Title: Regional Partnerships and Media Policy in the Age of China's Rise: The Case of Singapore-China Film Co-Productions

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Abstract

Despite being the first Asian country (except for Hong Kong) to sign a film co-production agreement with China, Singapore's film co-productions with China so far are few and far between, none of which have come under the official agreement. This raises wider questions about the policy making challenges of small nations when driving or facilitating regional collaborations with partners like China. Drawing on interviews with key interlocutors in the Singapore film industry, this article explores how Singapore's filmmakers make sense of working with the Chinese film industry as collaborators and co-producers on joint film productions. Our main argument is that conventional models for understanding drivers of co-productions may not work for small partners collaborating with a dominant regional/global partner like China. Through exploring the political, economic, and cultural tensions in the Asia-Pacific region that emerge when Singapore engages in collaborative film work with China, we hope to contribute to the wider literature on 'South-South' collaborations between film industries (and nations) of vastly different sizes and power.

Keywords: China-Singapore co-productions, film co-production policy, South-South partnership, regional partnerships, media policy, minority co-productions

Introduction

In the literature on cinematic co-productions within Asia (see Chua, 2008; Otzmagin, 2013), both scholars and policy discourse have argued that the efficacy of co-production policies are determined by several factors, including regional media dynamics and technological changes that facilitate increased competition or collaboration (see Keane, Yecies & Flew, 2019; DeBoer, 2014); governmental funding; cultural diplomacy efforts of countries (Yang, 2020), and how film producers respond to these factors. Like many Southeast Asian countries seeking to develop a vibrant film industry, Singapore cinema is situated in the geo-political context of a culturally diverse region, with close social, cultural and economic ties to larger trading partners such as China, Hong Kong SAR, Malaysia and the US (World Bank, 2021). This article examines Singapore-China co-productions in the context of the rise of China in the global film market. Amidst renewed research interest in so-called 'South-South' collaborations with China, both in terms of cultural affinities and difficulties among collaborators (Jin & Su 2020; Yang et al. 2020), Singapore presents a fruitful case study here for three reasons.

Firstly, research on inter-Asian co-productions with China has largely focused on East Asian (Chu 2015; Bettinson 2020; Leung 2020; Chung 2020) and more recently, South Asian (Yang 2020; Khan 2020) collaborations. Film co-productions between China and Southeast Asian nations remain understudied, not least because cases are few and far between. Following Ching, Shim and Yang's (2023) contention that our understanding of 'East Asian Pop culture' is in need of an update given the radical cultural and technological transformations in the last twenty years, this paper provides a renewed reflection on the Asian region's differentiated trajectories towards building pan-Asian regionally networked film productions from the under-studied perspective of Southeast Asia through looking at Sino-Singapore co-productions.

Secondly, China's increasing dominance as one of the world's biggest film markets also means we can no longer imagine power differentials to exist only along North-South lines. The rapid rise of China as a global film powerhouse renews questions about what co-producing means for different partners participating in 'South-South' collaborations with China in this current conjuncture. If, as argued in Berry's (2010) and others' works (Yang, Clini, and Dasgupta, 2020), 'all knowledge is situated and perspectival' and what we know about Sino-Singapore co-productions depends on 'where and when you are looking from' (Berry 2021: 183), more research needs to be done from understudied perspectives like Singapore's on how minor regional partners participate in, respond to and experience the globalisation of PRC cinema and its co-productions in this current context (2021: 193).

Thirdly, while Sino-Singapore film co-productions are rare and Singapore's current participation in the wider Chinese-speaking film industries is limited, this is set against the backdrop of more than 20 years of cultural exchanges between the two nations within the wider 'Sinophone televisual landscape' (Liew & Yao, 2019). As a case in point, co-productions adapting Chinese martial arts wuxia novels into television dramas was commonplace in the 1990s and early 2000s, but such co-production activities dwindled with the maturing of the PRC media industries. The signing of the film co-production treaty between the two nations in 2010 therefore presents an opportunity to examine the effectiveness of government policy in reinvigorating Singapore's media regionalisation in an updated and very different geopolitical context. Despite being the first Asian country (except for Hong Kong) to sign a film co-production agreement with China, Singapore's film co-productions with China so far are few and far between, none of which have come under the official agreement. This raises wider questions about the policy making challenges of small nations when driving or facilitating regional collaborations with partners like China – a huge player on both regional and global levels in this current conjuncture.

This article will examine Singapore-China film co-productions in the context of policy changes and industrial practices of China's and Singapore's film industries from the perspective of Singapore's film industry. To understand the complexities of Sino-Singapore co-productions, we first situate our examination within the wider policy context for Singapore's internationalising strategies through film co-productions and treaties. Next, we discuss the perspectives of state and non-state stakeholders as policy actors in Singapore-China film collaborations to argue for why promoting co-productions at governmental and policy levels are insufficient and depend as much on media power and human factors to bridge co-producing parties' various requirements. This will be followed by reflections on the experiences of Singapore film co-producers who have willingly partnered with their Chinese counterparts in a variety of film co-production models. We do this through examining three types of policy discourses - cultural globalisation; economic globalisation; and cultural diplomacy and soft power - in the academic literature on international co-productions and critically examining how Singapore filmmakers make sense of working with the Chinese film industry as collaborators and co-producers on joint film productions through these lenses. Our main argument in this article explores why conventional models for understanding drivers of co-productions may not work for small partners collaborating with a dominant regional/global partner like China.

Policy Context: Co-Production and Singapore's Remaking of a Regional Media Hub

The signing of the Sino-Singapore co-production agreement in 2010 is situated within a much longer history of bi-cultural exchanges and regional collaborations, dating back to Singapore's earlier position as a film hub in Southeast Asia for Malay language and Chinese-language films made for Southeast Asian audiences during the 1920s-1950s[i]. Such regional co-production activities declined in Singapore in the 1970s in the 'black out' period (Man Shu Sam, cited in Lee, 2011) during which both state and economic efforts were focused on postcolonial national statebuilding. As the state's film policymaking only came at a later period, this section explores some of this policy context in relation to Singapore and the wider Chinese-speaking film industries in the region.

In terms of film-specific policy, the Singaporean government implemented a mixed model of national and international film development in 1998. The Singapore Film Commission (SFC) was established to support local filmmaking while a commercial film arm of state-linked Television Corporation of Singapore (later MediaCorp) Raintree Pictures was launched to engage in commercial movie production and financing. As the commercial film arm of the state, Raintree Pictures actively co-produced pan-Chinese films working mostly through Hong Kong, resulting in Singapore-Hong Kong co-productions like *The Eye* (2002, 2004) and *Infernal Affairs 2* (2003). This also included one of the recognised China-Singapore co-produced films, *Painted Skin* (2008). However, despite the signing of the co-production treaty with China in 2010, and policy push to attract media investment funds to Singapore such as $100-million digital content investment fund by China-backed Gobi Media (Schwankert 2011), Raintree Pictures closed in 2012. The unsuccessful marriage between the formalising of a co-production relationship between the two nations and the state-commercial model of co-production reflects what DeBoer (2015) called the wider region lack of 'coherent and interdependent structures of soft money', or transparent production infrastructures such as tax incentives and point structures that 'inform potential coproduction partners of the advantages of engaging with more formal, often state-defined, "treaty coproductions"' (DeBoer 2015: 220-21). Importantly, for DeBoer, such infrastructures need to be *interdependent* to work. Whilst Singapore had tax structures designed to draw commitment to Singapore, these were less transparent in China. According to DeBoer, East Asian coproductions therefore often relied on partners finding benefits in sharing resources whilst being subjected to the flexible and unstable terms of capitalist exchange.

Two further media industry development plans are significant. In 2003 and 2009, the Singaporean government launched the *Media 21* and *Singapore Media Fusion Plan 2015* (SMFP) as part of plans to develop its creative economy, which included its film industry (Tilakawardana 2005; Leo and Lee 2010). These led to a number of newer film financing schemes (eg. MDA's various film grants in film development, production assistance, talent assistance schemes). In particular, the *Media 21* blueprint strategically employed the 'Made-by-Singapore' concept to encourage joint productions stemming from bilateral coproduction agreements in a bid to encourage Singaporean creative talents to work with international media centres, which at the time, did not include China (Lee 2016: 84). During this period, several local film production companies emerged alongside Raintree Pictures that continue to actively produce transnational film projects such as mm2 Entertainment, Weiyu Films, Akanga Film Asia, not necessarily with China but with others in the region. These companies were attracted by the availability of various talent and film production schemes offered by SFC, EDB and MDA (now IMDA). Given that there were few funding schemes that encouraged regional co-productions in Southeast Asia at the time, local film production activity increased (from less than 10 to 17 films launched a year) starting from 2006 onwards especially with the launch of the SFC Co-investment scheme, and the signing of a $74 million film fund with China-based Gobi Partners (Schwankert, 2011). However, regional film production activity involving Singapore filmmakers remained less than ten a year.

When it comes to encouraging international film co-productions, *Media 21* and SMFP faced two main difficulties. First, film-specific initiatives were subsumed under a wider push for Singapore's creative industries in these two plans, with investments going to other emphasised areas that bring higher GDP returns such as the Fusionopolis cultural cluster as part of *Media 21* and the Interactive Digital Media (IDM) subsector for SMFP (Yim 2009; Lee 2016). Second, the two policies' plans to make Singapore a "regional hub" or "global city for the arts" during the first decade of the 21st century (see Kong, 2012) envision the Singapore media hub 'brand' (such as the 'Singapore Media Fusion brand') as a trusted and well-connected place for *business*. This is exemplified by marketing initiatives throughout the late 1990s to 2010s where Singapore competed with Hong Kong to play host to a regional Asian TV and film marketplace (i.e. MIPAsia, then later in 2000, Asia TV & Filmmart) where international partners gathered to conduct media content sales. While the promotion of media collaborations and co-production interests between industries were added later, their emphasis was on boosting Singapore's status as a location for economic activity (Lee 2016: 88).

There was a period in the 1990s and early 2000s when Singapore's aspirations as a regional media trading hub enabled regular bi-cultural exchanges between China and Singapore, however (see Curtin, 2007). This was sparked by the commercialisation drive of Television Corporation of Singapore where its Chinese-language dramas became popular television viewing in Mainland China and elsewhere in Southeast Asia (Liew & Yao, 2019). However, further inroads by Singapore media producers into Mainland China were dampened by domestic policy shifts in China and Singapore, such as the signing of China-Hong Kong SAR's Closer Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) in 2003, aided by China's post 1989 policy reforms towards domestic market commercialisation, as well as Singapore's own local media competition policy in 2000-2003, making Singapore filmmakers pivot towards wider regional, pan-Asian filmmaking during the first decade of the 21st century (see Lim, 2019).

It is against this backdrop that the China-Singapore film co-production treaty was signed in July 2010 during the Shanghai World Expo, at its highest state-to-state level meeting, the China-Singapore Joint Bi-lateral Council Meeting. This was the same year China began to showcase its film industry by establishing new international film platforms such as Beijing's first International Film Festival, and the consolidation of Shanghai's long-running TV festival with the added film angle into a Shanghai Film and TV Festival. These suggest that the co-production agreement signals a moment of cultural diplomacy rather than industry development. Nonetheless, the bilateral agreement presents a good opportunity to examine the extent to which government policies can renew Singapore's expansion into the China market through the case of film co-productions in this current conjuncture.

While Singapore film producers have actively sought to co-produce with Chinese filmmakers leading to "unofficial" co-productions, examples of "official" China-Singapore film co-productions remain elusive. To date, there have been four China-Singapore film co-productions, namely, *Painted Skin* (画皮) (2008), *Turn U Around* (为你转身) (2013), *Meeting the Giant* (再见巨人) (2014) and *Distance* (再见，在也不见) (2015) acknowledged by local authorities as having substantial Singapore participation in co-production with China. Importantly, however, none of these films were officially made under the treaty. More recently, there have been other Singapore-China co-produced films that do not categorically fall under the Chinese state's definition of "co-production" such as *Reunion Dinner* (2022), often tied to digital platforms such as *iQiyi.*

The lack of official Sino-Singapore film co-productions made since the signing of the treaty despite the long history of exchanges at cultural, historical, and governmental levels between the two nations raises questions about the challenges of facilitating and driving official co-productions at state policy level and about the collaborative efforts that exceed the realm of policy. This necessitates exploring beyond the four 'unofficial' co-productions acknowledged by the Singaporean authorities. Against this backdrop, we conducted interviews with 10 Singapore film practitioners, including filmmakers, producers and representatives from the Chinese digital platform *iQiyi*. We also interviewed representatives from the Singapore Film Commission. Our interlocutors include both those who were involved in the co-productions mentioned above and others working under different co-producing models. Through gaining their perspectives and experiences of working with their Chinese counterparts, we hope to explore the tensions that emerge from Sino-Singapore collaborative filmmaking in this current conjuncture.

Policy Actors' Perspectives: Facilitating Singapore and China film Co-Productions

> 'This co-production model is borrowed from Europe. I think for Asia, it is more laissez-faire… we borrow a lot of ideals from the European systems, but sometimes, they don't get practised.' – Singaporean Film Producer, 22 April 2023

While China has signed over 20 film co-production agreements with different countries, Singapore was the first Asian country (except for Hong Kong) that it entered into a film co-production agreement with. Rather than activating any economic benefits for Singapore and

China film co-producers, the China-Singapore film co-production agreement serves more as a formal approval of film collaborations between the two countries. The words of governmental officials on both sides give us clues on how they envision their governments' roles in enabling co-productions. During the signing of the co-production agreement, Zhang Pimin, then Vice Minister of China's State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT) said that the China-Singapore Film Co-production Agreement provides 'direction and guidance for filmmakers from both countries to pursue co-productions' (Media Development Authority 2010). In a more recent response to our enquiry on how important the agreement is for Singapore's film companies when working with China, the Infocomm Media Development Authority of Singapore (IMDA) clarified:

> G2G treaties are useful for government agencies to facilitate interested companies from both countries to come together to do co-productions. It is useful for companies to tap on the government network relations with their foreign counterparts, such as understanding the specific rules and regulations of co-producing with another country / multiple countries. By leverag[ing] on the treaty, the co-producing structure is also clearly spelled out, and this avoids ambiguity (Personal communication, 20 June 2023).

While both governments position themselves as enablers of co-productions between the two countries, the IMDA's elaboration is useful here. As facilitators, the IMDA envisions its key work to lie in two broad areas: First, in bringing companies from both countries together for collaborations; and second, by smoothening that collaboration process through clarifying any rules, regulations or ambiguities that may occur in the process of transnational collaborations. Since 2010, however, the four film co-productions between Singapore and China that were identified by the authorities have largely been fronted by industry collaborations and were not under the agreement. This raises questions about the invisible, yet crucial, processes and practices that may exceed these inter-governmental structures when it comes to facilitating co-productions between China and smaller partners like Singapore.

When it comes to tapping on governmental agencies' cross-country networks for co-productions, this depends on industry profiling and networking as Singapore's film producers without established presence or pre-existing connections in China's film industry face certain barriers to entry when attempting to find co-producers in China. In an interview with us, a representative of Chinese platform giant *iQiyi* explained why China's film companies are often unwilling to co-produce with Singapore partners they had not worked with previously. In his words, there is a certain level of 'risk taking from the China side' when searching for the right partner to work with in Singapore, which is particularly exacerbated by the vast difference in sizes of the two industries.

> Because in China, it's like a big machine… So, you got a team in China that is used to producing on a massive scale in China, high budget, high level of quality… So, the question is who do we work with in Singapore to deliver the final project? I think that involves some risk taking from the China side… Because the China market is obviously a unique market, also a very mature market, a very developed market. The expectation levels sometimes and the work output, very different styles of working very different. Right? Like, obviously, everything moves way faster in China. Right? Everything is a lot more detailed and dashed out in China… Because it's so competitive when they're pitching for projects. So sometimes they have this difference, there's a bit of a cultural difference. Sort of like, you know, just the business environment expectations as well (Personal Communication, 3 May 2023).

The differences in levels of industry development and market sizes translate into differences in business expectations, working practices and industry capacities. Finding the right co-producing partners therefore involve much more than the matching of project interests on the institutional or governmental levels, but more crucially ensuring that the co-producer will be able to match expectations around working styles and output quality.

When tapping on government agencies' help in navigating the 'rules and regulations' and 'ambiguity' of co-producing with China, Singapore's film producers face further challenges. Elaborating on what he alleges as a common practice in China of film companies tapping on better marketing resources, advertising budgets and profit splits through personal networks and affiliated companies, a Singaporean film director based in China explained:

> In China, you have to understand, nothing is not political… There is that cultural barrier that we have to fight. It is who you know and how you work... That's how China works. But if you want to go through proper channels straight to [the platform], they will say 'welcome, welcome, welcome', at the end of the day you won't get anything… between government and government, or between company and company, they won't do that. So, if a Singapore company were to go to [the platform] directly, even if they agree, it's just business to business. They will not promote your film as much as if it is through an affiliated company. It is simple mathematics… China is always messy, that's the thing with China (Personal Communication, 10 April 2023).

Whether dealing with issues of matching working styles and expectations or negotiating informal structures and barriers to entry, Singapore film producers wanting to co-produce with China must navigate challenges that far exceed the realms of inter-governmental facilitation. What emerges clearly is how pushes for international film co-productions between China and small partners like Singapore at governmental and policy levels are insufficient, raising questions about how far other dominant drivers of international film co-productions work in such cases.

Policy Discourses and Theoretical Approaches: Three Co-Production Models

In academic literature and policy discourse, ‘the motivations for international co-productions have always been a blend of interrelated economic and cultural concerns’ (Selznick 2008: 16), with an increasing focus also on political reasons when it comes to China (Yang 2020). Several dominant approaches to co-production are commonly imagined in government policies and discourse as effective models for driving international co-productions. In the rest of this paper, we will discuss three co-production models: i.e., the European ‘cultural’ approach, the U.S. model prioritizing financial motivations, and the political model of ‘cultural diplomacy' and ‘soft power’ (Nye, 1990) - and interrogate whether these co-production models are sufficient drivers of Singapore-PRC film co-productions.

The ‘European Art Film Model’: Cultural Politics and Lost in Translation

Co-productions emphasising cultural motivations as collaborative drivers are sometimes called the ‘European art film model’ (Jin 2020: 24) due to its popularity as a model in Europe, amidst other locations, and for its tendency to produce low-to-medium-budget art house films typically (Morawetz et al. 2007: 426). In this model, co-productions are opportunities to develop culturally specific films for national or regional markets to re-invigorate local industries and protect cultural heritage and identity from disappearing under the hegemonic forces of global film powers like Hollywood (Miller et al 2009; Mitric, 2018).

Using examples of co-productions in Europe and Canada, Taylor (1995) wrote, 'the attraction to international co-productions was the potential of short-circuiting the center-periphery relationships… The premise was that like-minded peripheral countries could pool resources on a single project and amortise the cost over a larger population, thereby lessening reliance on the center (in this case, Hollywood)'. Two assumptions underlie this model. First, collaborating nations are motivated culturally to counter the influence of international film powers like Hollywood. Second, co-productions tap on shared cultural resources to emphasise regional identity in their creations.

Singaporean officials suggest that these two ideas serve as what they think should be the main motivations for Singapore-China co-productions. Sam Tan, then Parliamentary Secretary, Ministry of Trade and Industry and Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts, said during the signing of the China-Singapore film co-production agreement that 'this Film Co-Production Agreement presents immense opportunities for filmmakers in China and Singapore to collaborate, as well as share experiences and resources to showcase the rich heritage and culture in our two countries internationally through films' (Media Development Authority 2010). Similarly, then Chief Executive Officer of the Media Development Authority, Dr Christopher Chia, concurred 'China and Singapore share deep historical and cultural connections. This affinity in language and culture, warmed by many decades of friendly collaboration, will allow filmmakers from both countries to pursue common themes and unearth uniquely Asian storylines that can resonate with global audiences' (Media Development Authority 2010). The two government officials' emphasis on 'affinity in language and culture' and 'showcas[ing] the rich heritage and culture… internationally through films' point to the two underlying assumptions of the European art film model of counter-influence and cultural affinity.

Scholars have debated extensively about the multi-layered proximity between East Asian television productions, reception and product flows in 'East Asian Pop Culture' (Chua 2007). At the production level, scholars have argued that 'cultural proximity' amongst East Asian partners can include 'values proximity' such as shared 'Confucian beliefs' (Nauta 2018; Leung 2020). Regarding reception, scholars mention coevalness; a shared sense of identification with urban issues; cultural reality and desires amongst audiences (Iwabuchi 2002; Leung 2008; Cho 2011). On the other hand, while the shared conditions of East Asian pop culture and pop culture China constitute loose 'cultural proximity' that facilitates the boundary crossing of media products and personnel, they do not guarantee or engender a homogenous cultural identity in the region (Chua 2012) nor sidestep socio-cultural marginalisation within regions (Iwabuchi 2014; Wee 2016). As evident from a special issue published in 2023 on 'East Asian Pop Culture' in the era of China's rise, the current conjuncture raises additional questions about assumptions of cultural proximity in Asia (Ching, Shim & Yang 2023).

The film practitioners we interviewed also explicitly challenge assumptions about shared cultural identity. Our interlocutors tell us stories of how they discovered through working with their Mainland Chinese counterparts about their differences in cultural tastes, sense of humour, and storytelling styles. This not only serves as an inconvenience during the production process (one of our interlocutors described working through 17 drafts of their co-production's screenplay) but can pose real difficulties for Singaporean co-producers attempting to find partners in the PRC. A long-time established film producer reflected on his experiences:

> I think our main challenges are still cultural. We don't have enough cultural capital to engage such a big market that is very steep in their own cultural capital. I have had discussions with potential Chinese producers and they all mock Singapore

> Chinese. They are like "Come on, you know, you guys your Chinese standards are so bad. You will die in our market and there's no point in working with you because your control of language, your delivery, even how you write is so subpar. I'm sorry, we don't think we can work with you. And we just don't want to do it." You know, I think these are real issues that we face. And until we find a certain comfort zone in our cultural capital, language proficiency, cultural proficiency, I think it's very difficult to engage a larger market… We must have leverage to have a level playing field. And I think sometimes the challenge is the cultural challenge of storytelling, writing talent, language capability. I was discussing a project [and was] totally 'dissed' by the Chinese company manager… This story that we were pitching was written by a Singapore filmmaker based in China and he is as Chinese as all the Singaporean filmmakers can get. But even in that context I felt that this company boss just didn't feel that we were up to par (Personal communication, 22 April 2023).

This producer's articulation of Singaporean filmmakers' challenge of not being deemed 'Chinese' enough by their Mainland Chinese counterparts is revealing of the tensions that emerge within regional co-productions when small partners work with a regional partner as big as China. By framing this as a matter of 'cultural proficiency', the film producer points to the unequal playing field faced by smaller partners when co-creating with a much bigger regional partner from a supposedly similar culture. In such cases, the shared cultural identity created inevitably caters more to the dominant market.

This inequality emerges in co-productions within the wider Asian region too. When it comes to working with the PRC in particular, research on other Asian contexts have shown that attempts at implementing the CCP's 'going out' policy through co-productions have often ended up as China-facing cultural productions even when partners are major film markets like India (Ching, Shim & Yang 2023; Keane 2016; Yang 2020; Fong 2022). This inward orientation of film co-productions with China is undoubtedly related to the massive size of the Chinese film market that is enough to sustain huge profits for producers without having to rely on other shared markets. However, such arrangements are not without antagonisms. Catering to the Chinese state's terms have resulted in irresolvable sacrifices to domestic markets in Sino-Thai (Jirattikon 2023) and Sino-Korean co-productions (Yecies 2016). In everyday production encounters of Sino-Singapore media work, tensions between producers do not simply reflect but also reproduce cultural differences perceived along national lines (Fong 2023). In this sense, the assumptions of cultural affinity and counter-influence underlying the 'European art film model' of co-productions face difficulties when it comes to regional film co-productions between partners of vastly different sizes.

The 'U.S. Model' and Two Globalisations

> 'China remains a big market for media space, and breaking into the market / leading the way should be a collective effort by the SG companies' (Infocomm Media Development Authority of Singapore 2023)

If 'the complexities of lives in Asia have been hurdles to integration of the content of co-produced films' (Jin 2020: 29), this raises questions about whether financial motivations could serve as the main drivers of film co-productions between Singapore and China in this current conjuncture. Compared to cultural goals, studies have argued that financial benefits are often seen as the main drivers of film co-productions (Hoskins et al 1995; Taylor 1998; Jin & Su 2020). Often associated with the U.S. and Hollywood film industries (Jin 2020: 25-26), models of co-productions focusing on the financial and business aspects of film collaboration aim to minimise the risks of investment by taking advantage of national film-promoting policies and tax incentives, often involving adjusting films' creative elements or cultural identity just to get the pictures made (Lorenzen 2007; Johns 2016; Morawetz et al 2007).

In the case of China's regional film collaborations, capital gains that can be obtained through co-productions go beyond simply box-office profits. Two major developments are important here. As mentioned earlier, the Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement (CEPA) between Hong Kong and Mainland China introduced in 2004 allowed Hong Kong films to tap into the huge Chinese markets. In exchange, the Chinese film industry received 'soft capital' such as technology and creative talent transfer, and borrowed branding from Hong Kong at a time when it was just opening up to the world (Yeh and Chao 2020; Davis 2018). The CEPA scheme reignited the regional cinematic network largely through financial investments in *dapian* or blockbusters targeting the pan-Asian market. South Korea's entrance in the mid-2000s, however, further changed the co-production environment with China (Lee 2012). While China sought out South Korea's technical innovativeness in genre storytelling, special effects and global experience to catch up to international industry standards, China-Korean co-productions offered South Korean industry players increased exposure and investment opportunities (Yecies 2016). The China-Korea co-production model has not only resulted in the China industry's rapid technological maturation, it also allowed South Korea's industry to develop cutting-edge and more integrated pre- and post-production infrastructures with China (Shiau and Yecies 2018).

Two elements seem key to regional co-production partnerships with China here – soft capital such as talent and technical expertise; and financial capital investment. In terms of soft capital, while there was a period between the 1990s and mid-2000s when Chinese regional television stations sought out co-productions with Singaporean producers for their technical and creative expertise gained from years of learning from the Hong Kong media industry, such collaborations fizzled out with the opening up of China's media industry (Liew and Yao 2019). In film, as with Hong Kong, Singapore had historically positioned itself as a gateway between the West and China. However, with the rapid development and maturity of the Chinese film industry tapping on the earlier branding of Hong Kong cinema and the global experience of Korean cinema, Singaporean producers are also finding it increasingly difficult to pitch themselves as cultural intermediaries with the cross-cultural literacy needed to translate between East and West sensibilities in China-Singapore co-productions, especially where these are filmed in China.

In terms of financing co-productions, Singapore's now defunct Raintree Pictures participated in an earlier pan-Asian *dapian (big picture)* through co-financing the 2008 film *Painted Skin* with regional producers like Shanghai Film Group (China) and Golden Sun Films (Hong Kong). That momentum also fizzled out given China's increased investment in its domestic media sector to compete in the global media marketplace (Peng & Keane, 2019), raising questions about the limitations of this financial co-production model for Singapore. As part of the research process for this article, we asked all our interviewees about the attractiveness of the Singaporean government's financial incentives when co-producing with partners from the PRC. This was met with responses that politely acknowledged the important existence of funding support from the Singaporean authorities whilst carefully qualifying the effectiveness of such grants when it comes to incentivising co-productions with the PRC.

> 'I don't think we have the capacity to do any Singapore-China co-production on a blockbuster level yet. Even the grants from IMDA, to them would be "huh, never mind lah, you know?" It can't even pay for how many percent of the production. The cost of production for some of these Chinese films will strip out

> the entire year's budget for IMDA film funding.' (Personal communication, 4 April 2023).
>
> 'To be quite frank, China doesn't need us, structurally.'
> (Personal communication, 22 April 2023).

This idea that Mainland Chinese do not need Singaporean co-producers emerged repeatedly in our interviews. Singaporean co-producers have much financial incentive to collaborate with China due to the size of its film market. Many of our interlocutors explained to us that even if a film does not do particularly well in China, its profits from the Chinese market still consist of substantial extra income on top of its regular theatrical earnings in Singapore. This is simply due to the wide disparity in sizes of the two markets, making China a very attractive market financially. However, the disparity in sizes between Singapore's and China's film markets also poses problems.

Historically, the small size of Singapore's local film industry has meant that filmmakers and productions rely largely on the authorities to fund many of their projects, and that there is a lack of private investments in the local film industry for cultural and financial reasons. This places Singaporean co-producers in a conundrum. When seeking partners in the PRC who are used to much larger budgets and production scales, they are confronted with the stark realities of 'not being needed' in the wider scale of Chinese co-productions due to the comparatively small funding available from the government and an under-developed private film funding environment. This makes Singaporean co-producers uncompetitive as a partner in the financially driven model of co-production, and much less as an equal partner. If seen through a purely transactional lens, Singapore has little soft and hard capital to offer in Singapore-China co-productions in the current conjuncture. In this sense, policymaking based on financial drivers of co-production face difficulties in the case of industries of vastly different sizes.

If co-producing on equal grounds proves difficult for Singapore-China projects due to the disparity in sizes and budgets, this raises questions about how far collaborations between the two nations could be catered purely for the much larger Mainland Chinese market. While scholars have argued that financial incentives offered means producers from the Greater China region are willing to be subjected to the Chinese state's power and control (Chua 2012; Zhao 2016), this "risks celebrating the supranational flow or transnational exchange of peoples, images and cultures at the expense of the specific cultural, historical or ideological context in which these exchanges take place" (Higbee and Lim 2010, 11-12). In other words, understanding Singapore-China co-productions as driven purely by the logics of profit accumulation risks explaining away the contestations related to capitalist forces amongst those who operate within these transnational networks, organisations and projects.

Reflecting on his experience collaborating with partners in the PRC over the years, the Managing Director of a big film company in Singapore said in an interview with us: 'Are we going to just pander to that market? Are we just going to bow or kowtow? Or are we just going to … compromise just to get that market? And at what cost?' (Personal communication, 18 April 2023). This interlocutor's rhetorical questioning is revealing in several ways. Not only does he directly raise questions about the creative cost of catering to the market when engaging in collaborative film production, his reference specifically to 'that market' also points to the uniqueness of the PRC film market. The homogenization potentially enabled by co-productions with China takes on the form of "Mainlandization" rather than the "Westernization" processes traditionally associated with globalisation. This relative insularity of the China market has real consequences for small partners attempting to create more globally accessible products. A Director with extensive experience working in the Mainland Chinese industry explained to us:

> 'Because what China likes will never be what the international market wants. It's two different worlds. It is two different worlds. China is a world of its own. And the rest of the world is a world of its own… They have their own guidelines, and the things they like will never be what we like. China can accept international productions as long as [they are] within guidelines but the world cannot accept China productions.' (Personal communication, 10 April 2023)

This phenomenon reflects what Berry has called the era of 'two globalisations' or 'two transnational projects of wealth accumulation based on market capitalism, each grounded in a national polity' (2021: 188). In Berry's formulation, while American-style globalisation is driven by transnational corporate capital, the Chinese Communist Party leads the second model of state-led globalisation promoting Chinese investments and interests around the world, resulting in escalating tensions between the two transnational projects of globalisation as they contest for zones of influence. For Berry, the impact of this contestation manifests as a new era of the 'cinemas of the Sinosphere… a Chinese-centered transborder realm… that is not only regional but global in its aspirations' (2021: 189). What results is a 'multipolar world of overlapping and competing world orders' (2021: 195) with multiple centers and peripheries. So far, as illustrated by the director's comment, the PRC-centered productions have developed quite separately than the rest of the world in terms of film representations.

While the PRC is the one of biggest film markets in the world, the huge box office revenue boom experienced by PRC films has been almost entirely domestic (Berry 2021: 190). Scholars have argued that PRC films have low international appeal for various reasons including the limited motivation for Chinese producers to adapt to audiences elsewhere due to the rapidly growing Chinese market, thereby resulting in films only appealing to the PRC diaspora overseas (Keane 2019). Others have pointed to the obstacles that the CCP's censorship mechanisms pose towards Chinese films' global appeal (Yang 2016). In this sense, an interesting tension emerges as Singapore's co-producers looking to tap into the Chinese market find themselves facing crossroads when making creative decisions in response to two vastly different markets and tastes[ii]. Importantly, the director's comment that 'the things they like will never be what we like' suggests that Singaporean producers/audiences' preferences fit within the international market rather than the China market, a sentiment shared across many of our interlocutors. Singaporean filmmakers' reluctance to simply 'pander to that market' reflect the tensions that emerge from collaborating with China as a small regional partner. As a small industry with limited output, Singaporean co-production projects aiming at international expansion have to be taken strategically, with careful navigation among competing cultural, artistic and economic demands. The bilaterality of the global market therefore adds to these complications, troubling any understanding of creative collaborations driven purely by financial incentives when it comes to China-Singapore co-productions.

The Politically Driven Model - Cultural Diplomacy and Soft Power

The 'two globalisations' development raises questions about alternative ways of understanding drivers of film co-productions under China's state-led globalisation. While the Singaporean authorities cite cultural and financial reasons as drivers for co-producing with China, Chinese officials' emphasis differs slightly. During the signing of the China-Singapore film co-production agreement in 2010, then Deputy Director-General of SARFT Film Bureau, La Peikang, said he hoped the agreement would 'contribute toward enhancing the friendship between the peoples of the two nations' (Media Development Authority 2010).

In this sense, La's emphasis on international diplomacy through film means that the political ambitions of the Chinese state cannot be underestimated when considering film co-productions with China (see Su 2017 for China's desires to export Chinese culture through Sino-US co-productions), particularly amidst changing practices and understandings of globalisation over the last ten years with the rise of China as global superpower.

Discussing China-India co-productions, Yang (2020) argued for the importance of considering beyond the culturally and financially driven perspectives of co-productions, to focus on the political dimensions of co-productions as 'part of a bilateral diplomatic strategy aligning film with China's statecraft' (Yang 2020: 204). According to Yang, politically driven co-productions with China tend to be China-led films with limited inputs from co-producing partners, and Chinese co-producers are driven by two motivators provided by such arrangements. First, such co-productions echo the CCP's 'Belt and Road Initiative' and 'going out' policy (Peng & Keane, 2019). Second, these projects provide Chinese co-producers with the opportunity to develop culturally specific materials from other cultures for the Chinese market (Yang 2020: 213). This raises questions about the applicability of the politically driven model for co-productions between Singapore and China at this current juncture.

While Singapore was one of the first recipients of China's 'going out' policy through the film co-production agreement, the use-value of the agreement have remained largely symbolic and cosmetic as Singapore provides limited enticement for China in terms of the two motivators mentioned above by Yang. As a provider of culturally specific materials or locations, Singapore's close historical, ethnic, and cultural entanglements with China make it less attractive compared to more visibly different locations like India. As a partner for political co-branding to showcase China's international 'soft power', Singapore's longstanding strong and positive political ties with the nation means there is little political motivation for subsequent disciplining from the Chinese side to increase its branding visibility with Singapore through co-productions, particularly if there are few financial or other benefits to such arrangements for them.

A long-time film producer and collaborator with China reflected on the relevance of political motivations as the primary driver of Singapore-China co-productions during an interview with us. Talking about why he felt Chinese partners might prefer if their partner companies worked with the Singaporean government, he said:

> ‘It is not so much about, oh, they want to work with the government, or they want to have that kind of recognition, it is also more like they feel that if this company that I'm working with is able to get certain government support, it shows that this company is highly regarded. And I'm assured that this company is a proper company, especially with our government, as you know, like, it's famously known to be bright and open like Singapore's government. So, they will feel that kind of recognition, or the kind of … positive, you know, like, endorsement. Yes. The endorsement from a government body for such a company will [indicate it as] a good partner to work with. Yeah, so I don't think they meant for it like, oh, we want to be associated with the government or that kind of idea. Yeah, it's really more like, are you able to bring in the Singapore government to support this project?’ (Personal communication, 18 April 2023)

For Chinese partners, the use-value of governmental endorsement lies in its indication of the national reputation of their Singaporean partner rather than in political, diplomatic, or international branding. In this sense, our interlocutor’s reflection on Chinese partners’ approach to Singaporean governmental involvement in co-productions is revealing of the limited applicability of the politically driven model of co-productions when it comes to Singapore-China projects.

Conclusion

This article explored the disruptions China is bringing to configurations of media globalisation through looking at film co-productions and its implications for smaller or minor partners. As globally aspiring film 'operate across increasingly complex entanglements of scale' (De Boer 2015: 216), smaller regional partners' ability to participate in large-scale 'new Asian' co-productions are determined by their abilities to meet the ever-changing demands for "scale" with assemblages of talents and sites. Focusing on Singapore, one of the first nations to sign a film co-production agreement with China in 2010, we argued that the three dominant models (cultural, financial, and political) for understanding drivers of international film co-productions are insufficient or inadequate when it comes to regional collaborations between industries and nations of vastly different sizes and power. On the one hand, co-production agreements alone cannot offer protection from the geopolitical, cultural, and financial forces that compound the overall precarity of co-producing with China. On the other hand, these difficulties also relate to local policy approaches to envisioning media internationalisation.

Looking towards Europe, East European countries traditionally faced similar challenges in bilateral co-production treaties as minority co-producers compared to their Western counterparts. However, to diversify production financing, almost all public film funds in Europe established support schemes for minority co-productions between 2008 and 2019, adding to a total of 30 minority co-productions schemes in Europe. These concerted efforts to ensure minority co-productions no longer unfairly compete with the majority ones made local producers more attractive as international partners, resulting in a doubling of East-

West co-productions in the same period (Mitric 2021), reflecting the need for targeted and sustained public investment to address the specific challenges of minority co-producers. However, the ideology and pragmatics of economic growth that underpin Singapore's media policies means such investments would appear as big financial risks to the Singaporean state, partly explaining the absence of this approach there.

This further relates to the Singaporean policies' vision of its media hub as largely a cluster of economic activity (Lee 2016: 88). Like Yeh and Davis's (2024) assessment that Hong Kong's subsuming of its declining film industry under a wider 'cultural hub' is a way to hedge the film industry while other profitable sectors take the lead, a similar argument can be made about the Singapore case. This perhaps explains why small film producing nations like Singapore oscillate between regional filmmaking for accumulating capitalist advantages such as film tourism, and building regional ties through collaborating on larger scale regional productions.

Singapore's vision of its media-as-economic hub traditionally positions its value in bringing networks together. In recent film policy, for example, the Singapore Film Commission launched the Southeast Asia co-production grant in 2019 and Singapore On-screen Fund in 2023, which imagines Singapore to play the role of producer rather than filmmaker. However, this imagination of Singapore as hub contrasts with the Singaporean filmmakers we spoke to, whose ambitions lie not just in enabling connections between China and Southeast Asia but in curating stories that potentially resonate in China and Southeast Asia; providing creative input; and experimenting with innovative collaborative models. This inherent contradiction between state and practitioner visions of media internationalisation underline further difficulties in aligning policy and practice as Singaporean practitioners continue to find ways to 'make it' with China. Most importantly, however, we argue that it is mainland China's recent policy focus on a Chinese civilization-based media century (Keane and Su, 2019) that serves as the biggest stumbling block for smaller nations like Singapore to access and fit into China's film production imperatives. Thus, China-Singapore film co-productions remain elusive.

Declaration of Interest Statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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[i] While China's film production was high in the early 20th century, after its 'closed door' policy in 1952, pan-Chinese film co-production increased dramatically between Hong Kong and Taiwan. From the 1950s to the 1960s, Chinese language film co-producers pivoted to Chinese dialect-speaking audiences in Southeast Asia for commercial and economic reasons. However, demographic changes, increased Chinese migration, and Taiwanese inflow of financing into Hong Kong cinema also led to more Mandarin-language cinema (Hau & Shinishi, 2013).

[ii] To cope with the difficulties of Chinese film products travelling outside of the region, our interlocutors sometimes resort to creating two separate versions of content catering to the international market and the China market.