

From China to Malaysia: Understanding The Cultural and Economic Dynamics of Imported Chinese Films

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ABSTRACT

The connection between China's diplomatic engagements abroad and its trans-border film trade holds considerable importance. Inherent in this dynamic is cross-cultural interaction and inter-cultural communication. Malaysia's support for China's Belt and Road Initiative has fostering a growing cultural exchange, particularly through the trade of Chinese films, some of which have achieved significant box office earning success in Malaysia. Despite occasional media attention, there is a notable lack of scholarly literature addressing the impact of these films on Malaysian audiences. This study examines the cinematic consumption of the films imported from China by Malaysian distributors for exhibition to its cinemagoers, using Song Hwee Lim's framework of conceptualization of transnational cinema. It seeks to better understand the phenomenon of the imported Chinese films for audience appeal, cultural influence and impact on box-office earnings. By collecting and analyzing relevant data from distributors through in-depth interviews with their representatives, this study identifies the approaches of film promotion and marketing activities that are reshaping the cultural experience of filmic storytelling in the Malaysian context. The implications of this study extend beyond film distribution, offering insights into how transnational cinema can shape cultural narratives and influence the cultural landscape in a globalized context. By examining the interplay between Chinese films and Malaysian audiences, the research highlights the role of transnational cinema in fostering cultural exchange and understanding, as well as its potential to impact the future direction of filmic storytelling within a multicultural society.

Keywords: *Transnational cinema, Chinese film, Malaysian cinema, film distribution, cultural trade.*

INTRODUCTION

China and Malaysia are friendly "neighbors" across sea with a long history of cultural exchange, trade, and mutual cooperation. Malaysia was the first country from Southeast Asia to establish full diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC) (Ouyang, 2024). Malaysia embarked on the pathway of normalization with China beginning 1974 when "Malaysian Prime Minister [at that time], Tun Abdul Razak Hussein, paid an official visit to China" (Baginda, 2016, p. 1). As a result, Malaysia has been the most noteworthy country in its economic and profitable development from the relationship. Meanwhile, China has become the largest trade partner of Malaysia. Cultural exchange activities have never been absent between Malaysia and China in the subsequent decades. According to Kok (2005), "culture exchange ... between China and Malaysia are likely to continue to grow" (p. 71) from time to time in the future. "Malaysia is well placed, probably even better than most of its ASEAN neighbors, to embrace the opportunities" (Yeoh et al., 2018, p. 298) which come with the progress in constructing the ocean-based Maritime Silk Road (MSR), one of the two pronged initiatives of China's Belt and Road Initiative. This deep-rooted relationship has not only fostered strong economic ties but also facilitated a continuous exchange of cultural practices and media between the two nations. As the bilateral relationship evolved, these

cultural exchanges became more intricate (Ng, 2022; Rahman & Embong, 2018), reflecting the complex interplay of both countries' unique cultural identities. In particular, the media landscape in Malaysia, with its diverse and multilingual audience, plays a significant role in how Chinese cultural content, including films, is received and integrated into the broader Malaysian society.

Malaysia and China exhibit distinct cultural characteristics, which significantly influence various cultural exchange endeavors. The rich tapestry of Malaysian culture, rooted in its multiethnic milieu, necessitates a nuanced understanding of the remarkably diverse and cosmopolitan Malaysian society. Diverse forms of media and cultural content are being consumed by Malaysians. The demographics that exist in the country of Malaysia consist of multiple and diverse ethnic groups. Malaysian citizens include the ethnic groups of Malay, Chinese, Indians and others. According to Wang (2019), "Malaysian cinema is itself an aggregated form that denotes a varied and multilinguistic source of films" (p. 539). In the view of Rahim and Pawanteh (2010), "There needs to be a mutual consensus between local and foreign content in catering to 'audiences/consumers' and the nation's expectations" (p. 218). Some earlier studies (e.g., Tapsell, 2013; Eichenauer, 2016) have highlighted that Malaysia's freedom of the media, particularly within the print sector, is a highly contested one within this diverse context. Recent studies (e.g., Aziz et al., 2021; Briandana et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2024) discuss the evolving trends in storytelling, the flexibility of narrative forms, and the growing appreciation for a diverse range of films in Malaysia. Furthermore, Shah and Rahman (2022) assert that the rapid development of Malaysia's film industry is evidenced by the increased entry of foreign film productions, contributing not only to economic growth but also to employment opportunities, thereby boosting the growth momentum of the Malaysian economy.

The Malaysia film market is inherently appealing to some countries, including China. The Chinese action film *Wolf Warrior 2* (Wu Jing, 2017) released in Malaysia on the 28th July 2017 represents a commercial success at the box office of imported Chinese films in Malaysia. According to China Press (2017), *Wolf Warrior 2* topped the box office in an unprecedented number (para. 2). The success of this film may have triggered a new trend of importing Chinese-language films to Malaysia. Based on this success, the local mainstream cinema theatre operators and film distribution companies may have found more confidence in taking a risk to release these Chinese imported films to Malaysian cinemas. Since 2017, several Chinese films imported to Malaysia have surpassed the record set by "*Wolf Warrior 2*". For instance, the Chinese crime genre film "*No More Bets*" (Shen Ao, 2023), upon its introduction to Malaysia, grossed over 20 million Malaysian Ringgit (approximately 4.5 million USD) at the box office, establishing it as the highest-grossing Chinese film imported to Malaysia to date. This remarkable box office success has prompted the author of this article to investigate the performance of Chinese films imported to Malaysian cinemas after 2017. It has prompted further exploration into the factors contributing to this trend, including audience reception, marketing strategies, and the broader implications for cultural exchange between China and Malaysia. The success of these films not only reflects the strong commercial potential of Chinese cinema in Malaysia but also underscores the importance of understanding the cultural dynamics that influence film consumption in Malaysia.

Despite the longstanding amicable relations between Malaysia and China, characterized by extensive diplomatic ties and flourishing economic exchanges, there exists a significant challenge in navigating the cultural nuances that shape the consumption of diverse media content in Malaysia. The burgeoning transnational cinematic exchange between China

and Malaysia has inspired the author to investigate the reception and performance of Chinese film imports in the Malaysian market. The concept of cultural proximity, as discussed by scholars such as Straubhaar (1991), refers to the shared cultural, linguistic, and historical ties that make media content from one country more relatable and appealing to audiences in another. In the context of China and Malaysia, this proximity is grounded in their historical relations, shared values, and the significant Chinese population in Malaysia, which contributes to the appeal of Chinese films in the Malaysian market. However, the dynamics that govern the success or failure of these imports remain underexplored. This paper aims at filling the research void by investigating the theatrical performance of the films imported from China in Malaysia. With China's transnational cinematic dream now being propelled by national ambitions, there are now some empirical studies (i.e., Xu, 2015; Keane, 2010; Peng & Keane, 2019; Mitchell, 2020) asserting that Chinese films have begun to successfully compete with Hollywood movies outside their home country. Some of them (Sun, 2014; Liu & Lai, 2009; Keane, 2019) also have addressed issues of promotional strategies, marketing and the business model of Chinese films in the overseas market. There are also an increasing number of studies that focus on the importance of enriching and expanding the construction of the conceptual framework for a greater understanding transnational cinema.

LITERATURE REVIEW

a) China's Global Cultural Presence

Some earlier studies (e.g., Deng & Li, 2013; Flew, 2016; Liu & Lai, 2009) have identified and focused on the positive performance of China's core cultural product exports of the 2000s. In 2001, joining the World Trade Organization (WTO) compelled the Chinese media and cultural sectors to confront and address challenges presented from the global media industry. In their report entitled, *"Made-in-China across the barrier: an empirical study on the overseas performance of Chinese-produced motion pictures"*, Liu and Lai (2009) employ economic models to examine the export performance of Chinese-produced films and determine more accurately their role in the market. Their study suggests that there is a positive correlation between the domestic marketing performance and offshore revenue of the Chinese films. Moreover, they argue that "higher investments could chronically contribute to a better performance overseas, though a high budget is not a plenary condition for an individual film to draw more revenue in the overseas market" (Liu & Lai, 2009, p.7). This body of work underscores the significance of understanding the factors that contribute to the international success of Chinese films, laying the groundwork for further exploration of how these dynamics play out in specific markets.

While the existing studies (e.g., Romano & De Oliveira, 2023; Tong & Zhang, 2024) address China's 'going-global' policy, ideological weight is unavoidably measured, especially by looking at China's "external images" (*dui wai xing xiang*) and soft power through exporting its media contents. In his article *"Keeping up with the Neighbors: China's Soft Power Ambitions"* which examines cultural trade between China and East Asian countries, Keane (2010) states "China's soft power has become a key issue in the reform of its cultural, media, and creative industries" (p. 130). He also believes that "China's success story since 2003 is undoubtedly cinema" (p. 133), as the market data indicates that China's film industry has steadily gained momentum since then. These studies provide a comprehensive picture of the favorable performance of China's cultural exports. Nevertheless, limited descriptive

information and inferential statistics have been employed to measure such positive performances of China's cultural product exports.

Many studies have discussed the increasing media presence of China in the world during the early 2000s, particularly in the light of the popularity of foreign cultural and media products within China. For example, Keane (2019) discusses the present business model of the film industry in China, and he identifies a relationship between the export of China's media and cultural products with the so-called '*culture going out*' campaign. As a result, he maintains that "China's global cultural presence has become more visible since the government endorsed the commercialization of online platforms and recognized their contribution to the 'going out' program" (Keane, 2019, p. 246). Keane (2019) also identifies the problem of "reporting on the reception of China's film and television outside China" (p. 244).

The existing literature lacks empirical data and in-depth evaluation of the criteria that influence film selection for overseas export and how these exports impact global audiences beyond mere market success. While previous studies highlight China's soft power and the positive performance of its cultural exports, they often fall short in analyzing the specific attributes that make certain films successful internationally and how these films resonate with diverse audiences across different cultural contexts.

Xu (2015), in his study "*Chinese TV drama in a regional market: Aspiring to be a cultural actor?*" narrates the historical development of China's media content exportation and discusses the "officials' motivation in the 'going-global' policy-making process" (p. 98). She also examines the marketing tactics, the varieties of Chinese-language dramas which have been particularly made to circulate internationally, and the consumption of these exported dramas by overseas audiences. According to Xu (2015, p. 98), "China has been able to be the center of this regional market, either culturally or economically". Her findings align closely with the officially stated motivation of forming the going-global policy and internationalization of China's media and cultural content. This exploration is particularly relevant to the current study, as it provides a contextual framework for understanding the distribution and consumption of Chinese films in Malaysia. By situating this study within the larger discourse of China's media export strategies, Xu's work enriches the analysis of how these policies have influenced foreign markets. Similarly, Sun (2014) in her essay "*Slow boat from China: public discourses behind the 'going global' media policy*" examines policy recommendations which have been anticipated as a part of China's efforts to improve its global image through media expansion. Sun argues that China's globalizing mission cannot be achieved through a singular strategy of state media expansion but requires identifying effective vehicles for conveying China's messages abroad. Her critical analysis of public discourse and well-known Chinese scholars' opinions further complements the discussion on the complexities of China's media organization efforts.

These studies demonstrate a consensus that China should become a regional player. Furthermore, some of these studies recognize China's success in regional cultural and media markets which could ultimately trigger a wave of national pride. However, these studies do not examine any specific representative contexts in terms of China's global cultural presence, but merely present some macro-lens observations. Notably, there are few recent studies that deeply investigate the contemporary realities of China's international cultural influence, leaving a gap in understanding the impacts of China's "going-global" strategy in specific markets such as Malaysia.

b) Malaysia-China Cultural Exchange

There are few existing studies that focus on the cultural exchange activities between China and Malaysia. Some of them more specifically examine China's cultural trade from the perspectives of geopolitics and economics. As case studies, Keane (2010) compared China's TV drama exports with the TV dramas of its geographic neighbors – Korea and Japan. He recommends that China should take “advantage of preferential location policies”, and he argues that “there is a sense that if Japan and Korea can make waves in terms of cultural production, then it may be China's turn next” (Keane, 2010, p. 135). In addition, Deng and Li (2013) propose “a cultural trade development mode among China, Korea and Japan on the basis of openness, exchange, competition and cooperation” (p. 1301). Tian and Yang (2010) have attempted to identify “factors affecting cultural trade” (p. 1040) between China and the United States.

Some studies (e.g., Ngu & Ngeow, 2021; Petrů, 2020; Yeoh et al., 2018) implicitly characterize the current status of the Malaysia-China cultural exchange as lacking a well-defined framework. These studies primarily attribute some cultural factors for defining the relationship between Malaysia and China. For example, Petrů (2020) asserts that “One of the Chinese strategies to ‘win the hearts and minds’ of Malaysians is to cultivate existing historic ties and offer a vision of a mutually beneficial partnership based on shared interests” (p. 118). He points out that the use of soft power is “an age-old method to bolster a country's reputation” (p.118) while discussing educational exchange activities between Malaysia and China. Similarly, Yeoh et al. (2018) also notice the higher education cooperation between Malaysia and China functions “as a tie and channel of cultural and educational exchanges between China and Malaysia” (p. 303).

Transnational corporations are at the heart of the globalization process, being the significant actors that provoke the movement of the aforementioned factors across borders between Malaysia and China. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that China's Belt & Road initiative – which commits “greater connectivity of China's western and southern provinces to the global economy” (Mitchell, 2020, p. 2) – is not only to promote more trade and business activities between Malaysia and China, but also cultural activities. Some studies do focus on the business of the cultural exchange between China and Malaysia. For example, Li and Cheong (2017) examine the “localization experience of two Chinese enterprises ... in Malaysia” (p. 752). Their study asserts that “what matters for Chinese enterprises is political connections rather than ownership and control” (p. 769) and at the same time this study further identifies “moderate levels of [cultural] localization” (p. 765) of the Chinese enterprises in Malaysia. There are few studies which specifically examines the Malaysia-China cultural exchange and relevant events in the context of Belt & Road initiative. This has motivated the author of the study to investigate and attempt to identify the current status quo of the cultural exchange and cultural trading activities between China and Malaysia through a well-focused lens.

c) Chinese Films Released in Malaysia

As China has been seen “at the forefront of the take-up of soft power policy discourses” (Flew, 2016, p. 282). This highlights the importance of considering how Chinese cinema is being reconfigured on the global stage. Writing about China's rise to soft power, Peng and Keane

(2019) argue that China has “a long tradition of using film as a vehicle for communication of the ideology of the one-party state” (p. 907). Several studies (e.g., Aitken, 2016; Barker, 2018; Kang et al., 2023; Kuan, 2018) establish the long history of filmic communication and film marketing ties between Malaysia and China. In his book “*Malaysian Cinema, Asian Film: Border Crossings and National Cultures*”, Heide (2002) states that “In the 1920’s and early 1930’s, films from China, India, Indonesia, and western countries were shown” (p. 118) across Malaysia. Malaysian film culture is historically open and accommodative (Khoo, 2006; Wang & Kerry, 2022). *Xin Ke (The Immigrant)*, which Low (2018) points out “is believed to be the first film shot entirely in Singapore and Malaya in 1926”, depicts “the life and social struggles of the newly arrived Chinese in Singapore” (p. 176). And the producer of *Xin Ke*, *Liu Beijin* (also known as *Liu Peh Jing* and *Low Poey Kim*), is originally from China. Wang (2008) specifically discusses a Hong Kong remake of a Lubitsch musical comedy in 1957, and addresses “importance of scrutinizing border politics and the ‘foreignization’ of Chinese cinema in its transnational production and reception” (p. 9). This film was targeted for export to the audiences of Southeast Asian countries where Cantonese speakers constituted the main overseas Chinese population. Malaysia is one of these countries.

In the contemporary era, films ‘*made in China*’ are still introduced to Malaysian audiences. Nevertheless, it is difficult to identify any empirical and systematic studies which examine the development of filmic communication between these two nations. Nor does there appear to be any studies that address the present practice of this film business relationship and the reception of the films from China that have been released across Malaysia.

METHODOLOGY

a) *Methods*

This paper employed two methods of data collection on China’s film export to Malaysia and the Malaysian’s consumption of these film works made in China. To enhance the robustness of the findings, this paper employed method triangulation by integrating in-depth semi-structured interviews with archival analysis. This approach allowed for a comprehensive understanding of both the distribution motivations and the consumption patterns of Chinese films in Malaysia, providing a richer and more nuanced perspective. The first method was in-depth semi-structured interviews with Malaysian film distributors, focusing on the companies’ motivation of importing films from China, as well as the relevant factors which drive their distribution and marketing activities. The interviews were “not rigidly structured, that is a flexible approach is adopted when asking respondents questions” (Diamantopoulos & Cadogan, 1996, p. 25). Representatives of Malaysian film distribution companies as well as an owner of a distribution company were interviewed for the study. The details of the interviewees are presented in Table 1. The interview sessions were conducted through phone calls with Chiah CK and Jeffrey Eng on the 28th April 2022 and 12th May 2022 respectively.

Table 1: The details of the interviewees

No.	Interviewees	Gender	Company
1	Chiah CK	M	Mega Films Distribution
2	Jeffrey Eng	M	MM2 Entertainment Malaysia

The second method was archival research. This method was used in order to examine how Chinese films have been consumed by Malaysian cinemagoers. Archival research in this case is “to understand layers of meaning that accrue throughout the research process” (Clary-

Lemon, 2014, p. 382). The archival materials were obtained from Malaysia's film distribution companies - Mega Films Distribution, MM2 Entertainment Malaysia and the National Film Development Corporation Malaysia (abbreviated FINAS). FINAS is the Malaysian government agency that promotes filmmaking in Malaysia and the Malaysian film industry. The data on the box office earning date of Golden Screen Cinemas was published on its official website. Since box office data are not publicly accessible, the author of the study acquired archival data on box office earnings for each film distributed by Mega Films Distribution and MM2 Entertainment Malaysia through their generous provision of the data.

b) Concepts of Transnational Cinema as Research Framing

This study is guided by Song Hwee Lim (2019)'s conceptualization of transnational cinema. His essay illustrates transnational film trends through the use of the case study methodology which interrogates the cinematic ambitions of China and their influence on the United States highlight the need for a deeper exploration of soft power, particularly in understanding the competitive and collaborative aspects of transnationalism (Lim, 2019, p. 1). In his earlier article co-authored with Will Higbee – “*Concepts of transnational cinema: towards a critical transnationalism in film studies*”, a critical form of transnationalism in film studies has been delineated and discussed. They state that the concept of ‘transnational cinema’ should not “be merely descriptive because all border-crossing activities are necessarily fraught with issues of power” (Higbee & Lim, 2010, p. 18). However, they argue that it should be used to interpret the interface between global and local, national and transnational and identify its meaning as generally indicating “cross-border cinematic connections” (Higbee & Lim, 2010, p.8). As they explain, “it is imperative not to theorize transnational cinema only in the conceptual-abstract but also to examine its deployment in the concrete-specific so that the power dynamic in each case can be fully explored and exposed” (Higbee & Lim, 2010, p.10). Thus, this study uses the transnational case of Chinese film crossing borders for circulation and distribution within Malaysia to better understand the phenomenon of transnational cinema. It further analyzes the circulation and the performance of Chinese films in the Malaysian film marketplace to better understand transnational cinema.

Yang et al. (2020) point out that “research on transnational cinema has long debated definitions and given to ‘transnational cinema’ in film studies” (p. 178-179). The author of the study is aware of the variety of interpretations on ‘*transnational cinema*’. This study focuses not on interpretations of transnationalism but rather as Yang *et al* advocate in considering “more practical applications for research” (Yang et al., 2020, p. 179). It actually echoes the critical reflection of the concept of transnational cinema by examining the specifics of the case of Chinese film export to Malaysia. Also, this study only focuses on the direct audience theatrical consumption of the films imported from China in Malaysia in the recent five years. Conversely it does not undertake to examine transnational cinema activities in the form of transnational remakes, co-productions, cross-contamination of genres, and diasporic and post-colonial cinemas.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

a) Models of Release and Consumption for Films Imported from China into Malaysia

There are basically two models of release and presentation of the films imported from China across Malaysia: (1) the Chinese film festivals organized by the government authorities; and (2) commercial film screenings by local distribution companies for exhibition in movie

theaters. The imported Chinese film products primarily meet their Malaysian audiences and are consumed through these two circulation models, the first a cultural promotional model and the second a business, profit-making model.

The first model, a non-profit model is represented by China Film Week (CFW). It was held for the first time in Malaysia from 16 to 19 January 2020, in conjunction with 2020 being the Malaysia-China Cultural Tourism Year. This was a joint effort between Malaysia and China “for promoting greater people-to-people exchange and sustainable socio-economic growth” (Wang, 2020. para. 8). It was conducted to support trade, investment, tourism and cultural exchanges.

A total of seven titles were screened for free at selected cinemas operated by Golden Global Cinemas (GSC) during CFW. They were the following: *Xuan Zang* (Jianqi Huo, 2016), *Go Away Mr. Tumour* (Yan Han, 2015), *Hello Mr. Billionaire* (Fei Yan & Damo Peng, 2018), *The Whirlwind Girls* (Hai Zhong, 2017), *A Smile from the Mountain* (Wei Li, 2018), *Wolf Totem* (Jean-Jacques Annaud, 2015), and *Six Years, Six Days* (Dong Shen, 2017). CFW was organized by the Embassy of the People’s Republic of China, and its admission was free to the public in Malaysia.

A similar film festival used for Chinese film release was the ASEAN-China Film Festival held in 2017. The following films had been selected by China for screening at this event: *Wolf Warrior 2*, *Kung Fu Yoga* (Stanley Tong, 2017), *Shock Wave* (Herman Yau, 2017), *Xuan Zang* (Huo Jianqi, 2016), *Saving Mr. Wu* (Ding Sheng, 2015), *Book of Love: Finding Mr. Right 2* (Xiaolu Xue, 2016) and *Where Has the Time Gone* (Jahmil X.T. Qubeka, Aleksei Fedorchenko, Jia Zhangke, Walter Salles, Madhur Bhandarkar, 2017) to be shown at the film festival. *Wolf Warrior 2* was awarded Best Feature Film of this festival.

The second model is the profit-based, distribution-exhibition theatrical release. The majority of the films imported from China reach Malaysian audience through the Malaysia’s film distribution companies. There are two types of distributors for commercial theatrical release of film imported from China – local distributors and local exhibition-integrated distributors. Malaysia’s film distribution companies may not only deal with films from China, but also those from other nations and regions. The Chinese producers sell both to the Chinese domestic market and into Malaysia’s markets. Malaysia’s film distribution companies market the Chinese films in Malaysia.

For this study, an interview was conducted with Chiah CK (personal communication, April 28, 2022), the Executive Director of Mega Films Distribution. He mentioned there is a limited number of local distribution companies which distribute the films from China. Mega Films Distribution distributes films from China, Thailand, Singapore, the United States and others. *Wolf Warrior 2* was imported by Mega Films Distribution in 2017. According to Chiah, the total box-office earnings of *Wolf Warrior 2* in Malaysia is 4.1 million Malaysian Ringgit (approximately one million USD). It made box office history with its high performance for films imported from China. Chiah explained that *Wolf Warrior 2* presents realistic gun battles, action scenes, heroism, representations of the military power of China, and discourse of the responsibility of great power; and these narrative elements would be considered appealing to Malaysian audiences.

Two of Malaysia’s exhibition-integrated distributors actively distribute films from China: MM2 Entertainment Malaysia, and Golden Global Cinemas. MM2 Entertainment Malaysia is the distributor which offers more films from China than others. MM2 Entertainment, a wholly owned subsidiary of MM2 Asia Ltd, is Singapore’s leading media entertainment and content production company with regional offices in Kuala Lumpur, Taipei,

Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Beijing. In 2015, the Group entered the film exhibition scene. They have their own distribution subsidiary in Malaysia to release their own productions and to distribute films from other studios that they represent for distribution.

An interview was conducted with Jeffrey Eng (personal communication, May 12, 2022), Senior IT Executive of the Malaysia office of MM2 Entertainment. In the interview with Jeffrey Eng, he explained that the Malaysia office of MM2 Entertainment primarily distributes their own local productions, and foreign films from Mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Thailand, Korea, and Japan. These regions align with the company's broader business strategy and global focus.

The other exhibition-integrated distributor is Golden Global Cinemas which is the largest Malaysian cinema company. It appears that the distributors and the exhibition-integrated distributors in Malaysia are very active in acquiring films from China for distribution to local screens. Chiah stated, "we keep following the market updates about Chinese films from various sources. The domestic performance and publicity of these films is always considered before we decide to distribute." The other distributors also consider factors including Chinese celebrity, and production costs in their decision-making process for marketing Chinese film product.

b) Box-Office Performance of the Films Exported from China into Malaysia

Chinese Malaysian typically dominated in management, the three distribution companies – Mega Films Distribution, MM2 Entertainment and Golden Global Cinemas appear to have different strategies and demonstrate their specific 'preference' of the films imported from China. This preference is based on their direct experience in terms of box office earnings. The responses from the interview sessions suggest that content diversity is not ranked as the highest concern in film selection. For instance, Chiah noted that the popularity and box office earning of a film in Mainland China significantly influences their decision to select and potentially import it to Malaysia.

Table 2: The Chinese films imported by Malaysian distributors from 2017 to 2020

No.	Film titles	Released on	Box office (Malaysian Ringgit)	Distributed by
1	<i>The Knight of Shadows: Between Yin and Yang</i>	5 Feb, 2019	12,600,000	Golden Screen Cinemas
2	<i>Enter the Fat Dragon</i>	23 Jan, 2020	11,800,000	Golden Screen Cinemas
3	<i>The New King of Comedy</i>	5 Feb, 2019	11,000,000	Mega Films Distribution
4	<i>Big Brother</i>	16 Aug, 2018	8,500,000	Golden Screen Cinemas
5	<i>Wolf Warrior 2</i>	28 Jul, 2017	4,100,000	Mega Films Distribution
6	<i>A Journey of Happiness</i>	7 Feb, 2019	3,510,000	MM2 Entertainment
7	<i>Golden Job</i>	20 Sept, 2018	3,400,000	Golden Screen Cinemas
8	<i>Project Gutenberg</i>	4 Oct, 2018	2,900,000	MM2 Entertainment
9	<i>Integrity</i>	7 Feb 2019	2,000,000	MM2 Entertainment
10	<i>A Witness out of the Blue</i>	17 Oct 2019	1,200,000	MM2 Entertainment
11	<i>Detective Chinatown Vol 2</i>	22 Feb, 2018	620,000	MM2 Entertainment
12	<i>Girls 2</i>	1 Mar, 2018	562,000	Mega Films Distribution
13	<i>Buyer Beware</i>	28 Jun, 2018	350,000	MM2 Entertainment
14	<i>The Thousand Faces of Dunjia</i>	15 Dec, 2017	320,000	MM2 Entertainment
15	<i>Walk with Me</i>	21 Nov, 2019	289,000	MM2 Entertainment
16	<i>Love the Way You are</i>	27 Jun, 2019	245,000	MM2 Entertainment
17	<i>The Last Wish</i>	12 Sept, 2019	230,000	Mega Films Distribution
18	<i>Legend of the Demon Cat</i>	4 Jan, 2018	223,000	MM2 Entertainment

19	<i>Animal World</i>	29 Jun, 2018	198,000	MM2 Entertainment
20	<i>My People, My Country</i>	3 Oct, 2019	88,000	MM2 Entertainment
21	<i>Hello, Mrs. Money</i>	18 Oct, 2018	86,000	Mega Films Distribution
22	<i>Men on the Dragon</i>	2 Aug, 2018	60,000	MM2 Entertainment
23	<i>Sheep Without a Shepherd</i>	9 Jan, 2020	55,000	MM2 Entertainment

The success of *Wolf Warrior 2* in Malaysia distinguishes Mega Film Distribution among the others. In addition, four films were subsequently imported from China and were distributed by them in 2018 and 2019 (see Table 2). Among these titles, the 2019 Chinese comedy-drama film *The New King of Comedy* directed, written, and produced by Stephen Chow became the most successful film distributed by them in Malaysia. It earned a box-office gross more than two times that of *Wolf Warrior 2*.

MM2 Entertainment champions importation of films from China as the leading distributor. From 2017 to the beginning of 2020 before the implementation of a Movement Control Order (MCO) due to the pandemic of COVID 19, fifteen films were imported, distributed and exhibited through the Malaysia office of MM2 Entertainment (see Table 2). According to Jeffrey Eng, they have offices in Beijing, Shanghai, and Hong Kong which first supply the list to the marketers in Malaysia. Among the fifteen titles, *A Journey of Happiness* obtained the highest box-office earning. It is a 2019 co-production between Malaysia and Hong Kong, China. The film tells the journey of a dysfunctional Hong Kong family of four who on their own travel in Malaysia for a vacation. Jeffrey Eng shared that the box office earnings of the 15 films range from 55,000 Malaysian Ringgit (approximately 13,600 USD) to a high with the film of *A Journey of Happiness* earning 3,510,000 Malaysian Ringgit (approximately 868,000 USD).

Golden Global Cinemas only distribute the films from Hong Kong, China. All of their four titles, released between 2017 and 2020, have some well-known Chinese actors, and according to the interviewee, considerable investment in production costs (see Table 2). *The Knight of Shadows: Between Yin and Yang* is a 2019 Chinese historical fantasy comedy film directed by Yan Jia and starring Jackie Chan and other young Chinese celebrities. It was released on 5 Feb 2019 in Malaysia. The release date is significant for box office earnings as it is the Chinese New Year season which has a number of holiday genres. Possibly as a result of this release timing with an audience demand for seasonal entertainment, *The Knight of Shadows: Between Yin and Yang* has become to date the highest grossing imported Chinese film in Malaysia. *Enter the Fat Dragon* (Wong Jing & Kenji Tanigaki, 2020), the 2020 Hong Kong martial arts film, was also released during the Chinese New Year festival season. It scores the second in the list of box-office earnings of all imported Chinese films.

These local distributors do concern on the market value of the Chinese films which are potentially imported into Malaysia, in terms of the typical box office returns. According to Hennig-Thurau et al. (2007), who have proposed a film distribution marketing model, there are basically two types of box-office releases and subsequent revenue grosses. They are “short-term (STBO) and long-term box-office (LTBO) grosses” (Hennig-Thurau, 2007, p. 74). Lehmann and Weinberg (2000) explain that there is a sequential distribution, a phenomenon that occurs across media and consumer product channels becoming more extensively available to the market over time. Initially there is a more controlled but restricted channel of distribution to the domestic market with a later expansion of distribution over time to other markets and a ‘wider range of customers’ such as those in export foreign markets. The exportation of films from China into Malaysia may be understood to follow the pattern and distribution model proposed by Hennig-Thurau et al. (2007).

Alternatively, rather than first being released through profit-based distribution, some of the films imported from China are selected for circulation in the film festivals held in Malaysia. Examples such as *Saving Mr. Wu*, *Xuan Zang*, and *Wolf Warrior 2* are also then released to commercial screening. For the film *Wolf Warrior 2*, its short-term promotional marketing success in festivals influences long-term box office commercial success, which “is in keeping with the success-breeds-success effect” (Hennig-Thurau, 2007, p. 74). Nevertheless, the majority of the films imported from China goes directly to the commercial cinema theatres.

Based on the interview sessions with the distributors in Malaysia, cultural familiarity, star power, and director power dominate their decision-making of importing activities. The interviewees frequently mentioned the phrases “cultural connection”, “similar language”, and “familiar Chinese stars and directors”. They also revealed that the younger generation of Malaysian Chinese tends to use Mandarin more than dialects like Cantonese. As a result, young Chinese celebrities and film directors are particularly popular among young Malaysian Chinese audiences. According to Hennig-Thurau (2007), these three variables “can be argued to covariate with a film’s production costs” (p. 71). The star and directors could be seen as some established brands which serve as a powerful “strategy to reduce perceived risk” (Kapferer, 2008, p.53). Despite Petru’s (2020) observation that Malaysian Chinese identify strongly as loyal citizens, they face minimal cultural barriers in appreciating and finding appeal in films from China, likely due to shared cultural elements.

c) The Malaysian Distributors’ Marketing Challenges of Chinese Films

Although there may be a number of variables (i.e., advertising, movie reviews, viewer-perceived quality, awards) which influence or determine box office performance, a marketing challenge identified from the research interviews is that of promotion. Some of the Malaysian distributors encounter financial difficulties to promote Chinese films in the local Malaysian context. It pushes them to identify those films which already have well executed promotional campaigns in China. They demonstrate an understanding of the changing dynamics in film marketing and promotion, however. For example, although short on a budget for pulling an audience to a cinema theatre, Chiaf mentioned the effectiveness of social media marketing in increasing awareness of certain films among Malaysian netizens; He noted that the recent popular Chinese social media platform, Red (*Xiao Hong Shu*), has gained remarkable traction within the Malaysian Chinese community. Biswal et al. (2020) lately point out that “marketing a film in multiple media platforms” (p. 316) would be a trend of film promotion strategy. This may be emerging as a new strategy within this context.

The interview sessions with the Malaysian distributors also reveal their expectation for sharing and archiving the data of box office earnings of these imported Chinese films. Mega Films Distribution Pt Lyd. (Sdn. Bhd) and MM2 Entertainment Sdn. Bhd. provided the author with their own data records of the box office performance of their Chinese film imports. The reason why they wish to have such a data archive is to understand the effectiveness of other distributors’ marketing and business performance. This data may also provide an instructive indication of Malaysian audiences’ likelihood and preferences for consuming Chinese film imports.

CONCLUSION

Although the international film trade as transnational cinema has been examined and discussed in the research literature, there remains a gap in empirical studies on the consumption of these films in specific markets. This study has attempted to address this lack of knowledge by specifically examining the local context of theatrical consumption of films exported from China into Malaysia. By engaging with leading market players, the distributors and distributor-exhibitors, this study provides insights into how these factors impact audience reception and box office performance, offering an understanding of transnational cinema's influence in localized contexts. Some studies (Yeoh et al., 2018; Cheong et al., 2017) argue that Malaysian Chinese film industry players, by promoting China, may actually be counterproductive and serve as a potential liability to the diplomatic efforts of the People's Republic of China. Ultimately, the cultural association between Malaysia and China may still lead to continued release of more and more films from China across Malaysia. The local distributors and exhibition-integrated distributors have developed their own criteria to identify import products which would be considered a fit offering audience appeal for exhibition in the local cinema theatres. As evidenced by the box office data, some of the Chinese films have generated noteworthy box-office earnings within the local context. In addition, not only do these film products operate as economic value within transnational cinema, they serve as a cultural exchange facilitating the realization of an exchange value as cultural and informational commodities.

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