

## **THE WOLF WARRIOR CRUSADE: POTENTIAL AND CHALLENGES FOR CHINESE FILMS IN MALAYSIA.**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*China is fast becoming a global power to be reckoned with in various industries. However, for Chinese films in Malaysia, it seems to still be rather bleak compared to its television counterparts. Nevertheless, judging by the performance of Wolf Warrior 2, there seems to be a lot of potential waiting to be unleashed. This paper is an overview of the current situation of Chinese films in Malaysia, the challenges they face as well as opportunities to look forward to in order for Chinese films to prosper in this country. This paper looks into the impact of audiences, content development and government regulations in both countries in order to get a glimpse into possible further studies and the search for solutions that benefit both nations. It is a crusade for Chinese film producers as well as a craving for Malaysian audiences who want appealing and enjoyable film content. If Chinese television content has made it, then why not its films?*

**Keywords:** *Chinese films, challenges, opportunities, Wolf Warrior 2.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

With multi-dimensional growth in its economy, military, education as well as science and technology, China is fast becoming a major global power at the turn of the 21st century (Yang, 2019). China's global presence can be felt throughout various industries to a point where one can never be far from Chinese-influenced or Chinese-produced products and services everywhere around the world. However, aside from its economic prowess, China also aims at sharing and disseminating its culture with the audience of the world.

While many countries are looking into penetrating into the large potential of the Chinese market, China however, is looking outwards at the same time with its 'Going Global' policy. China views cinema as a potential tool to further promote its influence to other nations in the world (Yang, 2016; Chen, 2018). The Chinese film industry's rapid growth, along with various prestigious international awards demonstrates China's seriousness in spreading its soft power. This can be seen as by the end of 2010, China has become the world's third largest film producers behind India and the United States (Su, 2014).

Many Chinese films are produced with the aim of not only capturing the local market that is already enormous on its own, but also to expand and sell its films overseas. American-Chinese co-produced film *Great Wall* was an example of this attempt. Total worldwide box office collection for the film exceeded \$300 million with over \$170 million in China itself, over \$40 million in the United States and over \$3 million in Malaysia (Box Office Mojo, 2019). The box office numbers for *Wolf Warrior 2* have also highlighted how a locally-dominant Chinese film has the potential to spread wider at the international scene, similar to the achievements of the Korean Wave and Japanese animation (anime).

The impact of the both the Korean Wave as well as anime can be seen in many sectors of the society and economy in Malaysia. K-pop music, dramas and films have introduced Malaysians from all races to traditional and urban Korean products such as fashion, food, automotive and others. Anime such as Doraemon, Dragonball, Sailormoon etc. have been here longer and has also affected the lives of many Malaysians.

*Wolf Warrior 2* made a big impact on the box office. Not only did they manage to collect \$854,248,869 in China alone (Box Office Mojo, 2019), they also managed to penetrate markets in Australia, New Zealand, United Kingdom as well as Malaysia. During its third week of screening in Malaysia in August 2017, the movie was positioned as the best-selling Chinese film of the year, with box office exceeding two million ringgit (China Press, 2017). Its popularity is also reflected when the number of cinemas showing the film increased from 85 to 88 (China Press, 2017).

With the Chinese Going Global policy in terms of Chinese films, the intention is not only for the films to be exported, but also the exportation of Chinese culture as well (Jiang, 2017). Hence, various collaborations spanning from country to country is often on the books and can be seen with the attempts made i.e. co-production of *Great Wall*. However, they must try to overcome the challenges such as cultural differences and overseas distribution. The potential is clearly there and should China find the appropriate film-marketing strategy, it could do wonders.

## **CHINESE FILMS AND TELEVISION IN MALAYSIA**

In order to establish the framework and mechanisms for cultural exchange, regional cooperation in broadcasting plays an important role (Ishak & Firdaus, 2010). At the current moment, Malaysian television scene is divided into four main categories a) free-to-air television, b) satellite television, c) internet protocol television (IPTV) as well as d) streaming services such as Netflix, iFlix and HyppTV. All these channels provide an array of content, spanning from various local television shows to those from all over the world.

For television, the market for Chinese content in Malaysia seems to be in a healthy state. Various deals and partnerships have been set up with parties from both countries to share and exchange television content. Advisor with the Communication and Multimedia Ministry for Creative Industries in 2017, Kamil Othman formed the Malaysia-China National Film & TV Alliance Association (MCNFTVA) with Zhang Ziqiang, the executive director of the China Minority Cultural and Art Promotion Association (Chaw, 2018). The purpose of the alliance was to increase the representation of ethnic minorities from both countries mentioned as well as sharing television and film content. In June 2019, Astro Malaysia Holdings secured the exclusive rights to deliver content from iQiyi throughout

television and streaming platforms in Malaysia (Shackleton, 2019). These are just two of the many examples of partnerships that have seen both countries attempting to promote each other's content to their counterparts.

However, it is a stark contrast with Chinese films. The existence of Chinese films (aside from Hong Kong) is relatively in the realm of the unknown. While Google Malaysia revealed that *Story of Yanxi Palace* (an iQiyi original show) was ranked 2<sup>nd</sup> in the top searches for television shows in Malaysia for 2018 as well as 5<sup>th</sup> in terms of general search (Ibrahim, 2018; Google Trends, 2019), no Chinese films made the list. The low state of popularity of Chinese films may not be the absolute truth. However, it does give an indication that Chinese television producers are making better progress in terms of marketing content compared to Chinese films.

In general, Chinese films are still unable to compete with their television counterparts. However, with the success of Chinese television, there is still hope. One must first identify the challenges faced by Chinese films in order to penetrate the Malaysian market.

## **CHALLENGES OF THE MALAYSIAN AUDIENCE**

Malaysia is a multi-racial country with a society that spans across richly-diverse race and ethnicities such as the Malays, Indians, Ibans, Dayaks, Khadazans and not to forget, ethnic Chinese as well. Furthermore, the number of languages spoken in the country is also significant to be mention. Aside from Malay language, Malaysians also speak, read and write in English, Tamil and Mandarin. This diversity has allowed Malaysians to generally have access to various contents from a wide range of countries.

The cinema-viewing patterns in Asia are largely influenced by cultural, social and economic factor (Hamzah, 2003) and Malaysia is no different. One of the main challenges of any film producers aside from Hollywood is the issue of language. The diversity of languages in Malaysia is a double edged sword. On one hand, it opens up opportunities for content from other countries to come in due to the similarities in language, for example, Mandarin and Tamil films and televisions shows. This is also beneficial to other related dialects and closely-related language films such as Hindi and Cantonese films and television shows.

However, the majority of local films exhibited in Malaysian cinema are Malay films and only lately has Malay films made a significant rise in the Malaysian film industry with the impact of films such as *Munafik 2* (2018), *Hantu Kak Limah* (2018) and *PASKAL The Movie* (2018) - the top three highest grossing local films of all time (Marketing Magazine, 2019). The only three Chinese (albeit by collaboration with Hong Kong) films that have made some impact was *The Mermaid* (2016) and *CZ12* (2012) with the latest being *Wolf Warrior 2. Ip Man 3* (2015) was omitted since it is Hong Kong-produced. Compared to television, Chinese films are way behind.

The limitation is not just of understanding foreign languages. Languages also carry cultural connotation and context in which local non-Mandarin, non-Cantonese speakers may not understand and may cause disinterest among Malaysian cinema audiences. Hence, it is understandable that most Malay films are watched by Malays, Mandarin films watched

mostly by local ethnic Chinese and Tamil movies watched mostly by local ethnic Indians. This is contrary to Hollywood movies as American movies are in English, which happens to also be one of the official languages of Malaysia that is spoken by almost all races.

This phenomenon is referred to as cultural discount by Hoskins and Finn (1998) whereby audiences come from different cultural background and thus some elements from other cultures are a bit more difficult to comprehend due to cultural and language differences. Not only do differences occur through visual cultural differences but also in terms of the context behind the cultures. With the multi-ethnic facet of Malaysian races, there may be some difficulties for Malays, Indians and other ethnicities in understanding Chinese context if they are not familiar with them to begin with.

On another note, another challenge for Chinese films would be the restriction by Chinese government censorship and the need to address the appeal of foreign film audiences. These restrictions are understandably done to protect the interests of the Chinese government and the Chinese state. Scripts, production and content are reviewed to ensure that they do not touch on the sensitivities of the Chinese government in terms of social stability and social ethics (Gayton, 2017). This results in limited storytelling opportunities should the need arises to appeal Malaysian audiences as well as other foreign markets.

However, Aranburu (2017) believes that the boom of the Chinese film industry is not necessarily caused by or affected by the Chinese state. Aranburu believes that it has more to do with the constant growth of the population. Additionally, it is not expected to see any significant changes in the philosophy and practice, but the approaches towards the restrictions may change according to future time and needs of the population as well as the Chinese economy.

Similarly, the restrictions by the Malaysian Censorship Board may or may not have an impact on films coming from China. It is dependent on the contents of the film itself for as long as it does not touch on the sensitivities of the Malaysian audience or government, it should get the green light for screening in Malaysian cinema. So far, no Chinese films have been banned in Malaysia.

Another challenge is the competition from Hong Kong. While some collaboration have been done in the past, many Chinese filmmakers for purely non-collaborative Chinese films are still struggling to sell their content overseas. Not to say that collaboration is unwanted. However, collaboration can also be a challenge itself unless both parties receive maximum financial and experiential benefits which may not be possible due to other related challenges such as state control, profit-sharing margins, competition etc.

## **POTENTIAL FOR CHINESE FILMS**

There are many challenges faced by countries other than the United States when trying to promote their films to foreign markets. Some countries are doing better than others. Some are struggling. In the case China, the challenges can also be viewed in a more positive light.

One of the main bridges that need to be built is the aspect of cross-cultural communication. In order for Chinese films to cross other boundaries, it first has to participate in cross-cultural communication activities (Shao & Pan, 2006). In becoming a

more globalized world, Shao and Pan (2006) highlighted the threats of cultural homogeneity as well as the resistance towards 'foreign' culture in order to maintain one's own. However, in Malaysia, there are already ethnic Chinese whom still strongly practice Chinese values and thus should be seen as a potential for Chinese films to penetrate the market.

The changes on cultural policy and roles of the Chinese state indicate that there is capacity for accommodation and adaptation based on more recent trends in the Chinese cultural industry. Market forces and global capital are taken into consideration when dealing with film infrastructure and state mechanism (Su, 2014). Hence, there is room for opportunities for Chinese filmmakers at their own end when it comes to content development. So far, the Chinese government has shown that they are willing to adapt to new approaches as long as the core values are left undisturbed.

Looking at the issue of content development from the perspective of the audience preference, a research studying the factors that influence Malaysian audience's choice of film concluded that film industry players should design the storyline around the theme of family, love, and human relationship in addition to their effort of trying to focus on the current trends (Diana, Noraini, Zainodin & Suhaimi, 2015). *Wolf Warrior 2*, as this paper would like to portray as a rare Chinese film with positive reception in Malaysia, has its plot resolved around the comradeship between soldiers, the strong bond between a couple, the unconditional love for children, and of course the patriotism one has towards one's country. The values portrayed in the film tallies with the findings of the fore-mentioned study.

The Malaysian government, through its film arm National Film Development Corporation (FINAS), does offer various incentives, funding and discounts. Among them is the Film in Malaysia Incentive (FIMI) that offers 30% cash rebates on certain production costs should producers choose to film in Malaysia (FINAS, 2019). This offer is open to both local and foreign film production and has thus far attracted quite significant foreign applications (Choong, 2019).

Additionally, in year 2016, a team of film professionals from different countries in Asia have initiated Malaysia International Film Festival, also known as MIFFEST, and Malaysia International Film Festival, or MGGA in short. Having a Malaysian film artist with international presence Sinje Lee as an ambassador, the two events aim to recognize outstanding filmmakers around the world (MIFFEST & MGGA, 2019). Films from a number of countries had been dominated as the Top 10 Films in the latest MGGA in 2019. Aside from China, other places such as Hong Kong, South Korea, Indonesia, Singapore, Belgium and Iran are also in the list (The Star Online, 2019).

Such platforms provide opportunities for international filmmakers including filmmakers from China to gain exposure and perhaps popularity among the local audience. Several films and film industry players from China had indeed in the past made their names better known by grabbing home awards from MGGA. Among them are 2017 Best Cinematography Winner, *I am Not Madame Bovary* (MIFFEST & MGGA, 2019), 2018 Best Supporting Actress Winner, Zhou Meijun, and 2018 Best Director Award Winner cum Best Screenplay Winner, Vivian Qu (MIFFEST & MGGA, 2019).

## CONCLUSION

Obviously, there are many more aspects of this area to be studied and the results of such study will benefit all parties involved. The success of Chinese television is evidence that Malaysians do appreciate Chinese content and that there are plenty of room for opportunities. However, Chinese films do not seem to fulfil this need. If we can understand what makes Chinese television programs tick in the eyes of the Malaysian audience, surely there is something beneficial that can be learned. In turn, better industrial and marketing strategies can be devised in order to help further promote Chinese films in Malaysia.

Understanding the challenges is as important as understanding the potential of Chinese films in order for them to be successfully exported and accepted in Malaysia. This statement points to the need to further investigate many other aspects of Malaysian audience as well as potential of Chinese film elements that can pave way for expanding the reach of Chinese films.

There is evidence of potential for Chinese films in Malaysia. With the local ethnic Chinese making up the second largest population and the popularity of Chinese television content, there are hopes that Chinese films can make a strong statement of its presence. However, this shall not come easy. Various challenges and obstacles need to be overcome. First is to focus on content development, as it is difficult to address language barriers unless more Mandarin speakers emerge in Malaysia. Content that are appealing will surely result in positive outcomes as seen with K-pop and anime. Secondly, Chinese state restrictions may be hard to overcome but producers still have to overcome it. If television has managed to do so, there is obviously plenty to learn from television. The same goes to Malaysian government restrictions. However, with other opportunities such as discounts and funding from the Film in Malaysia Incentive, there are other possibilities that can be explored and opportunities to be taken. The *Wolf Warrior* crusade shall continue.

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