Abstract. This paper examines the regulation of Hollywood movies in 1990s China. Through exploring primary materials including comparison of the original and censored version of film text, interviews, and Chinese and English newspaper reports, the regulation of Hollywood films in the 1990s is shaped by an ambivalent attitude towards Hollywood shaped by the domestic political and economic environment as well as the Sino-American diplomatic relationship.

1. Introduction

This study asks how the Chinese government has censored Hollywood since 1994, a date landmarked as the time when “China slightly opened its door to Hollywood” by importing ten Hollywood movies on a revenue sharing basis (Whiteman, 2006). I argue that an ambivalent attitude towards Hollywood shaped by the domestic political and economic environment as well as the Sino-American diplomatic relationship deeply influenced the censorship of Hollywood in 1990s China. On the one hand, Beijing permits screening of Hollywood blockbusters in China with the intention of sharing profits. On the other hand, censorship still survives as a crucial obstacle for Hollywood entering into China. The Chinese government sets several agendas on censorship in order to isolate China from “Hollywood’s corrupted culture”, hence to secure its regime and to protect the youngsters (Zhao, 2008). Most of agendas include the issues of sex, violence, and “humiliating China”.

The meaning of “strangers” is threefold. Firstly, “strangers” suggests that Chinese authorities tend to be suspicious of Hollywood culture due to ideological conflicts and the fact that America poses the biggest threat to the regime of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Despite the fact that official discourse has undergone tremendous changes in attitude since 1994, slogans such as “resisting Hollywood’s corrupted culture” still remain and are enacted in the official discourse (Zhao, 2009). Secondly, “strangers” implies that the two sides are unfamiliar to each other. To Chinese audiences after four decades of isolation since the 1950s, Hollywood, together with other foreign matters, is an unfamiliar/capitalist culture that needs time to understand. An example of this cultural strangeness is sexual expression. Censorship in the 1990s witnessed a cultural process of communication and understanding between Hollywood and China. One notices the loosening of criteria for censoring Hollywood, particularly on the sex issue. Thirdly, “strangers” also refers to a dual standard on censorship between domestic and foreign movies, most of which originate from Hollywood.
2. Sex

This section takes account of the criterion of sex, one of the prominent issues involved in Beijing’s censoring of Hollywood. I find a loosening process on censoring sex since 1994, while nudity still serves as a yardstick for a judgment of whether material is approved or not.

A general look at Chinese history will reveal a tradition of de-sexualisation. Desexualisation functioned as a means of maintaining social harmony in practice. The Confucians in imperial China believed that sex could lead to a confusion of the personal mind and thus evoke the development of outside disorder. Therefore “Upholding justice and eliminating desire” (Cuntianli, mie ren yu, 存天理, 滅人慾) became a yardstick for judging a person’s behaviour. This sexual ethic was reinforced in the People’s Republic of China when “attention to matters of love and sex was treated for decades either as the shameful expression of a warped mind or as evidence of bourgeois individualism and detrimental to collective welfare” (Evans, 1997:1-2). After the open-door policy since 1979, the taboo on sexual issues has been gradually eased with the decline of ideology and the import of Western concepts and conduct until in the 1990s, sex is no longer regarded as “fierce floods and savage beasts”, at least in urban China (Zhou, 2001:9).

It is not fair to argue that Chinese sexual opinions in the 1990s had kept up with Hollywood, however. A good example is the modes of popular dress to confirm the differences in sexual opinions between China and Hollywood. The history of clothing since the 1970s saw a great change on sexuality (Xuelin, 2001:10). During the Cultural Revolution, “gendered tastes in hairstyle and dress were coerced into a monotonous uniformity of shape and colour” (Evans, 1997:2). Diversified colors and suits in the 1980s and 1990s replaced the desexualisation of the Cultural Revolution. However, body exposure was still not acceptable in 1990s China. Hence, it is not difficult to understand the conservative and elderly film censors’ deletions when watching James Curtis’s sexual dancing in True Lies (dir. James Cameron, 1994). Deletions occurred in Piano (dir. Jane Campion, 1993) as well, which hit Chinese screens on a flat fee basis in 1995.

Nevertheless, it is certain that censorship on sexuality has loosened in the wake of the continuous open attitudes toward sexuality in 1990s China. More and more sex scenes have escaped from blue-pencilling, such as a quasi-nudity image in Swordfish (dir. Dominic Sena, 2001). Further evidence of the loosening is a comparison between Film Censorship Principles in the 1997 and 2006 versions (see Appendix I, II). Two major advances have been achieved in the 2006 version. First is the deletion of the prohibition of extramarital love and premarital sex. According to the principle in 1997, no extramarital love was allowed to screen in China’s cinema. Hence, censors deleted the erotic scenes between Clint Eastwood and Meryl Streep in The Bridges of Madison County (dir. Clint Eastwood, 1995) due to their extramarital love in the film. The authorities abolished this provision in 2006 because of the drastically increasing extramarital affairs and pre-marital sex in China. The deletion of the word “homosexual” witnessed another improvement for sex censorship in China. In the 1997’s version, authority articulates the prohibition of homosexual presentations on screen. The 2006 version deleted this controversial provision owing to the continuous homosexual struggle for human rights and the gradual rise of social recognition. However, one may notice that a new term was introduced, entitled “sexual abnormality”, which presumably umbrellas a wide array of sexuality including homosexual. Consequently, Brokeback Mountain (dir. Ang Lee, 2005) was refused screening in China, despite the outcry of filmgoers and homosexual activists.

Despite changes on subjects related to sexuality, nudity remains off limits for the Chinese screen’s body exposure. Therefore, the image of Halle Barry’s bare breasts was certain to be censored in Swordfish. Titanic (dir. James Cameron, 1997) is the sole exception throughout China’s censorship practice since 1994. Perhaps Chinese President Jiang Zemin’s review of Titanic helped render the presentation of Kate Winslet’s nudity on Chinese screens for the first and the only time. Jiang said to the people’s representatives in 1997,

“You should not imagine that there is no ideological education in capitalist countries…Titanic speaks of wealth and love, the relationship between rich and poor, and vividly described how people react to disaster…I don’t mean to publicize capitalism, but as the saying goes, ‘Know the enemy and
know yourself,’ and you can fight a hundred battles with no danger of defeat.” (Robert Kuhn, 2004:357)

Jiang’s word was significant for Titanic’s fate in China. The top cadre’s enthusiastic review guaranteed the “political right” of Titanic and film censors would certainly approve it without any revision. Presumably this is the key reason why Titanic became the exception during censorship history, since top cadres never recommended films again. Moreover, Jiang’s word might have ensured the equal treatment of Titanic with Chinese propaganda movies, enjoying the exclusive exhibition period and the organised audiences from schools and work units for a “patriotism education”. All these advantages contributed to Titanic’s position as the top earner in the Chinese film market until now.

3. Violence

This section explores why China’s censors accepted more violence when censoring Hollywood, in contrast to their strong sensitivity on the sex issue. It seems that China’s censors permitted most of the violent scenes on China’s screen, even including strong violence images in Saving Private Ryan (dir. Steven Spielberg, 1998) and martial arts violence in Rush Hour (dir. Brett Ratner, 1998). My argument is that China’s philosophy of violence including the indulgence of morally-good-violence and the perceptions of martial arts violence, contributed to the criterion about violence when censoring Hollywood.

Two significant ideas are involved when referring to China’s violence philosophy, i.e., violence for the sake of good morals and violence for the sake of art. Violence for the sake of good morals means violence is justified as long as the action is morally good, such as fighting against adversaries and traitors. The permissive underlying factors and the proximate Maoist ideology on violence helped to explain China’s violence philosophy (Thurston, 1990:150). Violence for the sake of art specifically refers to the perception of martial arts, “a ballet of violence” in Chinese context (Kumnisky, 1974:134).

Orthodox culture in traditional and modern China stands as an explanation of the violence culture in China. The orthodox Chinese culture advocated the non-violence culture during the configuration of Chinese philosophy. Nevertheless, non-violence is held to less strongly than is suggested by the rhetoric. Violence was both justified and even praised in the eyes of the orthodox and the masses when the orthodox position was challenged, no matter whether the challenge came in the form of riots, crime, or even slight and occasional behaviour such as objection to family norms (Harrell, 1990:17). In addition to the traditional culture, Maoist ideology bestows legitimacy on violence if only such violence is morally or ideologically good (Thurston, 1990:152). In Maoist ideology, “toward friends, non-violent persuasion was the only acceptable exercise of power. However, toward enemies, coercion and force were often, though not always, acceptable means” (Thurston, 1990:152). China’s screen nowadays has not escaped from the influence of Maoist ideology and traditional culture on violence. The brutal violence was not only supported but also cheered when the morally-good Neo was beating the morally-bad Smith in R-rated The Matrix Reloaded (dir. Andy Wachowski & Lana Wachowski, 2003) in China’s cinemas.

The perception of martial arts violence explains China’s greater indulgence of martial arts violence than of other forms. Martial arts are treated as art rather than violence in the Chinese context, being associated with performance. In his analysis of Kung Fu movies, Schehr (2000: 104) suggested that “martial artists appeared on film possessed the seductive capacity to lure spectators through bodily movement”, which resembles the dancing scenes in the classic Hollywood movies. Furthermore, as a form of art, martial arts have their own “ritual pattern” including respecting adversaries and reacting to social ills and environment, as well as fighting for social good, not merely for personal revenge (Kaminsky, 1974:129-138). Possibly due to their perceptions of martial arts, China’s censors approved Jackie Chan’s Hollywood production Rush Hour without any deletion, but blue-penciled some images in Mission Impossible III (dir. J.J. Abrams, 2006) where Tom Cruise was tortured at the beginning of the movie. In addition, Crouching Tiger and Hidden Dragon (dir. Ang Lee, 2000) and
Hero (dir. Zhang Yimou, 2001) were allowed to enter freely into China’s theatre without any deletions despite many scenes of martial arts and swordplay in both movies.

4. **Humiliating China**

Why was Shanghai’s image in Mission Impossible III deemed as “humiliating China”? This section argues that nationalism in the 1990s, embracing the “original nationalism” and the “patriotic nationalism”, resulted in China’s sensitivity to negative portrayals of China, as a nation, regime, and people. The original nationalism basically refers to the desire of the Chinese for respect in world affairs, generated from a consciousness of China’s weakness since the Opium War of 1840. The patriotic nationalism, injected by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), is a strategy of ideological reconstruction after 1989, together with a combination of the original nationalism and a cautious blurring of nation, people, regime and the Party in the name of “China”.

Hollywood film effectively mirrored the complicated complex of nationalism in the 1990s. For instance, the first eighteen minutes of the film Pirates of the Caribbean: at World’s End (dir. Gore Verbinski, 2007) has been cut when screening in China. Official news agency Xinhua admitted the reason for the slashing was “Chow Yun-fat’s image as a swashbuckling Singaporean pirate” and the officials believed that Pirates of the Caribbean “vilified and defaced the Chinese” (Callick, 2007). The sentiment behind the assertion echoed that in the early twentieth century. Upset by derogatory references to the Chinese people, the screening of Welcome Danger (dir. Clyde Bruckman, 1929) induced a public protest in Shanghai led by Hong Shen, a well-known scriptwriter and pioneer of the Chinese film industry. Hong urged that Welcome Danger intended to convey “Chinese in the United States engaged in nothing but killing, kidnapping, opium trafficking, and the like”, and the “slander to such a degree that its vulgarness is beyond words”(Wall, 2000:184). Whether the official assertion in the 1990s or Hong’s personal fury shared the sentiment of “a wounded or outraged sense of human dignity, the desire for recognition” (1997, as cited in Fitzgerald, 2007:97), the censorship authorities would not and dared not ignore such passion and sentiment. Clearly, any negative portrayals about China and the Chinese people would easily induce deletion, prohibition, or even protest. In addition to the Pirates of the Caribbean, Mission Impossible III had similar adventures in China. At first, the picture was banned because the officials believed that “laundry on a Shanghai washing line painted a poor image of the city”. After negotiation and deletion of the “humiliating China” images, Mission Impossible III “ended up hitting Chinese theatres months after its U.S. release” (Coonan, 2007).

In addition to the original nationalism, Hollywood in 1990s China met another radical “patriotic nationalism”, a nationalistic sentiment fueled by the CCP regime. In 1990s China, the CCP was gradually relying on “its nationalist credentials to rule, owing to lacking the procedural legitimacy accorded to democratically elected governments and facing the collapse of communist ideology” (Gries, 2005:105-114). A new “patriotic nationalism” has thus injected into Chinese society to maintain the regime’s legitimacy. Attributes of the patriotic nationalism include “an ethnic-racial conception of nationhood; a reactive nationalism that nurses memories of China’s historical humiliation at the hands of imperialist powers; a collective sense of victimhood and insecurity; xenophobic narcissism; a preoccupation with power; cultural-moral relativism; an illiberal worldview; an irredentist resolve to reclaim lost territories; and political authoritarianism”, according to Marie Chang (2001:182).

Obviously, the patriotic nationalism was a reinforced version rather than the previous simple one in terms of its extensiveness and intensity. The patriotic nationalism called for the “loyalty and devotion to the Chinese Communist Party” as well (Chang, 2001:180). Through burring the nation, state, regime, and the Party, it intended to evoke the identity of the current regime ruled by the CCP in accord with identifying China as a nation and civilisation. In other words, it classifies criticism of the CCP regime into “anti-China” or “humiliating China”, through identifying the People’s Republic as equivalent to China.

Therefore, any elements blaming the People’s Republic or the Communist Party in Hollywood film must lead to a deletion and more fierce punishments and vengeances. The first case is Forrest Gump (dir. Robert Zemeckis, 1993). When the movie showed in China, several scenes were deleted.
including a shoot projecting the converted national flag of the People’s Republic and the wooden cadres sitting in the stadiums when Gump was playing ping-pong in China. In 1997, three Hollywood movies irritated Chinese authorities because these three movies, i.e., Red Corner (dir. Jon Avnet, 1997), Seven Years in Tibet (dir. Jean-Jacques Annaud, 1997) and Kundun (dir. Martin Scorsese, 1997) all criticised the CCP’s legal system and ethical policies. Beijing was so angry that it not only banned the three movies, but also lifted the importation of any films from their studios (Rosen, 2002:64). Moreover, Beijing was likely to institute a blacklist to block importing movies by or involving those who offended the Party. Seemingly avenging Martin Scorsese’s direction of Kundun, China refused to import his Oscar-winning Departed (dir. Martin Scorsese, 2006) excusing its gangster topic. Apart from Scorsese, the blacklist might include Richard Gere and Bai Ling, as well as Sharon Stone. Not surprisingly, the issue of “humiliating China” stands at the top of the list in the “censorship manual” due to the fact that such activity threatens the regime’s legitimacy directly.

References


