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ARTICLE

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China's soft power conundrum, film coproduction, and visions of shared prosperity

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ABSTRACT
This paper looks at China's soft power strategy in relation to the film industry, which since the early 2000s has opened to international co-productions and investment. Despite many coproduction projects being endorsed by government, results have not added significantly to China's film-making reputation. The paper shows that coproductions have a diplomatic function, which implies a more conventional understanding of soft power. The paper also considers the tension between artistic freedom and censorship that impacts on all coproduction projects in China and which undermines the efficacy of China's soft power strategy. The paper advances the proposition that coproduction with countries in Eurasia under the cultural template of the Belt and Road Initiative might present new opportunities to blend China's stories into a narrative of shared prosperity. In doing this, the advance of China's economic power is supported by cultural policies that evoke a historical past as much as a shared future.

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Introduction

The rise of China from an economic basket case (i.e. the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution periods: 1958–1976) to an economic superpower is unprecedented in the annals of contemporary history. China's growing economic, political, and military power is extending, augmenting the ancient China concept of *tianxia*, 'all under heaven'. Since the mid-2000s, the government has sought ways to refurbish the image of China as a low-cost manufacturing hegemon toward greater global recognition of its valued culture and civilisation. In 2013, the government moved to enhance China's regional power base in the territories collectively known as the Belt and Road, which includes central Asia as well as many adjoined territories as far afield as Africa, central Europe and the Pacific. The so-called Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) sees China's economic presence extending, creating development opportunities, while downplaying imagery of a China threat. The term 'heritage diplomacy' (Winter 2015) aptly describes the Chinese government's attempts to position China as a trusted custodian of shared pan-Asian values.

In this new extension of empire, China's soft power will play a decisive role.

In contrast to the considerable existing literature on diplomacy and foreign aid as soft power (see Chitty et al. 2017 for a summary), scholarly attention has recently begun to address the power and influence of popular entertainment media in Asia (Curtin, Jacks, and Li 2015; Curtin and Shah 2010; Fung 2013; Flew and Hartig 2014; Chung 2016; Su 2016; Kong 2014; Chan 2009; Zhu 2008;

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Keane 2016; 2016a; Chua 2012; Chua and Iwabuchi 2008; Su 2010; Rosen 2011). The most notable national producers and distributors of Asian popular media entertainment are India, China, South Korea and Japan (see Chua 2012; Curtin and Shah 2010). However, while K-Pop (South Korea), Bollywood (India) and anime (Japan) are globally recognized, China's popular culture influence outside of the mainland has largely been sequestered in its diaspora. For this reason, scholars in China have echoed the need for reasserting 'cultural self-confidence' (*wenhua zixin*). (Shen 2017)

In this paper we argue that policies supporting coproduction treaties are seen as strategic in moving China from the current situation of relative weakness – i.e. a lack of self-confidence – toward becoming 'a strong cultural nation' (*wenhua qiangguo*), the most recent governmental articulation of soft power (Li 2014; Shen 2017) advocated by President Xi Jinping. The reasons for optimism are most evident in cinema production. Coincident with the extraordinary growth of the Chinese cinema box office during the past decade is an unprecedented rise in collaborative production opportunities. Film projects have facilitated transfers of human capital, technology and knowledge between media entrepreneurs and companies.

The failure of China's film culture to resonate with international audiences is a critical indictment of China's government-led soft power strategy, which censors and approves outgoing messages. Success is mixed; some content escapes the heavy censorial hand and finds critical success, often in film festivals; and of course, multiple online channels now exist to access and share Chinese content, which in turn brings the Chinese Diaspora into a closer cultural connection. The narratives, however, remain very Chinese, mostly inflected towards the Mainland, which raises the problem of how to engage with new audiences, unfamiliar with Chinese cultural and linguistic idioms. This paper argues that territories within southern and central Asia are now being designated as cultural targets; it discusses how film coproduction functions to enhance China's cultural presence by translating Chinese projects to other cultural idioms. Yet, despite the support provided by central, provincial, and local governments in China, and despite ample investment flowing into coproductions, the model has yet to generate the success that was anticipated when the coproduction system was set in train in 2003; in short the coproduction model has yet to deliver critical recognition of Chinese film on the world stage.

The discussion in this paper draws on academic literature pertaining to film industries and soft power, on official Chinese documents regarding coproduction treaties, and on policy reports and expert analysis from film and media scholars. The first section introduces the symbiotic relationship between film production and soft power, as well as expressing the perspective of leading Chinese media scholars towards the challenge of reaching new markets. The second section discusses the relative failure of China's film exports and the incentives to collaborate with foreigners. Due to a lack of space, the paper does not discuss successes and failures of the many projects that have taken place, aside from briefly considering the most highly discussed coproduction of recent years, *The Great Wall* (2016–17), and the lessons learned from that project. The following section addresses the challenges facing filmmakers in a time of increased international insecurity and shows how China is reaching out to establish new coproductions in central and southern Asia. We argue that the rise of Asia allows China to promote its vision of shared prosperity, one that is underwritten by massive aid to the region. We further suggest that while there is a will to broker new film-making relationships in the region in the name of bilateralism, there is little guarantee of market success. In their attempts to bring about cultural understanding, however, such projects do constitute a modality of 'soft power' as diplomacy (Nye 1990).

Film and soft power

Writing about China's rise to power, Jae Ho Chung (2015) notes three positions: the Confident School (China's rise is irreversible); the Pessimist School (China's rise is likely to falter); and the Not yet/Uncertain School (too early to say). The Chinese government has invested in expanding hard power by stabilizing the economy and the military, and in its smart power assets through digital

infrastructure policies. Soft power, which is mostly applied to the idea of how a nation projects its power beyond its borders, has become a hot topic with respect to China (Chitty et al. 2017; Vlassis 2015; Breslin 2011; Kurlantzick 2007; Zhao 2013; Sun 2010; Sparks 2014; Flew and Hartig 2014; ; Keane 2016). Joseph Nye, who coined the term in 1990, identified three sources of 'national attractiveness': culture, political values, and foreign policies (Nye 1990). The effectiveness of China's soft power projection, that is, its 'attractiveness' outside its national borders, is a complicated subject. Some argue that China's massive investment in its image projection has brought little substantive return. Efforts to convince the world of China's international cultural efflorescence are likewise interpreted as propaganda that doesn't square with stringent controls on the ground in China (Nye 2012). In this way, government sponsored soft power efforts can exacerbate negative foreign perceptions of China.

Some predict that the soft power project is doomed to fail because of the government's intractable censorship of media, restrictions on Internet access, and an inability to tolerate 'cultural ambassadors' that might be viewed as inappropriate (Keck 2013; Sun 2010).[1] Of course, China's rise is viewed in a different light in parts of Africa, Latin America, Eastern Europe and Asia, where the Chinese government's brand of authoritarianism is portrayed as an effective governance model in uncertain times: China is 'a welcome partner' or 'a trusted long-time ally' (Moss 2013). In contrast, the general perceptions of China in liberal democracies range from bad air quality to repression of dissidents, authoritarianism, and strangeness (Moss 2013). As David Shambaugh (2013) points out, while Chinese business has 'gone global', the nation's success on the soft power front remains limited.

In his book *Soft Power and American Empire* Matthew Fraser (2005) characterizes American movies, television, pop music and fast food as 'awesome weapons of mass distraction'. In reviewing this book, Nye and Kennedy (2004, 711–713) concur with Fraser's assessments about the intrinsic soft power of popular culture. In 2005, Nye complimented China's attractive traditional culture, noting that China was 'entering the realm of global popular culture as well'. However, he asserted that 'China's soft power still has a long way to go' – it doesn't 'have cultural industries like Hollywood' (Nye 2005, 11).

In China, many hold Hollywood in awe, and some like Wang Jianlin, CEO of Dalian Wanda, have dreamt of a Chinese Hollywood in the making (Curtin 2018). Wang did his best to recreate this dream in Qingdao, where he poured his wealth into a massive cinematic production centre augmented by theme parks and luxury hotels to be called the Qingdao Oriental Movie Metropolis By the end of 2017, however, Wang had divested himself of his core assets of this much hyped development, leaving the project in limbo, and the Chinese film industry still searching for its answer to Hollywood. It remains to be seen how the divestment of Wanda in the Movie Metrpolis project impacts on China's soft power ambitions. Other entities like Alibaba Pictures are meanwhile entering into the vacuum.

Policy makers in China, who extol the cultural and creative industries, are in broad agreeance of the need to commercialize film. Among modern media, film is a powerful and effective tool for nation building. 'If I could control the medium of the American motion picture, I would need nothing else to convert the entire world to Communism', remarked Joseph Stalin (Cited in Zhu 2014). Thanks to Hollywood, American cinema has become 'part of the socialization process' for people around the world and 'a prime mover in the globalization of consumerism and image making' (Zoysa and Newman 2002, 189–201). This reality is reflected in the global dominance of the US film industry (Sin 2012, 7). In a global information age 'success depends not only on whose army wins, but also on whose story wins' (Nye 2005, 11).

Film has traditionally been the best tool for telling global stories. However, in China, film is not only a tool for telling a story. As Chu (2002, 44) points out, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) 'inherited Lenin's conviction that cinema is the most important art form'. The CCP has a long tradition of using film as a vehicle for communication of the ideology of the one-party state. Under Chairman Mao, the film sector's primary role was mass education, to promote Marxism, to ensure public loyalty to the Party, and to coordinate social or political campaigns (Chan 2003, 159). The

profit motive was non-existent. Although media reforms beginning during the period of Deng Xiaoping's leadership (1978–1995) enabled the commercialization of the film sector, the government retains a firm hold over script selection, film review and censorship. The emphasis on the micro-management of the media is evident from the fact that in 2018 the central government placed all film industry management, including censorship, directly under the remit of the Central Propaganda Department. Strict government control over media and cultural institutions has limited the effectiveness of Chinese soft power, a view supported by media scholars (e.g. Sparks 2014; Flew and Hartig 2014; McClory 2010; Shambaugh 2013).

Indeed, the Chinese government's need to exercise control over media and cultural industries is deeply grounded in the logic and history of the one-party state's political system. While it understands the subtleties of film – and has been attempting to employ film to promote soft power inwardly and outwardly – it is hesitant to loosen its hold over the media, fearful of the 'spiritual pollution' that comes with the entry of foreign media – and ideas. The reasons for media control are historical. In the first decade of the twentieth century China experienced the collapse of the Qing Dynasty, and this was followed by internal conflicts, occupation by Japanese forces, and civil war. This turbulent history has had a profound impact on China's ruling elite, such that the government sees fit to endorse propagandist recreations of Chinese resistance against foreign aggressors. In one sense the government employs soft power more for 'defensive purpose[s]' (Li 2009), to build a stronger cultural image both within and outside China and to assert media power to contest western dominance. In fact, the term cultural confidence (*wenhua zixin*) is a response to the legacy of powerlessness in the face of sophisticated overseas media content. Confounding such diminished confidence, the level of censorial control exerted over media and cultural production perpetuates the weakness felt by the state, and many Chinese people, in the international mediasphere.

Unlike his predecessor Hu Jintao, President Xi Jinping seldom uses the term 'soft power' directly but stresses the perception of 'comprehensive national security', which includes both 'cultural security' and 'cultural confidence'. Of course, cultural security could also be interpreted as cultural insecurity. The linking of security and confidence, and the additional urgency of engineering China's 'great rejuvenation' (*weida fuxing*), as laid out in the Chinese Dream, suggests that the government is unlikely to liberalize its media more than it has already done: the reverse seems to be the case with more jingoistic recreations of China's rise hitting the screens amid restrictions on allowable expression.

The importance of film to the refurbishing of China's image is recognised by prominent Chinese media scholars. Yin Hong, a leading film scholar at Qinghua University in Beijing, mentions the role of Chinese film in conveying a softer image of the country (in Yin and Shi 2012, 17–20); in another joint authored article, he says that Chinese film 'going out' needs more 'compromise' to appeal to foreign audiences (Yin and Tang 2012, 10–14). The authors emphasize the importance of 'universal culture', which requires films to transfer local, ethnic or traditional culture into universally appealing forms. They reject the idea of focusing on the purity of national culture. The Dean of the Art College of Peking University, Wang Yichuan (2012, 27–30), has discussed the soft power of film and its 'hierarchy of effect', by which he refers to, among other things, the specific national lifestyle depicted in films, the moral status of the protagonists and the value systems displayed that might create a subtle influence on the audience. The value of film in exercising soft power is therefore well-established. For China, the question is: how can Chinese films attract global audiences through international coproduction and in doing so promote Chinese soft power?

Film coproduction and soft power

Coproduction is a broad term: it involves a variety of types of collaborative production. In short, an 'international coproduction' is where two or more production companies or broadcasters from different countries come together produce a film under an official treaty or other type of formal

cooperative arrangement. Hoskins, McFadyen, and Finn (1997) use the term 'international coproduction', or 'coproduction' to include any production/business arrangement between organizations based in different countries, ranging from cofinancing, where one partner's primary role is provision of a cash investment, to full coproduction where the creative, artistic, and financial contributions are roughly equal . Elsewhere Chris Berry (2014) evokes the concept of 'assemblage' to describe the contingent nature of cinematic productions; that is projects are often made up of personal, investment and actors from a variety of countries, thus problematizing the notion of national (or Chinese) cinema.

Can Chinese cultural soft power be enhanced through utilizing the film coproduction model? The numbers are telling – in 2017 there were more than 50 such projects completed, the majority with HKSAR; moreover, the incentives are obvious. For foreign 'partners' the co-production model allows them a bigger slice of the takings, that is, assuming the project gets made. This makes working with, and in China irresistible for many international filmmakers. By the end of 2018, China's domestic box office was worth 60.9 billion RMB (USD9 billion), second only to the US (USD11.9 billion).[2] A small piece of this large market is an attractive lure and film investment forums in China are regularly frequented by foreigners. Significantly, China's film industry has developed rapidly under government intervention and subvention. A film coproduction in China is effectively a defacto collaboration with the state. Can trusted foreigners play a role in China's great rejuvenation, and what might that role be?

While coproductions are rarely delineated in policy discourse in China as a means to value-add to China's dormant soft power – doing so would imply a critical dependency on the foreign entity – the perceived benefits allow ongoing conjecture among scholars and participants at film events. Writing about the rationale of coproductions, the US media scholar, Aynne Kokas notes: 'joint ventures are part of a systematic, policy-driven attempt to enhance investment in the Chinese culture industries as a way of increasing the PRC's international influence' (Kokas 2017, 2). In fact, 'influence' is regularly used with respect to coproductions; where such influence is correlated with China's culture 'going out.' Speaking to a panel at the World Economic Forum in Davos Switzerland in 2017, Li Ruigang, head of China Media Capital, China's largest entertainment industry investment company offered the following prescription for success: 'China is using its market size to influence Hollywood's way of thinking and how they make films' (Ge 2017). In 2015, Dalian Wanda's Wang Jianlin presented a talk at Harvard University, called 'Going Global – the Wanda Way' in which he said, 'We will try to make Wanda a spokesperson for Chinese companies going abroad.' A more pointed comment followed in an interview when Wang responded: 'private companies that go global to expand their business are answering the call from government.'(Wang 2016, 237). In his comments Wang was referring directly to the '2014 Implementation Plan for Deepening Reform of the Cultural Industries' (*shenhua wenhua tizhi gaige fang'an*). The 'call from government' since 2104, coinciding with the directives of President Xi Jinping, is to 'tell Chinese stories well', even if this requires 'foreign' participation and assistance (Huang 2018). The relationship between the Chinese government, co-productions and soft power influence is well documented in the sphere of documentary film. Gao (2014, 49, cited in Chu 2016) writes about 'the objective of strengthening the soft power of Chinese culture' by 'encouraging exchanges with non-Chinese industries' (Chu 2016, 249).

Of all regions and nations, Hong Kong has led the way in co-producing in China. In 2003, the signing of the Closer Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) between China and Hong Kong not only reclassified coproductions with Hong Kong as domestic Chinese films, but also opened 'a back door for more international participation in coproductions organized through Hong Kong' (Zhu and Nakajima 2010, 33; see also Chung 2016). In this way HKSAR acted as a facilitator of projects in China, and many notable Hong Kong directors and producers 'went north', often sacrificing their critical voice for a slice of the mainland pie. As Peichi Chung (2016) has outlined, the Hong Kong film industry found itself at a crossroads, its identity fractured and local investment in film in

decline. Hong Kong directors like Stephen Chow, Tsui Hark, John Woo, and Peter Chan have sought to bring a different sensibility to film making in China, to introduce new genres, while at the same time negotiating the difficulties of censorship.

Since its move to incorporate the Hong Kong industry within the broader Chinese film making family, the PRC has shifted gears to become a willing collaborator with other international partners. Many companies from Taiwan, Korea, US and other countries have set up in Beijing, Shanghai, Hengdian and Guangzhou, or have entered into various models of collaboration with Chinese companies. On the official level, coproduction treaties have been established with many liberal 'western' nations where film making is largely unhindered by government censorship (see Table 1).

The reasons for opening the co-production door has much to do with the perceived benefits. The success of Chinese films domestically does little to promote China's cultural influence outside the mainland. Chinese film has not succeeded offshore, aside from the occasional art house success, and in some cases the directors are not true mainlanders in the eyes of some foreign critics.[3] While billions have been invested to enable media services such as Xinhua, China Global Television Network (CGTN), and to expand China Central Television (Zhu 2012) internationally, the return on investment is minimal because the services are seen to be propaganda. Of course, the role of these state outlets is just that. Film making requires more cultural sensitivity if it is to transcend national boundaries. Efforts in the film industry include huge studio infrastructure developments, such as Shanghai Film Studios, August First Film Studios (in Beijing's Fengtai district), Hengdian World Studios (in Zhejiang province), Wuxi Studios (in Jiangsu province), and the most ambitious of all, the aforementioned Qingdao Oriental Movie Metropolis. Film and television production finds a role in this depiction of shared values, and because of this investment is filtering into new projects. In western China for instance, a film and television centre called Khorgas has formed on the border of China and Kazakhstan, offering production incentives and announcing itself as part of the Belt and Road Initiative.[4]

Propaganda works well enough on the already converted, those who are attuned to its nuances, who accept the message, and conversely those who are able to decode and ignore the message. As Yingchi Chu notes, most 'foreigners' don't know how to decode (i.e. read) Chinese movies. But is this problem of translating across cultures the full story? How about a co-production featuring the best talent of the west, the best from China, and special effects to die for? The much-vaunted Zhang Yimou co-production *The Great Wall* (2016–17) garnered disappointing ratings of 6/10 on IMDB. Rotten Tomatoes site gave it a 35% rating, a flop, while Douban, the Chinese online rating site was more forgiving, albeit a mere 5.4/10.[5] Writing in the *The Hollywood Reporter*, Pamela McIntosh concluded that the project provided lessons for Sino-American productions, in particular 'the difficulties of finding stories that meld Eastern and Western characters and the challenges of blending crews, which in Wall's case meant hiring 100 interpreters and solving conflicts that allegedly took place among some below-the-line workers.'[6] The prominent US film scholar Ying

Table 1. Sino-Foreign film coproduction agreements (compiled by authors).

Agreement	Date
The Agreement on Sino-Canada Film Co-Production	1987.02
The Agreement on Sino-Italy Film Co-Production	2004.12
The Agreement on Sino-Australia Film Co-Production	2007.09
The Agreement on Sino-French Film Co-Production	2010.04
The Agreement on Sino-New Zealand Film Co-Production	2010.07
The Agreement on Sino-Belgium Film Co-Production	2012.04
The Agreement on Sino-Britain Film Co-Production	2014.04
The Agreement on Sino-South Korea Film Co-Production	2014.07
The Agreement on Sino-Spain Film Co-Production	2014.09
The Agreement on Sino-Netherlands Film Co-Production	2015.10
The Agreement on Sino-Denmark Film Co-Production	2017.05
The Agreement on Sino-Luxembourg Film Co-Production	2017.06
The Agreement on Sino-Brazil Film Co-Production	2017.09

Zhu (2019) added that: 'It is a reminder that a big budget, star actors, and excessive visual effects do not magically translate into compelling stories, Hollywood or Chinese'.[7]

If the failure of *The Great Wall* to impress the world provides a salutary lesson about the vagaries of cross-cultural story-telling and the perils of working within a highly structured and intractable media system, what does the future hold for co-productions? Despite its failures, coproductions seems to be a good way to transfer skills and know-how and also serves as an effective way of attracting people with much needed skills to work in China. The transfer of know-how might be a way to ground future film makers in the realities of the market, enabling them to break out of the domestic market. Of course, the elephant in the room, as always, is 'the Party'. But more on that bugbear in the conclusion.

The huge domestic market is always China's trump card. The size and growth of the Chinese box office drives producers globally to look for opportunities in China. As China imposes a quota on foreign films, only allowing thirty-four films to be imported in the form of revenue sharing annually, coproduction is a good way to bypass the quota and gain privileged access to China's box office. In turn policy makers are allowing the new willing collaborators (Keane, Yecies and Flew 2018) to generate ideas, to offer solutions to revitalise stagnant Chinese productions. The hope is that an increase in domestic quality, brought about by the infusion of creativity and technology, may counter the 'cultural exports deficit (*wenhua maoyi chizi*)' .

Coproductions enable the transfer of creative ideas, technology, knowledge, professional skills and management skills. A good example of skill transfer is the entry of Korean companies into the Chinese film market. Yecies, Shim, and Goldsmith (2011) have shown how digital intermediate (DI) skills have been transferred from Korea and how they have affected the Chinese film industry.[8] DI has become an essential process for film around the world since the mid-2000s. DI used to be 'a cost-prohibitive service offered by a small number of US, Canadian and Australian firms working with a select group of leading Chinese directors and their big-budget films' in China (Yecies, Shim, and Goldsmith 2011, 139). After the Beijing-based Korean DI company LOLLOL media started to collaborate with Chinese filmmakers, as well as 'providing digital technical and file-based workflow consultation' with lower costs, more filmmakers began to utilise this process. To give another example of technology transfer: in 2012, Cameron Pace Group (CPG) built its China headquarters in Tianjin and announced it would bring 3D technology to China.

The coproduction model gets the thumbs up from aspiring film producers. The CEO of Dreams of Dragon Pictures, Qiu Huashun, emphasized the importance of transfer of knowledge in his company's work with Cloud Atlas Productions, reporting that the most important thing that he learned by coproducing *Cloud Atlas* (*yuntu* 2012) with Hollywood is 'we have met so many of the most professional and excellent filmmakers in the world and we have learned how to produce a good film' (Cited from Yang 2012). Zhang Zhao, CEO of Le Vision Pictures, said that the purpose for his company in coproducing *Expendables 2* (*gansi dui* 2 2012) was to learn the coproduction process, from content to production, as well as to learn about international insurance, financial management and legal procedures (Zhang 2012). These transfers through collaboration and coproduction have had a positive effect on China's film industry. Indeed, coproduction memorandums, now in operation with multiple countries, are necessary preconditions for these transfers to occur regularly and extensively.

New territories for the taking? The Belt and Road

If coproduction is a way forward for a film culture looking to retool and remodel itself, how should Chinese filmmakers proceed? *The Great Wall* fiasco is now history. Should China try to broker more coproductions with Hollywood, a strategy that is looking increasingly problematic with the reception of Trump's 'make America great' rhetoric in China. The answer to this question is probably located in south and central Asia. In the introduction we raised the issue of how China's culture and civilisation might extend into geographically proximate, rather than culturally proximate territories

such as the Chinese Diaspora. The region we are referring to is the Silk Road, a part of the world that resonates with the China of the past, when the Chinese concept of *tianxia* (all under heaven) saw foreign powers paying respects to the emperor up until the end of the Qing dynasty (Wang 2017). Indeed, China's expansion into the Belt and Road territories of Eurasia indicates the state's willingness to provide infrastructure and loans in return for future prosperity.

Chinese ambitions in this region evoke historical memory – of a time when China (the Middle Kingdom) was a great empire, particularly during a long era of openness to foreign trade dating from 2nd century BCE to the 14th century CE. In the late 19th century, a German geologist named Ferdinand von Richthofen coined the description the Silk Roads. In a book of the same name the British historian Peter Frankopan (2015) refers to a 'sprawling web of connections.' China was connected to Persia and the Khanates of the Mongols, now Central Asia via Xinjiang, the latter literally the 'new frontier.' The gateway of the overland Silk Road was Chang'an (now Xi'an), the capital of China in the Tang Dynasty.

Xi Jinping's initial articulation in Kazakhstan of the overland 'belt' in 2013, evoked the region's shared history of the Silk Road. Suddenly it seemed, an opportunity had opened up. The challenge now was to fertilize the concept. How different nations choose to discursively represent the Silk Road opens up the issue of knowledge, or the plural form, 'knowledges', that is, there are competing knowledges of the Silk Road. From a cultural perspective China is seeking to enter into constructive dialogue about representations of the Silk Road. In establishing the BRI as a focus for cultural development, the Chinese party-state was quick to talk up how BRI expansion might enhance Chinese civilization and culture, while creating a harmonious framework for a 'new world order.'

Of course, one of the key roadblocks to a new world order is that multiple nations lay claim to the shared history and few of these nations have a secular model of government like China. Some nations, like India and Indonesia, are democracies. In 2016, the Ministry of Culture (Moc) issued an ambitious 'action plan for Belt and Road cultural development.' (HKTDC Research 2016) Echoing the sense of 'heritage diplomacy' (Winter 2015), and a 'community of shared future' (*renlei mingyun gongtongti*) (Shi 2018), these include a BRI international exchanges mechanism, a BRI domestic co-operation agreement, and the launch of Chinese cultural centres in a number of countries along the proposed BRI routes. Other plans entail a BRI artistic creations initiative, a BRI cultural heritage corridor, a Silk Road cultural industries belt, and a BRI international co-operation action plan for the video game industry.

When announcing the revival of the ancient Silk Road idea in 2013, Xi was no doubt rebadging a civilizational theme, one that resonates across the region, and one in which many nations in the region can self-identify: India, Persia (now Iran), Arabia, and the new states of central Asia that have seceded from the Soviet Union in recent decades: Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan etc. For China's part, the motif is called tianxia ('all under heaven'), a form of governance derived from Confucian principles that saw enlightened leaders providing to the needs of people, whose allegiances were arranged in a hierarchical fashion, in contradistinction to the western model of individualism. The concept of *tianxia* invokes what Chinese scholars call the Kingly Way, a long way removed from western liberalism, yet not so far removed from the kind of authoritarianism dispensed by governments in the region (Lee 2017). In trying to regain moral ascendency over this territory the idea of shared values comes to the surface.

Coproductions are a means for China to promote its vision of social order. Projects that show a shared community of values or heroic struggles against oppression are more likely to pass muster. Similarly, TV serials have been the principal modality of ideological correctness, from the multiple recreations of the Sino-Japanese War to the more recent 2015 *Legends of the Silk Road* (*sichou zhilu chuanji*), a heroic tale of Uighur resilience and entrepreneurism in Xinjiang, featuring both ethnic Uighur and Han Chinese actors. The serial was a coproduction of sorts, financed by the Propaganda Department of Party Committee of the Xinjiang Autonomous Region, and produced in Khorgas by the Beijing-based Xinghe Shengshishi Media company. Such a main melody theme

plays to the masses, showing how a community of shared destiny (*renlei mingyun gongtongti*) unfolds. This model community is likely to be the subject of future productions in the region.

Perhaps spurred on by the signalling of shared destiny, in neighbouring Russia moves are afoot to establish 'creative communication between Russian and Chinese filmmakers.' A slate of coproduction projects has been agreed upon, drawing on themes that seem to resonate across cultural divides, for instance, a project with the working title *The Destiny's Compass*, reported to be a detective adventure story about the vanished Loulan kingdom in the Taklamakan desert in remote western China; another is a sci-fi film on the edges of Lake Baikal in which a scientist is attacked by a monster. Whether these offerings fare better than *The Great Wall* remains to be seen. The initiator of a special symposium at the Russian International Film festival in 2018, the Russian producer, Timur Bekmambetov, was optimistic, speaking of 'a dire need in the tools for creative communication between Russian and Chinese filmmakers which will help determine the values shared by the two cultures, thus making co-productions easy to understand and appealing to the international audience.'[9]

India and China have also entered into the coproduction game, with high hopes but as yet, little real success. A coproduction agreement was signed in 2014 amid fanfare in the presence of Prime Minister Modi of India and China's Xi Jinping. The first film to be completed under this agreement was *Xuanzang* (2016, directed by Huo Jianqi), a rendering of how Buddhism entered China from India, although the film failed to ignite the box office in either country. Considerable effort was spent on assuring authenticity, including dialogue in Mandarin and Sanskrit: the fact that the story was more well-known in China as as a fantasy story called *Journey to the West* did little to promote this more authentic government-endorsed version to audiences. This effort was soon followed by *Kungfu Yoga*, directed by Stanley Tung with legendary Hong Kong actor Jackie Chan featuring in the lead role. The production credits were shared among a long list of Chinese companies including Sparkle Roll Media, Shanghai Taihe Pictures, and the Xinjiang based Khorgos Taihe Digital Entertainment Cultural Development company.

However, the Indian production company Viacom 18 pulled out in 2015, citing unspecified creative differences, although accounts suggested that the story was laden down with stereotypes of India that pandered heavily to Chinese audiences. The film was subsequently panned by Indian critics. Other projects currently in development at the time of writing have attempted to generate momentum. *Love in Beijing* (working title) is about a cross-cultural romance set in Beijing; *The Zookeeper* is a tale about an Indian zookeeper travelling across China in search of a panda. These projects have endeavoured to overcome the cultural problems that dogged *Kungfu Yoga* by allowing Indian directors to take a leading role and sharing creative developments evenly between the two nations.

The BRI is likely to become a setting for film development in the coming years and there is much talk of a new frontier. The rise of Asia has become a talking point among political scientists (Khanna 2019) and governments in the region are keen to ensure that authenticated versions of history are correctly inscribed. As Colin Sparks (2018) astutely observes, China's state control of the media, which has been a major stumbling block in advancing projects between Hollywood and China, is unlikely to deter BRI countries from involvement, at 'least on the official level' (2018, 94). Of course, there are good ideological reasons for making films, as the past history of the region and its links to the Soviet Union illustrates. The list of official coproduction treaties (see Table 2), is increasing, as film makers ponder the question of how to make stories that might seem plausible, and which might entice audiences in these countries to pay money to watch. While there is much at stake, there is a sense that the frontier might remain just that, far away from reality. In the meantime, it makes good sense diplomatically for the Chinese government and its film makers to open up the channels for dialogue about 'Asian civilizations.' One factor that plays in favour of China's influence here, compared to the Hong Kong example, is that many states in Eurasia are not averse to state control of expression. In a sense, the diplomatic reaching out of film coproduction agreements, while not guaranteeing market success, does augment China's soft power status in the diplomatic sense originally articulated by Nye (1990).

Table 2. Sino-BRI film co-production agreements (complied by authors).

Agreement	Date
The Agreement on Sino-Singapore Film Co-Production	2010.07
The Agreement on Sino-India Film Co-Production	2014.09
The Agreement on Sino-Malta Film Co-Production	2015.07
The Agreement on Sino-Estonia Film Co-Production	2016.04
The Agreement on Sino-Greece Film Co-Production	2017.04
The Agreement on Sino-Kazakhstan Film Co-Production	2017.06
The Agreement on Sino-Russia Film Co-Production	2017.07

Conclusion: the softness of China's cultural soft power

This paper has sought to investigate how film coproduction plays out in an era of increased nationalism, in particular looking at the Chinese government's attempts to engineer a 'great rejuvenation'. The rise of China was achieved on the basis of the nation becoming the world's centre for low-cost manufacturing. China has been largely successful in leveraging economic growth through strong management and control of foreign investment within China through joint-ventures together with knowledge and technology transfer. When it comes to projection of soft power, however, the task has been more challenging, even though the ambition to succeed has been perhaps even greater.

Discussion of China's soft power has typically focused on foreign policy, political values and cultural aspects such as listing the numbers of box office returns and numbers of Chinese overseas channels. This paper differs from this view through its argument that popular culture is the critical shortcoming in China's soft power exercise; for example, film might contribute to the enhancement of China's cultural profile around the world if filmmakers were able to harness the opportunities provided by coproduction, particularly the ability to craft universal stories. As a vehicle for promoting Chinese film and culture around the world film coproduction has become more of a focus for both the government and the film industry in recent years, a highly ambitious, attempted counterweight to the influence of Hollywood and American soft power, and as a mechanism to upgrade China's film industry value chain. The projection of China's soft power through international coproduction, however, remains very much a work in progress.

The efficacy of China's soft power strategy is undermined by the degree of control of the Chinese state over its media. While there has been an increase in coproduction activity globally, China offers unique challenges such as strict censorship, government intervention, unclear regulations and underdeveloped industry mechanisms. These obstacles need to be overcome if China is to be a competitor. In comparison with its main 'soft power competitors' (Hollywood and South Korea), the state intervenes in all aspects of content production, most notably through censorship. Productions need to pass the censors and there is a tendency on the part of film and television producers to self-censor prior to submission of the projects to the state regulatory agency.

Censorship, though a shackle to developing film talent, is also a domestic content regulation strategy; that is, China does not have a film classification system like almost all of its coproduction partners. If it did, it would be able to expand its genres. Much emphasis in discussions at film festivals falls on the term 'creativity', which is critical to film industry success but which requires latitude from regulators. Compared to other countries' soft power promotion, the Chinese cultural soft power push is more government-guided. The desire to promote culture abroad and to build a national image and an approved soft power strategy has cruelled the success of film projects such as *The Great Wall*. The coproduction model is in its early days. There is a will to collaborate but one senses that in a time of tight ideological control international players are losing interest. This is a key weakness, and there seems no ready remedy. Chinese audiences meanwhile rejoice in the success of nationalistic blockbusters such as *Wolf Warrior 2 (zhanlang 2017)*, playing the Party's tune but which are meanwhile 'lost in translation' for foreigners.

Notes

1. For instance, someone like the South Korean rapper Psy would be considered too problematic by the authorities in Beijing.
2. Data from EntGroup, Accessed online 20 January 2019 at http://www.entgroup.cn/Views/61992.shtml.
3. Hong Kong directors have at times been ambivalent about being cheerleaders for Chinese nationalism. The director of the award winning Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon (2000) was Ang Lee (Li An), a native of Taiwan whose film making style was honed in the US.
4. The base was caught up in a tax evasion scandal surrounding the actress Fan Bingbing in 2018. Fan purportedly used this base to launder her investments. Following the crackdown, many of the companies moved closed down.
5. https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/22/movies/the-great-wall-what-critics-and-filmgoers-are-saying-in-china.html.
6. Pamela McClintock, 'Matt Damon's 'The Great Wall' to lose $75 million: future of US-Sino co-productions in doubt, The Hollywood Reporter, 3 February 2017, available at https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/what-great-walls-box-office-flop-will-cost-studios-981602.
7. http://www.chinafile.com/conversation/can-china-expand-its-beachhead-hollywood.
8. 'Digital Intermediate' is the stage in the filmmaking process when footage is transferred from celluloid to a digital file for editing, before being transferred back to film for screening.
9. http://moscowfilmfestival.ru/miff38/eng/news/?id=677.

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