

UK-China Film Exchange: Cultural Relations in a Competitive Age

Written by Giulia D'Aquila

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GIULIA D'AQUILA, SEP 1 2022

In 2015, the UK and China signed a co-production treaty to inaugurate an era of film collaboration. However, since its institution, only five productions have been finalised. The obstacles to UK-China co-production have been multiple and varied, and include cultural differences, bureaucratic difficulties, lack of confidence in each other's markets, Covid-19 travel restrictions as well as worsening relations between the two countries. A key role, however, was played by the changing mission assigned to film under Xi Jinping's leadership and reforms of the film industry's infrastructure in China.

The UK-China film co-production treaty was signed in the context of a series of similar treaties with several European countries, including Italy, Spain and France. There are several advantages for production companies under the UK-China treaty. First, it qualifies the production for tax reliefs and exemptions. Secondly, it allows opportunities for cultural exchange and enrichment, as well as the international prestige of the production. Thirdly, and most importantly, it creates a shortcut in both countries for the distribution of production by allowing a bypass of any import quotas in place on foreign cultural productions. Entering the Chinese film market is an important advantage for international productions, as China's box office market has now become the largest worldwide and is still in expansion. Entering the Chinese market however is extremely difficult for foreign productions. Strict import quotas are in place that do not allow more than 34 foreign films to be distributed each year, and no more than 25% share of the box office earnings. Co-productions, however, are considered domestic films by all the countries involved in the production. A UK-China co-production, for example, would be considered a domestic film in both China and in the UK. Therefore, it could bypass any quota regulations and enjoy full distribution in both countries.

Most of these treaties, however, produced little output in terms of actual co-production feature films. In the UK case, only five films have resulted from the collaboration, including a BBC Earth Documentary (Earth: One Amazing Day, 2016), a UK-PRC-US Jackie Chan movie (The Foreigner, 2017) and a Northern Irish-Chinese comedy (Special Couple, 2019).

There are various reasons behind the relatively scarce success of the treaty so far. One is the cultural differences that creates difficulties in finding themes that suit both audiences. Cultural differences generate cultural discount, a barrier that diminishes the impact of a product outside its country of origin. Studies have shown that particular genres, such as comedies, are more culturally specific than others and thus harder to export, whilst science fiction appears to be one of the easiest genres for international distribution. Language, too, constitutes a barrier, as subtitled films tend to be less popular than those in an audience's native language. Another significant obstacle to the production of films since 2020 was constituted by the travel restrictions in place due to the pandemic, which slowed down film production worldwide but particularly hindered co-productions for which shooting in both the countries involved is essential.

In the specific context of UK-China co-productions, however, some factors played a major role in the development of the two countries' film exchange. These involve important changes in the Chinese film industry since the agreement was signed, as well as worsening relations between the two countries since the covid pandemic. Chinese cultural policy has also been in a state of flux. The co-production treaty was signed in 2014, and it was part of a strategy to

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internationalise the rapidly growing Chinese film industry as part of the 'going out' policy first started by Jiang Zemin in 1999. This policy followed an approach described as 'please come in', that encouraged the import of foreign cultural products in China and was the main trend in the 1990s. The 'going out' policy was ideated to encourage the global expansion of Chinese companies as well as to encourage Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). Its specific impact on the Chinese film industry was the official encouragement for Chinese films to engage in the global scene, by participating in film festivals and engaging in co-productions. During the years of China's fastest economic growth following its entry into the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2001, the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP's) control over culture was looser. This was partly due to a relatively scarce personal interest of the CCP's leadership in culture at the time, on the one hand. On the other hand, the CCP encouraged the internationalisation of China's cultural industries as a means to raise its international prestige as well as a means for economic growth.

The two parties signing the agreement were Ed Vaizey, former UK Minister for Culture, Communications and Creative Industries, and Tong Gang, former Deputy Director of the PRC's State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT). SAPPRFT was an agency in charge of most media and cultural industries in China, and its roles included the approval of films, as well as censorship. It worked under direct supervision of the PRC's State Council. In 2018, following a mass reform of China's governing bodies, SAPPRFT was disbanded and replaced by the State Administration for Radio and Television, still working under the supervision of the State Council. Filmmaking, instead, was put under control of the Publicity Department of the Communist Party of China (CCP), supervised directly by the Politburo, the main decision-making body of the CCP and presided over by President Xi Jinping. This put filmmaking, and any content, under much more direct official control.

Changes in the institutional structure of China's creative industries and filmmaking happened along with a shift in the role of culture under Xi's leadership. For Xi, culture is a political instrument that plays a crucial role in the building of a strong national identity, and his reforms show that he wants to have direct control over China's cultural outputs. The new reforms encourage the work of 'main melody films', namely films that follow the CCP's orthodox narratives, by establishing a number of screens in theatres dedicated to showing specifically that genre of films every day. Recent main melody projects have succeeded in both conveying official narratives and performing really well at the national box office. Xi's approach to culture is linked to the notion of 'cultural security', which was first introduced in the 1990s but became much more popular in recent years. This notion emphasises culture as a national security issue and highlights the importance of preserving national culture from foreign influence. According to this notion, foreign cultural products such as films might, in fact, hinder the existing leadership's position of power, by importing foreign values and narratives.

This approach to culture differs from previous leaderships' policies which, although still exerting some control over cultural outputs, recognised the importance of cultural exchange for China's international prestige. Therefore, stricter political control over cultural outputs, alongside the obstacle of tighter censorship, complicate things for international producers from the UK and other countries who might want to co-produce films with China at this historical moment. In parallel, Chinese directors might not be as encouraged as they once were, by their government, to co-produce with foreign countries. Additionally, worsening relations between China and the UK has already left a trace on film exchange, as demonstrated by media reception and coverage of Chinese blockbusters. As shown by the contention between Truss and Sunak over the next PM position, UK-China relations are not likely to improve in the near future.

However, some positive news is on the horizon: the first UK-China film co-production after the Covid pandemic is now in completion, directed by Justin Chadwick and Peng Fei Song. Shot between London and Shanghai, the film tells the story of Zhu Shenghao, the first translator of most of Shakespeare's work into Chinese in the 1930s. These signals show that film, despite the many obstacles, is still one of the few channels left for the building of international and intercultural dialogue. In fact, in light of an ever more political path embraced by the Chinese film industry, co-productions create a space for different narratives and stories to circulate in China. These can constitute important alternative sources of entertainment for the Chinese viewing public, which are still easily and legally accessible. Therefore, international co-productions are more important than ever in their mission to create alternative dialogue.

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