

Post-COVID Hollywood in China: Market Decline, Shifting Policies, and Audience Critiques

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ABSTRACT:

This article explores post-COVID transformations in Hollywood-China relations by analyzing qualitative audience data collected from questionnaires and group interviews and by comparing these findings with journalistic and industry reports. It foregrounds the significance and complexity of Chinese viewers' engagements with Hollywood movies beyond what is captured in quantitative market statistics. Drawing on concepts of the multidimensional identities of contemporary movie audiences under cultural globalization, the article argues that Chinese audiences of Hollywood movies act simultaneously as cosmopolitan consumers and citizens whose cultural identities do not necessarily adhere to Party ideology and national belonging; instead, they are shaped through consumption and reception practices amid transnational flows of cultural products. While Chinese audiences generally regard Hollywood movies as media products with high entertainment and aesthetic value, the post-COVID trend of growing "dislike" toward Hollywood nonetheless expresses an increasingly negative imagination—an imagination itself constantly mediated through global mass media—of the United States amid ongoing geopolitical tensions.

KEYWORDS: Audience; China; Crisis; Hollywood; Global Film Market; National Identity

Introduction

Since the 1910s, the term "Hollywood" has referred to a group of major film studios based in and around Los Angeles that came to dominate large-scale production and global distribution. In 1922, these studios formed the Motion Picture Association (MPA), which today also includes Netflix and Amazon Prime Video/Amazon MGM Studios. Together, these companies constitute the core of Hollywood, supported by a network of related firms and industries in the region. Since the late 1920s, Hollywood has penetrated international markets, and since the 1970s, Hollywood has dominated the global box office (Krämer). Over the past 15 years, however, its performance in many overseas markets has declined, with China being one of the most notable examples.

In the first thirty years following the establishment of the People's Republic of China (hereafter China) in 1949, Hollywood movies were almost completely absent from the Chinese screen (Su, *China's Encounter*). Beginning in the 1980s, however, economic reforms gradually loosened restrictions on the importation of cultural products from the capitalist world. China's film industry transformed from a state-controlled ideological apparatus into a diversified market that is partially open to foreign movies, investment, and coproduction under continued state regulation. This process culminated in 1994, when Hollywood blockbusters

entered China with the re-introduction of the revenue-sharing system for imported movies (Rosen 51). Since then, Hollywood has regarded China as both a lucrative market and a regulatory challenge, adapting production strategies to cater to both the Chinese audience and censorship in the pursuit of box-office growth. Some commentators observed that the “promise of Chinese money” led to a “remaking” of the Hollywood industry (Wolff). From the perspective of the Chinese film industry, Hollywood films have been variously discussed as a market and technological catalyst, a symbol of Western imperialism, and an instrument for advocating Chinese soft power.

Extensive scholarship has examined the China-Hollywood relationship between 1994 and 2020, from political-economic, cultural, and historical perspectives (Rosen; Wan and Kraus; Kokas; Su, “Resisting Cultural Imperialism” and “The Hollywood Chinawood Relationship”; Zhu). A few studies focusing on Chinese audiences have used qualitative approaches to explore their individual engagement with Hollywood movies (Wang; Su, “From Visual Pleasure” and “Disillusionment and Saturation”). Importantly, Wendy Su has examined how Chinese audiences’ attitudes toward Hollywood changed immediately following the COVID-19 pandemic, observing a general sense of disappointment with and disengagement from Hollywood (“From Visual Pleasure”; “Disillusionment and Saturation”). However, the ongoing and enduring post-COVID changes in the China-Hollywood relationship warrant further exploration of the current dynamics and future trajectories. In this paper, the post-COVID time frame spans from 2020—when cinemas and box offices were severely impacted by the pandemic—to the present—a period in which the global box office has yet to recover and will likely never return to pre-pandemic levels (Szalai).

To examine the current market dynamics and audience reception of Hollywood movies in China, I combine analyses of industry reports on post-pandemic dynamics in Hollywood and China’s film industries with empirical data drawn from 100 questionnaires and thirteen group interviews conducted in 2024 with Chinese viewers of Hollywood movies.¹ To address generational differences in audience reception, participants were stratified into five age cohorts: those born before 1970; 1970-1979; 1980-1989; 1990-1999; and after 2000, with approximately twenty participants in each group. The sample was collected mainly through contacts at universities in China and Germany, including professors, staff members, students, and student assistants who were hired to find participants within their social circles and conduct the questionnaire with them in the form of a one-on-one interview. To elicit more detailed qualitative data, approximately half of the questionnaires were collected in the form of in-person or online interviews. The other half were completed online via Kernwert, a qualitative research data collecting platform, where the data were subsequently compiled and

¹ This research is carried out as a case study of the larger “Hollywood Memories” program funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) and conducted at Leibniz Universität Hannover, Germany. It explores global audiences’ memories of, experiences with, and attitudes toward Hollywood movies, particularly sequels, franchises, and remakes.

organized for analysis. Participants who have completed questionnaires or questionnaire-based interviews could choose whether they wanted to further participate in the group interviews, which were later transcribed for analysis. All questionnaires and interviews were conducted in Chinese, and results were translated into English. As the sample was primarily collected through self-selection, with respondents voluntarily putting themselves forward for participation, it was skewed toward urban residents with relatively high education (Figure 1). Given the large and highly diverse Chinese population, the empirical results were not designed to be representative from the outset. Rather, they provide exploratory insights into Chinese audiences' engagement with Hollywood movies. My qualitative analysis captures details within the ongoing changes in Chinese audiences' attitudes, rather than reducing them to mere statistics. To protect participants' personal information, all questionnaire and interview participants quoted in this study have been anonymized. Instead of using names, I provide brief descriptive identifiers that are relevant to the quoted responses.

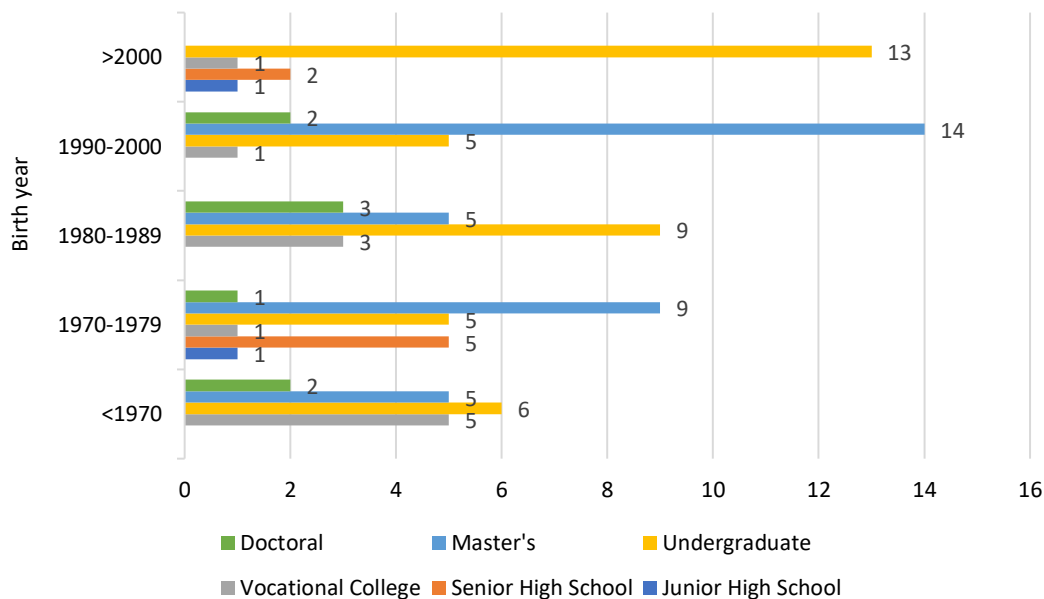


Fig. 1. Education level of participants in my research according to age group.

I first contextualize Hollywood's post-COVID crises within a global and historical perspective before zooming in on the challenges facing its relationship with China in the broader context of the Sino-US relationship. I then introduce my theoretical framework, including theories of cultural and audience studies, for the analysis of my empirical data. I draw on the citizen/consumer model and my qualitative data to reveal my participants' active negotiations between their national identity and movie consumption. In doing so, this study contributes to an understanding of how Hollywood movies are localized in the reception process of global audiences. Finally, I use Jonathan Gray's conceptualization of "dislike" to examine how my respondents articulate their shift away from Hollywood movies. I argue that their perceptions of Hollywood films are both shaped by and challenge China's official political-cultural

discourse, which positions Hollywood in a competitive relationship with a rapidly rising Chinese cinema. Although participants' responses often reflect this discourse, they continue to perceive Hollywood films as superior to Chinese films in terms of their formal and aesthetic qualities. At the same time, many express growing criticisms of Hollywood, driven by geopolitical tensions, strengthened cultural confidence, and a sense of exhaustion with established Hollywood storytelling conventions.

Hollywood's Long-Lasting Crisis Discourse

The entire history of Hollywood could be read as a recurrent narrative of crisis, deriving from technological, cultural, and social changes. In the 1910s, in response to "the threat of State censorship," film producers, distributors, exhibitors, and advertisers started to form various trade associations, which reached "agreements of industry-wide standards of acceptable handling of certain subject matter" (Bordwell et al. 105-06). These agreements, together with the National Board of Censorship voluntarily established by the industry in 1914, served as mechanisms of self-censorship designed to forestall state-imposed censorship, while simultaneously advancing the industry's standardization. Concerns over the morality of the movies, combined with the rising unemployment rate in the early years of the Great Depression and the turbulent transition to sound, rendered the 1930s "a time of crisis" (Morgan 1). This series of crises was resolved by the late 1930s through the consolidation of a star system and vertically integrated operation where studios controlled production, distribution, and exhibition, and thus the initial threats transformed into the so-called "golden era" (Morgan 1). The Second World War gave way to another period of instability. It was marked by the House for Un-American Activities Committee's blacklist of Hollywood artists for alleged communist activities, the Anti-Trust Law which dismantled the vertical integrated structure and studio system, post-war economic recession, the popularization of television in the 1950s, and "social and cultural upheaval" in the 1960s (Tzioumakis 156). The severity of these events led some commentators to proclaim the "death of Hollywood" (Schatz 15). However, Hollywood adapted through new production strategies and industrial configurations—including television productions, conglomeratization, mass advertising, and fewer but more expensive blockbusters—allowing the industry not only to survive but expand and dominate the global market in a changing media landscape (Schatz 2003).

In recent years, the press has again sounded the alarm about Hollywood's growing crises amid the rise of video-on-demand (VOD) streaming services. The COVID-19 pandemic had a disastrous impact on the US movie industry, forcing all 5,477 cinemas to close by the end of 2020 (Faughnder et al.). In 2021, the shutdowns led Warner Bros. to "smash the theatrical window" and release 17 films on HBO Max instead of exclusively in theaters (Masters). Following this decision, *The Hollywood Reporter* raised "big, even existential questions" about how theaters would survive after this "supposedly onetime" move (Masters). Amazon's acquisition of MGM studio in 2021 further eroded the theatrical window, a trend fueled by Netflix and Paramount's bidding on the acquisition of Warner Bros (Benchetrit). Since 2020,



streaming services such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Disney+ have come to dominate the combined global theatrical and home/mobile entertainment market. In 2021, the digital market accounted for 72 percent of this combined market, down from 75 percent in 2020 (2021 *Theme Report*). By financing productions and operating through data-driven, algorithmic VOD systems, streaming services have challenged Hollywood's traditional studio model (Lobato; Meir and Smits).

Further turmoil for Hollywood struck in 2023, when the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) and the Writers Guild of America (WGA) launched strikes against the use of generative AI, halting major studio productions. Quoting a member of the SAG-AFTRA negotiating committee, *The Guardian* reported that actors and screenwriters were forced to negotiate for their "very existence" (Beckett and Paul). The Los Angeles wildfires in early 2025 added to the turmoil, forcing the evacuation of 8,100 Hollywood workers and destroying more than 300 homes (Smith, "It's a gut punch"). Meanwhile, the rising production costs and fierce competition from rivals with financial incentives—such as Australia, Britain, and Canada—have increasingly driven production out of Los Angeles (Smith, "It Feels Empty").

As daunting as the disruptions may look, this series of events could be regarded as a reiteration of the crisis pattern running throughout Hollywood's history. The crisis discourse prevalent in Hollywood today echoes earlier periods of transformation but distinguishes itself through its inextricable ties to the global market and geopolitical relations, including its relationship to China.

Hollywood's Crisis in the Chinese Market

When the revenue-sharing system was reintroduced in 1994, only ten films per year could be permitted to enter the Chinese market under this arrangement. Most of them were Hollywood or Hong Kong movies (Rosen 51). In 2001, the quota was increased to 20 films (Su, "Resisting Cultural Imperialism"). Despite their limited number, Hollywood dominated the Chinese box office in the late 1990s and early 2000s. During this period, left-wing scholars warned against Hollywood's cultural imperialism, regarding it not only as a material threat to the Chinese film market but also as a symbolic threat to Chinese cultural identity (Rosen; Wan and Kraus; Su, "Resisting Cultural Imperialism"). These critiques reflect the broader transformations and uncertainties surrounding China's national identity following its economic reforms of the 1980s, which introduced free-market capitalism in the Communist Party-state (Su, "Resisting Cultural Imperialism" 198). As Yingjie Guo observes, since the reforms, the Chinese identity "has been reconstructed in the broad context of rapid modernization and globalization as well as the gradual debunking of socialism" (xi). The expansion of global Hollywood in China contributed to this process by exposing Chinese audiences to Western culture.

By 2003, however, Hollywood's market share had fallen below 50 percent (Su, *China's Encounter* 49-50). Although China and the US signed a memorandum of understanding in

2012, which increased the quota to 34 films per year and Hollywood's market share in the Chinese market for that year to 51.5% (Herring 112), it dropped to just over 40 percent in 2017 (Cain). In 2018, Sino-US relations deteriorated amid the trade war initiated by the first Trump administration and were further strained by geopolitical tensions following the COVID-19 outbreak. Hollywood's market share in China declined to just 12 percent during the pandemic in 2021 (Brzeski). After the pandemic, Hollywood's market share has remained between ten and twenty percent. In terms of top-grossing movies, Hollywood's presence in China's top ten declined sharply: from three to seven Hollywood movies between 2011 and 2018 to fewer than three between 2019 and 2024, none of which made it into the top five (Fu et al.). This trend was exacerbated by Trump's escalation of the tariff war during his second term. In April 2025, in response to the newly imposed tariffs, the China Film Administration (CFA) released a statement saying that the situation "will inevitably further reduce the domestic audience's favorability towards American films," adding that China would "moderately reduce the number of American films imported" (Rahman and Brzeski). In the first half of 2025, amid disputes over tariffs and import limits, Hollywood's share in the Chinese box office fell to 5% (Reuters).

From the perspective of film production, after a period of close cooperation between 2014 and 2017, Chinese investment still plays a role in financing Hollywood projects. Wendy Su notes that from 2014 to the second quarter of 2016, "Chinese companies invested over \$5 billion into the US film industry through 13 projects" ("The Hollywood Chinawood Relationship"), but such funding has become significantly restricted by the Chinese government. Lara Herring considers the China-Hollywood relationship from 2020 as part of the "Redux" period, in which "strategic decisions made by both the Chinese and US governments [...] were indicative of a reversal of the attempts made in the ten years prior to enable mergers and acquisitions between the two nations" (199). This shift was reflected in a decline in the number of Sino-US co-productions as well as in Hollywood studios scaling back efforts to cater to Chinese audiences or to acquiesce to Chinese government censorship in order to gain market access (Herring 200). In 2022, for example, Chinese censors asked Sony Pictures to remove shots of the Statue of Liberty from *Spider-Man: No Way Home* (2021); however, unlike in earlier years, Sony refused, and the film was never released in China (Cain and Davidson).

The diminishing prospects for China-Hollywood cooperation suggest an intensifying competitive relationship. Stanley Rosen told the *LA Times* that Chinese film companies are "trying to beat Hollywood", which is "becoming a patriotic issue [for China] as well as an economic issue" (qtd. in James). He also stated that, "for those films [the Chinese government] might accept, they're not going to promote them" (qtd. in James). This resonates with Wendy Su's observation that Hollywood not only faces the challenge from protectionist policies and changing audience preferences, but also from China's distinct marketing strategies, including an integrated online network that combines mobile ticketing apps with market research and

consumer intelligence firms, to which Hollywood studios have little access (Su, “Disillusionment and Saturation”).

The diversity and abundance of entertainment media in present-day China have added to the competition faced by Hollywood. While subscription-video-on-demand (SVOD) platforms such as Netflix and Amazon Prime Video are not accessible in China due to state firewalls, Chinese streaming services, such as Tencent Video and IQiYi, have flourished.² While Netflix challenges traditional Hollywood studios, its wide distribution system simultaneously facilitates their global reach. By contrast, China’s domestically cultivated streamers, which have the capacity to further censor and restrict Hollywood content, present challenges not only to its studios but also to the broader expansion of the Hollywood ecosystem in China.

Alongside geopolitical relations and marketing strategies, another obstacle to Hollywood’s box-office growth in China is movie piracy. As a way of accessing media content, it is not only facilitated and popularized by digital formats, but also free from censorship concerns or release delays. Aiming to tighten regulation on the media market and pressed by the Motion Picture Association, the Chinese government has launched multiple successful anti-piracy campaigns (*MPA Comments*). However, piracy remains a significant—if not primary—means of accessing Hollywood movies for Chinese viewers. In the 2025 *Special 301* report—an annual review by the US Trade Representative (USTR) that identifies countries failing to adequately protect or enforce intellectual property rights (IPR)—the United States once again accused China of online piracy, referring to the latter as “a manufacturing hub” for illicit streaming devices (22). This report resonates with the questionnaire results in my research, in which 80 respondents out of 100 reported having watched movies from pirated online sources.

These developments have also influenced Chinese audiences’ attitudes toward Hollywood movies and the broader US popular culture. According to industry insiders and reports from mainstream Chinese media, Chinese audiences are turning away from Hollywood and toward domestic cinema, which depicts “more convincing” characters “adapted from real historical stories [from China]” (Shi qtd. in Chen). In these reports, Hollywood is often held to a high standard which the Chinese industry is not only supposed to learn from but also to supersede. For example, a report in *People’s Daily*—the official newspaper of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)—celebrates the recent achievements of Hengdian World Studios, one of China’s largest audiovisual production centers located in Zhejiang, calling it the “Chinese Hollywood” (“Chinese Hollywood”).

Chinese audiences’ growing disengagement from Hollywood has also been discussed in scholarly research. As mentioned earlier, Su observes that younger Chinese audiences have experienced “a sense of disillusionment” with American popular culture since the pandemic,

² Tencent Video boasts 114 million subscribers in the second quarter of 2025, and while the recent numbers are not available about IQiYi, it reached 101 million subscribers by the end of 2023 (“Recent Data”; “Tencent Holdings”). These subscribers are almost exclusively Chinese.

which she attributes to the inadequate US pandemic control measures (especially compared with China) and the rising nationalism fostered by the growing adversarial relationship between China and the United States (“From Visual Pleasure” 532). I complicate Su’s argument by investigating not only how Chinese audiences distance themselves from but also how they continue to engage with Hollywood movies.

Taken together, the decreasing market share, the continued prevalence of piracy, and the Chinese audiences’ reportedly waning interest in Hollywood movies pose serious obstacles for Hollywood in China. Meanwhile, Chinese mainstream journalistic publications have turned from a cultural-imperialist framework toward greater emphasis on the cooperation and competition between China and Hollywood. This discourse reimagines Chinese audiences as more closely aligned with the party-state and traditional Chinese culture, and as increasingly impervious to Western cultural influences. These indicators often neglect the fact that Hollywood movies remain a significant component of Chinese viewers’ everyday media consumption. The following sections will bridge the gap by exploring the changes in their lived experiences and perceptions of Hollywood.

Consumer/Citizen, Global Imagination and the (Limits to) Active Audience

Exploring Chinese audiences’ reception of Hollywood movies involves examining how their national identity interacts with film consumption and meaning-making process within the globalizing media environment. Since the 2000s, scholars have highlighted transnational audiences’ engagement with Hollywood movies, moving beyond cultural imperialist critiques to explore viewing practices, interpretation, and memories grounded in the local film culture (Maltby; Stokes). As Richard Maltby points out, these studies serve to dismantle “confirmatory descriptions of hapless audiences deceived by irresistible texts into abandoning their cultural patrimony to become temporary American citizens” (7). This turn corresponds with developments in scholarly discussions of Hollywood movies in China. As noted in the previous section, Hollywood’s introduction into China initially provoked alarmist critiques that Hollywood movies would interpellate Chinese audiences into capitalist ideology. Over the past decade, however, scholars have increasingly focused on audience responses and how individuals negotiate between national identity and film consumption within a globalizing world (Su, “From Visual Pleasure”). More broadly, globalization has put nationalism in China under increasing influences of “consumerism, individualism, internationalism, globalism and presentism” (Lu 6). My study contributes to this field by revealing underlying negotiations between distinct cultural identities in Chinese audiences’ reception of Hollywood films, adopting Nestor Garcia Canclini’s discussion of the identities of the citizen/consumer in the globalized era.

Canclini’s conceptualization of postmodern citizens as consumers is rooted in the context of the metropolitan city. He argues that the citizen “feels rooted in his or her local culture (rather than the national culture that the state and parties speak of),” which is “also the site of intersection of multiple national traditions—those of the migrants that come together in any

metropolis” (29). He emphasizes that the “global explosion of identities” has extended beyond national borders and has been “reorganized by the transnational flow of commodities and messages” (17; 29). On the one hand, Canclini’s discussion dovetails with the demographics of my participants, whose exposure to metropolitan culture and global media products has shaped their cultural identities. On the other hand, his observation reveals film consumption as a site for Chinese urban viewers to transmit and interpret political and cultural messages within a global context.

In their exploration of the globalization of Hollywood, Toby Miller and his colleagues further contextualize the citizen-consumer identity in the film market (41). They observe that

Citizen-consumers are said to be both constructed and corrupted through popular culture. On one side of the debate, the exercise of choice through purchase is supposed to guarantee the democratic workings of a market-driven society, because the culture industries are simply providing what the consuming public desires. But for today’s progressives, choices may also effect social change. (41)

Consumption choices are not only symbolic of desires for “social change,” but could be materialized through the “global imagination,” which Shani Orgad describes as “both the faculty to and the process of forming mental images and concepts of the world, and of ourselves and others traversing this global social space [...] through signs and symbols” (107). Hollywood movies act as crucial mediators in transmitting the “signs and symbols” through which “images and concepts of the world” are formed. Since China opened its market to Hollywood studios—which happened alongside the rise of multiplexes and increasingly abundant cultural commodities—Chinese audience identities shifted from citizens shaped by the state’s ideological/national education to consumers whose viewing choices constantly interact with their global imagination. More specifically, their media consumption may foster imagination of other socio-political configurations, thereby effecting the “social change” identified by Miller et al. through prefigurative actions that align with these imagined possibilities. Today, the immensity of China’s film market and its significance in the global film economy further complicate the relationship between the consumer and citizen identities. As my research data show in the next section, both the neo-liberal and progressive sides of consumption are evident in Chinese audiences’ attitudes toward Hollywood movies, which are often elaborated in relation to their attitudes toward Chinese movies. Although this article foregrounds cultural-political orientations, it is important to note that they do not determine Chinese audiences’ reception of Hollywood movies; rather, they constitute only one factor among multiple social, cultural, and personal influences revealed in my empirical study.

The argument that Chinese audiences’ identities are situated at the intersection of the consumer and the citizen is predicated on their agency, including their active choice of movies and viewing strategies, as well as their critical capacities. This conceptualization aligns with audience studies’ emphasis since the 1970s on “viewers’ ability to make their own socially pertinent meanings out of the semiotic resources” (Fiske 65). However, Jonathan Gray’s

recent investigation into audiences' "dislike" draws attention to the limits of such agency, particularly with regard to audiences' control of their media consumption (40). Emphasizing that dislike is not "'just' an absence of like" or "simply a failure to like," he argues that, on the contrary, media products can become "passionately disliked objects" when they are "ubiquitous and inescapable" (Gray 11, 15). Dislike functions as "a site of analysis and reflection, of individual texts but also of media writ large," with the capacity to "perform identity, self, and community" (Gray 4). Gray's observations facilitate an understanding of Chinese audiences' perceivable disengagement from Hollywood movies and, in turn, Hollywood's declining box office in the Chinese film market.

Chinese Audiences' Engagement with Hollywood Movies

My analysis in this and the following section draws on audience responses collected through my empirical study, the full data from which is not reproduced here due to its extensive length. Specifically, I focus on participants' answers to the following questions from the group interviews conducted as part of the study:

1. When I say Hollywood movies, what comes to your mind? How does it contrast with Chinese cinema?
2. When you think back to your childhood and youth, are there specific Hollywood movies, characters, or stars that were important to you back then?

I analyze responses to these questions together because they frequently overlap. In addition, answers to the survey question "Do you prefer Hollywood movies or Chinese movies?" are also used to provide a general picture of audience preferences. Therefore, all quotes from participants come from transcriptions of group interviews.

According to these data, participants generally treat Hollywood movies primarily as commodities to be purchased and consumed for their entertainment value—particularly a source of sensory stimulation and relaxation—without requiring emotional or intellectual commitment. These viewing strategies are further exemplified by their impression of Hollywood movies as the technologically advanced, big-budget, spectacle-driven, star-powered "blockbusters" with highly revered storytelling and acting techniques. "Blockbusters," the term interviewees use to describe their impression of Hollywood movies, is symbolic of the history of Hollywood's re-entry into the Chinese market. Although the term "blockbuster" was used from "the early 1950s on to refer on the one hand to large-scale productions and on the other to large-scale box-office hits" (Neale 47), it was first mentioned in China in 1994, when the imported movies came out on the big screen (Rao 462). Following this press report, the authorities emphasized that the ten foreign films imported each year were chosen for their capacity to "reflect the finest global cultural achievements and represent the latest artistic and technological accomplishments in contemporary world cinema," rather than their financial scales (Rao 462-63). However, the term persevered among audiences as "high-budget movies and even US movies" (Rao 463). Since then, it has also

become widely used in Chinese scholarship and mainstream media to describe Hollywood movies, thus embedding their impression of blockbusters in the view of the public.

It is perhaps due to the long-established impressions of blockbuster qualities that Hollywood movies appear to be more appealing as media products for Chinese audiences than their domestic cinema. As shown in Figure 2, my questionnaire results reveal that significantly more participants reported a preference for Hollywood movies over Chinese movies in their questionnaire answers, a finding that contrasts with media claims regarding Hollywood's waning popularity in China.

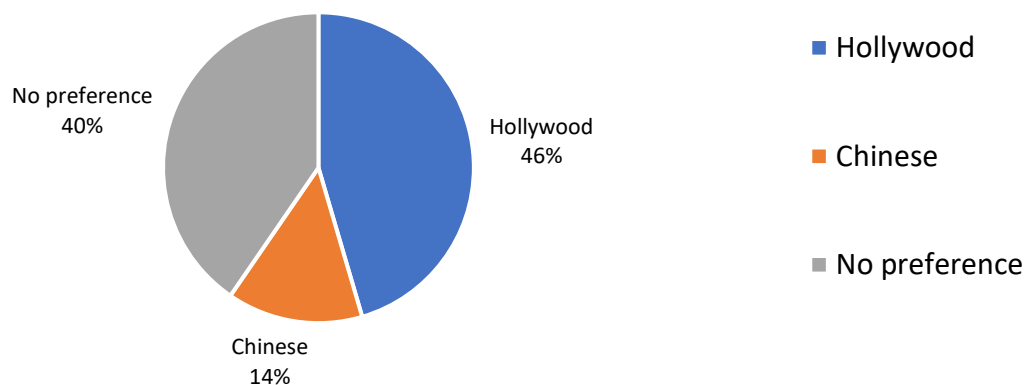


Fig. 2. Preference for Hollywood or Chinese movies; based on my questionnaire data.

Their preference for Hollywood movies is further explained in the group interviews. First, participants often perceive Hollywood cinema as less politicized than Chinese cinema, lamenting the overtly political messaging in Chinese movies as well as the rigid censorship and regulations governing the Chinese movie industry. For example, a university freshman critiques that Chinese movies “prioritize the correct values [...] the antagonists, bad guys, have to have problematic values and end badly,” whereas “Hollywood movies are closer to reality” and “explore the trajectory of characters.” This statement reflects the views of many other participants, who often use the term “correct values” as a shorthand for a vague conception of good citizenship under the current Chinese administration: roughly a fusion of “Confucian ethical concepts” with discourses that legitimize the rule of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), particularly patriotism and loyalty to the Party (Gow 97). Participants’ “dislike” of Chinese movies thus demonstrates a distancing from a “traditional” national identity grounded in Confucianism, patriotism, and CCP ideology. Conversely, their preference for Hollywood movies implies an endorsement of their liberal-democratic values such as freedom of speech and individualism, often without acknowledging that US cinema likewise functions as an ideological apparatus, suggesting prefigurative actions based on media-cultivated “global imagination.”

A second recurring theme across the group interviews is realism. This topic can be examined with Philippe Meers's distinction between "thematic realism," which refers to "the close link between films and the reality of everyday life," and "filmic realism," which "focuses on the realistic and convincing character of the filmic narration" (169). On the level of filmic realism, participants often criticize Chinese movies for prioritizing the "correct values" at the expense of creative and aesthetic qualities. Hollywood cinema, on the other hand, creates more convincing characters and stories with more advanced cinematic techniques and is viewed with "a higher suspension of disbelief" (Meers 162). On another level, a university staff member born in the 1980s illustrates her preference for the "thematic realism" in Chinese movies: "[Hollywood's] images and things like that do not appeal to me as much [as a movie's] story, including how the story it tells is closer to my life." For her and many other participants, Chinese movies are perceived as closer to everyday social reality and are therefore expected to maintain and further develop such representations of social problems.

In contrast, Hollywood's appeal resides precisely in its distance from the reality of Chinese audiences. Although Hollywood has become deeply integrated in the everyday lives of audiences worldwide—such that it has been called "everyone's second culture" (Kuisel 237)—this second culture is not a replica of the American culture, but mediated and negotiated in relation to audiences' lived first culture. As Maltby observes, while Hollywood movies function as representations of American culture for American audiences, they are the American culture for audiences elsewhere (2). For Chinese audiences, therefore, the "reality" presented in Hollywood movies—and the expectations attached to it—concerns the United States or worlds elsewhere: a reality constructed through "global imagination." Fueled by Hollywood movies, "global imagination" evokes "the possibility of pursuing alternative lives in a different place" but could also contrast sharply to one's own society and identity, which "in turn ignites the inner drive for change and action" (Su, "From Visual Pleasure" 525). This corresponds with another university freshman's response: "I haven't watched much Chinese movies to this day, because for me, film is something I'd rather view as a kind of 'utopia.' [...] Compared to Hollywood, Chinese cinema is clearly closer to my own life, and every time I watch it, I can't help but reflect on myself." Instead of mere escapism, the statement foregrounds active engagement with movies to create a space where the stresses and uncertainties of everyday life are mitigated through a momentary transcendence of reality—or through the possibilities of "alternative lives"—offered by Hollywood movies.

This does not mean Hollywood cinema lacks thematic resonance for Chinese audiences; rather, concrete social problems are substituted by more general narrative frameworks which enable its movies to carry values and narrative forms across cultural boundaries and to succeed in the global markets (Wasko 176). Scott Olson explains this phenomenon through the concept of "narrative transparency," attributing it to polysemy: "the properties of the text" which give "the text the illusion of indigenous meaning" (21-22). Due to narrative transparency, Chinese audiences are able to resonate with characters and stories portrayed

in the US movies by incorporating these elements into their own culture and everyday experiences.

Perceptions of Hollywood movies function as a benchmark shaping expectations of domestic film, thereby reflecting the civil cultural engagement through patterns of consumption. Despite my participants' positive reception of Hollywood cinema, its growing accessibility diminished their appeal, in some cases its ubiquity even rendering them objects of "dislike."

Dislike and Disengagement: Signs of Changing Attitudes

While there is a broad tendency to turn away from Hollywood cinema, this shift should not be understood as an overarching turn, but as a set of expressive choices shaped by multiple factors. As my data suggest, film extrinsic factors include increased media literacy, growing critical distance cultivated through online information, and the proliferation of popular Chinese movie and media products, all of which are intertwined with each individual's unique personal experiences. On the level of filmic content, both Chinese and Hollywood movies were at times perceived with "dislike" due to elements that can be perceived as "ubiquitous and inescapable": for the national cinema, it is the backward-gazing, ideological refrain of revolution, collectivism, and nationalism, which serve to consolidate the political aspect of the national identity; however, some participants also expressed fatigue with images and clichéd plots in Hollywood movies. Participants' expressions of "dislike" toward either Chinese or Hollywood cinema function as reflexive and educated actions of citizenship embodied by consumption. As Canclini argues, these actions

elevate consumers to citizens, entail a conception of the market as not only a place for the exchange of commodities, but as part of more complex sociocultural interactions. Similarly, consumption is seen [...] as the collective appropriation, within relations of solidarity with and distinction from others, of commodities that provide biological and symbolic needs, and that serve to transmit and receive messages. (45)

Therefore, consumption serves not only to reflect, but also to perform self and collective identity, turning a sense of longing into an act of belonging.

A good example of turning away from Hollywood comes from a participant born in 1973, who describes the trajectory of her perception of Hollywood movies:

It wasn't until college that I gradually started watching American blockbusters. At first, they felt incredibly fresh—the large-scale productions and sophisticated filming techniques were a novelty. But later, I realized many of their heroic or sci-fi plots felt strikingly similar. Even the grand humanistic themes in films like *Hacksaw Ridge* (2016) or *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) seemed repetitive. So now I'm not as eager to see them. [...] Back then, I recall our country imported about ten films annually, and each one was eagerly anticipated. But later, I felt the plots and visuals became repetitive. Plus, with the rise of Chinese cinema, I now watch a lot of domestic films too.

This participant's recollection marks the trajectory of her media consumption. At first, Hollywood movies provided a refreshing change of perspective, with their relative rarity heightening a sense of novelty and anticipation. However, as they become more accessible and familiar to Chinese audiences, their presence becomes banal within an expanding entertainment landscape, and their repeated plots, themes, and archetypes become objects of fatigue and dislike. Her change of attitude reflects those of other participants, who also expressed fatigue with Hollywood's formulaic narratives, questioning its production quality in light of the overtly obvious commercial nature of its output. These responses highlight that participants' higher levels of media literacy turn consumption into "more complex social interactions," enabling them to voice opinions through their consumption choices. In the participant's last quoted sentence, "the rise of Chinese cinema" suggests a sense of cultural pride, and her speech act of watching more domestic movies highlights a performative form of national identity.

A participant who works as a professor in the United States goes one step further to express disillusionment with the humanitarian spirit embodied in Hollywood cinema, recognizing it as merely another form of propaganda. Although she had been moved by the humanitarian spirit conveyed in *Saving Private Ryan* when she watched the movie in 1998, she soon became disillusioned by the NATO bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade during its attack on Yugoslavia in 1999. Although the United States claimed that the bombing was an accident—originally intended for a nearby Yugoslav arms supplier, the incident still caused strong anti-US sentiments in China ("Strong Protest"). The participant recollects the time when

the entire Chinese people felt deceived. [...] We truly believed in American humanitarianism, but now you're bombing our embassy. All of this is fake. [...] This film led to American blockbusters being banned in China for six months. Then newspapers erupted in heated discussions about America's hypocritical humanitarianism.

The retrospective disappointment with the movie is a consequence of the contrast between the global imagination and geopolitical reality—a disappointment with the US ideological propaganda similar to their disappointment and dissatisfaction with the Chinese movies. The bombing incident also marks a break in the image of "pursuing alternative lives in a different place" for Chinese audiences. Despite her disillusionment, this participant still reported a preference for Hollywood movies over Chinese ones. This suggests that political tensions do not necessarily affect Chinese audiences' appreciation of US movies, although they are more inclined to take a critical distance from American values and perspectives embedded in those movies. As "a site of analysis and reflection" of her identity, not only as a Chinese viewer of US movies but as a Chinese citizen living and working in the US, this participant's criticism of *Saving Private Ryan* radiates from an individual text to the broader media and cultural landscape (Gray 4).

Corresponding to the declining influences from Hollywood with increasing age, participants show a progressively stronger tendency to dislike Hollywood at the individual level over time

and at the aggregate level as participant age increases. For example, a university teacher born in 1968 says that she remembers watching Hollywood, such as *Gone with the Wind* (1939), *Roman Holiday* (1953), and *Rambo: First Blood* (1989), but also does “not watch these blockbusters from Hollywood anymore.” Instead, she watches more Chinese movies and series, because she does “not like those Sci-Fi or thrillers so much” and Chinese movies could reflect on the historical and traditional values and social changes in China. These examples reveal that, rather than an absence of affection, “dislike” is often a result of continued critical engagements and emotional journeys built upon accumulated media and personal experiences.

Moreover, while participants often position Hollywood cinema as the “industry standard,” they also recognize Chinese cinema as the latecomer that is rapidly catching up. For example, a participant born in 1986 responds that “Hollywood films tend to express a greater sense of tension through their use of sound, visuals, and scenes—something that Chinese films used to lack. However, Chinese cinema has been gradually moving in that direction in recent years.” A recurring topic in the group interviews is China’s technological progress in producing science fiction films such as *The Wandering Earth*, which ranked second among the highest-grossing films in China in 2019, emphasizing that the gap with Hollywood is steadily narrowing.

Chinese audiences’ critiques—or “dislike”—of Hollywood are shaped by media literacy and geopolitical consciousness, and as a performative site of evolving negotiations of national and cultural identity. Although their viewing preferences lean toward Hollywood, their engagement with movies remains shaped by the mainstream discourses in Chinese media and state policies that frame China’s cultural production in competitive relation to the United States.

Conclusion

By contextualizing Hollywood’s post-COVID crises within its long-standing crisis discourse, I have foregrounded contemporary shifts driven by increased global competition and geopolitical tension. In particular, Hollywood’s presence in the Chinese film market has become marginalized due to the strained relationship between China and the United States, widespread piracy, as well as changes in marketing strategies and audience preferences.

Data from my empirical research demonstrate that more Chinese audiences still prefer Hollywood over Chinese movies with a large margin, contrasting with the market reports. While the reasons behind Chinese audiences’ preference for Hollywood movies vary, respondents commonly emphasize Hollywood’s advanced storytelling techniques and production technologies, as well as its universal appeal and capacity to inspire global imagination. Therefore, the identities of contemporary Chinese audiences are situated between citizens and consumers, who identify with a local culture that is influenced by global media and communication products. This result certainly does not mean that quantitative industry reports and journalistic comments are incorrect about the changing preferences of

Chinese audiences. Rather, they imply that Chinese viewers' engagements with both cinemas are far more complicated than shown by box-office or streaming statistics. The inconsistencies between audience preferences and market statistics call for further exploration, which would need to pay attention to the widespread use of pirate websites and promotion of Chinese movies supported by government funding.

Despite audience preferences, respondents have also expressed a fatigue with Hollywood's repetitive plots, characters, themes, and narrative forms. Thanks to increased media literacy, Chinese audiences are also more suspicious of ideological messages embedded in Hollywood and more embracing of the representation of the Chinese culture and society in their domestic cinema. Audience perceptions of Chinese movies catching up with Hollywood reflect a nationalistic mindset framed around competition with the United States. Ultimately, the reasons for disliking either Chinese or Hollywood movies converge on audiences' shared sense of limited control over media consumption. In this context, "dislike" functions as performative expression through which Chinese audiences articulate their identity in a globalized media environment.

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