, it has encountered both cultural and political resistance in China. Hollywood movies in China present an example that demonstrates how a globalized cultural industry (i.e., Hollywood) may overcome local resistance to achieve economic success in the global market. To pursue economic benefit while facing local resistance, Hollywood studios initialize their coping mechanism and adapt their movie production and marketing strategies and activities to respond to the challenges. Although Hollywood studios may not extensively localize their cultural products in the context of globalization, they have at least made an effort to manage key relations by locally customizing their production and promotion endeavors so that Hollywood movies can generate profitable box-office revenues in China.

Through relationship management, Hollywood studios can actively send friendly signals in China: We are here to participate and share, not to take over or replace. Hollywood studios could carefully monitor the relationships and proactively detect, discover, resolve the merging expectations or concerns of Chinese audiences, collaboration partners, media personnel, and state regulatory agencies to smooth the path for their revenue-sharing movies. Managing relations may not be able to directly determine the production value or quality of a Hollywood movie; however, it could help create a favorable environment in which a movie can be well promoted, distributed, and received. Even if the current marketing restrictions remain unchanged and a new agreement between Hollywood and China does not take place soon, the overall profit Hollywood collects from China will still increase as long as managing relations enables Hollywood movies to continue contributing to (roughly 40% of) China’s total annual box-office revenue, since that revenue is expected to keep growing in the coming years. Managing relations hence promotes the ideology of harmonious coexistence in the current sharing-economy film market of China where both Hollywood and China benefit from each other while seeking greater cinematic prosperity. Analyzing Hollywood studios’ China-focus efforts from the relationship management perspective may also provide some insights for foreign media and cultural industries as to how other cultural products may enter and expand in contemporary China.

Globalization also means more opportunities for Chinese film industry to develop and grow (Li, 2010). Relationship management of Hollywood Studios in China’s cinema market is a win–win process for both Hollywood and Chinese film industry. While Hollywood studios manage the relations with their Chinese partners, Chinese film corporations have the chance to learn from Hollywood and its productions. Chinese filmmakers can even seek coproducing opportunities to further collaborate and cooperate with Hollywood production teams and specialized professionals (Kokas, 2017; Richeri, 2016). As one of the Chinese state authorities in charge of film industry once commented, China has to appropriate the methods that Hollywood film industry has used to lead its success (Braester, 2015). The intimate interactions with Hollywood studios present learning opportunities for Chinese cinema professionals and pioneers. Although Chinese film industry
is far behind Hollywood and it may take a decade before China could make films that technologi-cally match Hollywood productions, as pointed out by one of China’s most successful directors (Braester, 2015), the wide gap between the two film industries is starting to narrow slowly. With its constant development and persistent attempts, Chinese film industry is hoping to leave its own marks in the global film markets someday soon. Chinese cinema would then face the similar challenging situations in other global film markets as Hollywood does today in China. The relationship management efforts of Hollywood studios would then be helpful in providing some guidelines for Chinese studios on how to optimize Chinese movies’ box-office potential overseas.

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