

The Current Trends in China's Film and Television Market: Cross-Fertilization in China's Film and Television

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Abstract: This paper investigates the current trends in China's film and television market by analysing the gross box office performance of film/audience TV ratings as well as word of mouth regarding China's film and television dramas.

1. Introduction

After a general context of the current trends in China's film and television market, the cross-fertilization of China's film and television will be analysed from the perspective of sharing of resources in terms of technical skills, directors and actors. Among them, the most notable is the sharing of actors.

2. Trends in the China's Film and Television Market

In recent years, the gross box office has steadily increased in China. It has risen from less than 1 billion yuan in 2002 to 10 billion yuan in 2010 (China Daily 2016). According to the data, 686 films were produced in the nation in 2015 (Li 2016). In 2015, the gross box office achieved a record at \$6.8 billion, up 49% from the previous year. North America also witnessed a record in 2015, hitting an estimated \$11 billion for the first time even though it had only increased by 7% (KNOWLEDGE@WHARTON 2016). According to the data from the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SARFT), the growth rate of China's gross box office in 2015 was the highest since 2011, the gross box office in 2011 in China was just \$1.51 billion (Brzeski 2015). The number of cinemas in China is also continuing to expand. In 2016, the number of cinemas increased by 26 every single day. Recent figures indicate the number of cinemas in China has reached 40,917 in 2016, which exceeded the United States (40,759) and thus China became the country that enjoys the largest number of cinemas worldwide (China Daily 2016). The economic effect of IP (intellectual property) is also reflected in the growing of films in China: in 2014, five of the ten highest gross box office films were from the studios of the United States. But in 2015, only three of the ten highest gross box office films were made by the United States, the others were Chinese films with IP, like *Goodbye Mr. Loser* (2015), *Monkey King Hero is Back* (2015), *Wolf Totem* (2015) (China Economic Review 2016). As China was the world's second-largest film market in 2012. Many filmmakers predicted that the film industry in China would soon be larger than Hollywood because of the booming situation in China in 2015 (Li 2016).

However, China's film market has entered a period of transition in recent years. After a three-year box office bonanza, poor box office performances as well as negative word of mouth publicity have been witnessed in 2016. According to China's government data, the box-office revenue in China rose only 3.7% in 2016, which was far below its growth rate of 48.7% in 2015. Film ticket receipts showed no sign of improving to their expected levels throughout the three-day New Year holiday and box office takings also decreased 200 million yuan (\$29 million) in comparison to the same period in 2015 (Wang 2017). What is worse, domestic film ratings for 'word of mouth' on Douban (China's film rating website) are only between 3 and 4 out of 10 (Xu 2016).

By comparison, a rapid development has been seen in the television industry in China. According to data from the 2016 Global TV Industry Development Report which was released by the China Alliance of Radio, Film and Television (CARFT), 773 television and Internet dramas were produced in 2015, these dramas had 21,546 episodes in total. That is to say, there were on average 59 episodes produced every day in 2015 (Li 2016). Data from the tracking and consultancy firm Ent Group also supports the view of the success of TV companies in that the revenues of only 47 companies listed in 2016 surpassed 6 billion yuan, a growth rate compared with the same period in 2015 of more than 24%, with a gross profit of 40%, higher than the corresponding film market in China. In the meantime, the investment in television dramas has risen year by year. In other words, a big-budget model has been built on China's television dramas. The development of online television also boosts the boom in television. From this, we can see that the China's TV drama industry is booming with no signs of slowing down (Koetse 2017). Since China became the largest television production country in the world in 2006, the status of the largest television production country has been enhanced in recent years.

With the prosperity of the domestic market of television dramas, this has made film crews readily available for the production of Chinese television drama, which has actively poached film industry specialists (Zhu 2013). It is noteworthy that lots of famous film actors and actresses choose to play in television dramas again on the premise that production values are guaranteed, and prefer to work with trustworthy directors and production teams. Super film stars, like Xun Zhou, Bingbing Fan, Wei Zhao, Baihe Bai, Kun Chen and Ni Ni, have all returned to the television drama market in recent years, creating topical television dramas like *Tiger Mom* (2015), the *Empress of China* (2015).

Moreover, there is expected to be a lot of changes in the television drama industries soon, especially IP which is vigorously advocated. The new IP dramas like *Ruyi's Royal Love in the Palace* (2017) and the *Rise of Phoenixes* (2017) have gained popular interest before they have even been released. Compared to even the hottest young television actors and actresses, the return of super film stars has undoubtedly promoted the qualities of television drama to a new higher level.

In order to meet the audience aesthetic demand, the investment in television dramas has improved a lot. According to the data, the investment in a simple set for a drama has increased 6.5 times from 2005 to 2013. The general production costs of a simple set in China is no less than 25 million yuan and normally 50 million yuan. The higher concept set typically costs around 100 million yuan but this investment is also continuing to increase (Zhang, Hu and Zhou 2016).

It is not only well-known film stars who are entering the television industry, many television dramas are also produced by leading producers from the film industry. For example, the television drama *Ten Great III of Peach Blossom* (2017) starring Youting Zhao and Mi Yang was broadcast during the Spring Festival. The costume designer, Suoping Chang won: The Golden Rooster Award from the China Film Association, the Golden Horse Awards from the Government Information Office of the Republic of China (Taiwan) as well as Hong Kong Film Awards. He was also nominated for the 86th Academy Awards Best Costume Design with the film *The Grandmaster* (2013). This television drama crew aims to reach the production standards of production films and to set a new aesthetic standard for the television industry.

This cross-fertilization can also be seen in the last century. Due to oversupply in the 1960s, the Hong Kong film industry was largely stagnant in the 1970s (Zhong 2004). However, the local television industry witnessed a rapid growth at that time. In order to attract more audiences, local TV stations not only hired filmmakers and opera actors but also expanded their production of television series. With the involvement of famous actors and directors, a higher standard of television dramas was created. From this perspective, the cross-fertilization of film and television will raise the quality of television dramas as well as improve the development of film and television industries.

3. China's Film and Television Market

China's film industry was born in 1905 with the production of the *Battle of Dingjunshan*. The

first television program was established in the late 1950s with the launch of Beijing Television (now China Central Television) in mainland China. The early film and television industries in China were developed independently. Initially, film makers despised television. In order to protect its developing market, television also took action in preventing film makers from television production and exhibition until measures were taken by the government to improve the separate situation of film and television industry in China.

In the decade following the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese film industry experienced a dip in feature film output, reducing the number of films available for broadcast. To respond to the demand for dramatic programming and to fill the void left by the film industry, China Central Television (CCTV), the only national level broadcaster, began to produce its own television dramas. Some provincial-level stations also began to produce television dramas (Zhu 2013).

The cross-fertilization in China's film and television can be dated back to 1996. The China film Channel Program Centre (CMPC) officially established CCTV -6 as the first and only nationwide film channel in China. The China film Channel has not only broadcast films produced by various studios but also produced some small-budget films for television by themselves. A television film is a feature-length motion picture that is produced for distribution through the television channel; it cannot be shown in the cinema. Following the lead of the China film Channel Program Centre, other studios in different provinces started to collaborate with local television stations to build film and television coproduction centres. The creation of the China film Channel has changed the way people watch films; since then, people can now watch films on television (Zhu and Robinson 2012).

This trend was also evidence that many filmmakers became television producers. The 1990s were heady times for many in China's television industries (Keane 2002). Chinese TV dramas, including several produced by noted film director Xiaogang Feng, attracted huge interest in overseas Diasporic communities (Yin 2002; Keane 2002). The founding member of China's new wave film, Baochang Guo, started to be known for his serial television drama *Grand Mansion Gate* (2000) rather than his new wave films. This series became the top rating series on CCTV in 2001 and was also broadcast many times on different stations. The success of *Grand Mansion Gate* (2000) led to its 32-episode sequel *Grand Mansion Gate* in 2003. Renowned 4th Generation directors Fei Xie adapted the stage play *Sunrise* into a television drama in 2002 and ventured into television. The tough situation of the film market has also turned well-known 5th Generation directors into making television dramas. Ziniu Wu, Shaohong Li, Mei Hu, and Kaige Chen brought their professionalism and aesthetic vision for producing films to making television dramas. Furthermore, as many younger directors have produced not only television dramas but also music videos, they have brought the MTV (Music Television) aesthetics to television dramas. MTV aesthetics originated from the unique stylistic conventions of the music video. Visual characteristics like editing seem to be equipped with some pop musicality in this kind of films (Dickinson 2001). Hu Guan, the director of the film *Dirt* (1994), made a profit from his commercial films only by selling his film rights to the film Channel in China. In order to gain more money, he also spent five years producing television series (Zhu and Robinson 2012). Furthermore, the production of television films for the China film Channel has also provided a practising platform for young directors, such as Yazhou Yang, the director of *Empty Mirror* (2002). As a 6th Generation director, Hu Guan mentioned in his interview that he has spent most of his time producing television series. One reason is that making television series can help him earn more money, another reason is that the production of television series brings many more opportunities for him. Since China produces thousands of TV episodes each year, the large number of TV production opens up a space to make films. In other words, he can manage to do something in television that cannot be applied to films (Sun and Li 2008).

The sharing of resources can also be seen in television dramas in recent years. The first television drama of super idol Han Lu finished shooting *Fighter of the Destiny* in October 2016. This drama hired Bin Yuan as action choreographer; he was also the action choreographer of director Hark Tusi's films. Chuxiong Lei, the art director of this drama was known for his *Twins Effect* (2003), which won the 23rd Hong Kong Film Award for Best Art Direction. The visual effects director Fei Xu directed the *Young Detective Dee: Rise of the Sea Dragon* (2013) as well as

the Taking of Tiger Mountain (2014). The costume makeup artist Jin Xiao is also renowned for his Painted Skin (2008) as well as the Ghouls (2015). All of these people were renowned for their film careers.

It is predictable that the gap between the film and television industry is fading away. Since the improvement in aesthetics for the audiences, the quality of television dramas is no longer lower than films. The increasing investment makes the techniques only used in films before, now available for use in television dramas. With the sharing of resources between film and television, the development of China's film and television industries has been expanding rapidly.

4. Conclusion

After researching the relevant sources, a large amount of data supports the conclusion that the cross-fertilization of China's film and television has begun to be an inevitable trend. Cross-fertilization means the sharing of resources between the film and television industries. With the sharing of resources between film and television, the development of the China's film and television industries have been expanded rapidly.

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