

Exploring the Conflict of National Narratives in Taiwanese Film from Cultural Politics and the Market of Popular Culture

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Abstract

Policy of Cultural and Creative Industries (CCI) is often integrated to cultural policy. However, cultural policy involves symbolic interaction and is entangled to politics, industries, social consciousness and resistance. This paper explores the results of Taiwan's policy of CCI in the past decade through perspectives of cultural studies by examining Taiwan's film production, power, resistance, consumption, and identity. Through the integration of cultural politics and popular culture market, this study examines the development of Taiwanese film industries by analyzing the multiple conflicts between Taiwan's history and geopolitics, film ideology, market and economic interests. This paper argues that the main reason of the failed development of Taiwan's film industries as CCI is its failure to serve Taiwanese's collective identity. However, the result might be successful to serve politics when film industries are tangled in cultural politics, citizen identity and consumption demands.

Keywords: film, national narratives, cultural politics, popular culture

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Introduction

Scholars have identified complicated relationship and contexts of popular culture with hegemony, ideology, power, and economy (Fisk, 1989; Storey, 2006). When Cultural and Creative Industries (CCI) is considered by governments as an approach to boost economy and develop a nation's culture, film as a flagship business in CCI turns into a cultural arena. The content of local film turns into symbolic interaction among moviegoers. At first, Taiwan-made local film turned prosperous when *Cape No. 7*, screened in 2008, marking the beginning of a revival in a market that had long been depressed (Taiwanese Film Industry Survey 2015). *Cape No. 7* and more Taiwan-made local film such as *Monga*, *Seediq Bale*, *You Are the Apple of My Eye*, *David Loman*, *Beyond Beauty - Taiwan from Above*, *Kano*, *Café*, *Café·Waiting·Love*, and *Our Times* listed as the yearly Top 10 movie box office from 2008 and 2010 to 2015. If the popularity of these national narratives in Taiwan film is related to changing Taiwanese identity, this study aims to explore whether failing CCI policy in Taiwan film industries is related to the result of cultural politics. *Our Times* hits a record high global box-office as 2.4 billion NT Dollars for Taiwan-made local film. However, when *Our Times* reached its peak, Taiwan-made local film made a deadly turn in local market. There are no more Taiwan-made local film listed in Top 10 movie box office from 2016 to 2017. In fact, Taiwanese government invests more money in this CCI business. This phenomenon makes Taiwan a good place for scholars to apply cultural studies to explain how the conflict of national narratives in Taiwan film may influence the market of popular culture.

Cultural politics and the local market of popular culture

After China opened markets for Hong Kong film industry by "Hong Kong-China co-production", Wu (2011) describes that the "success" in "Hong Kong-China co-production" is questioned by many people. He finds that that after closer integration with the Mainland China Market, the Hong Kong film still retains the attributes such as Cantonese culture and urban landscape but the content of elements presents hollow and "pan-Chinese" culture fills in (Wu, 2011). Signs of Taiwan film industries show that what happen in Hong Kong might appear in Taiwan. Based on Ma (2010), images and identity of Hong Kongese are changing when the transfer of sovereignty over Hong Kong from the United Kingdom to China proceeded and later Hong Kong is under the rule of one country two systems. With unification of political pressure from China, Taiwan's film industries encounter the similar dilemma whether to target movie funding and market in China. The answer of that might draw different opinions from moviegoers and movie industries and that implies the conflict of national narratives in Taiwanese film from cultural politics and the local market of popular culture. More than 50 percent of citizens consider themselves as Taiwanese when the answer of that was 17.6 in 1992 (See the green curve in Figure 1). In the KMT's dominant ideology, it was "cultural geography" which showed the phenomenon as Mainland China was "absent presence" when Taiwan was "present absence" (p.20). Chen (2017) analyzes Taiwan-made movies listed annual top 10 box office from 2008 to 2015 and finds that consumers search for new knowledge and ideas about

their favorable identity and representation which might be ignored by traditional movie producers and social elites in Taiwan.

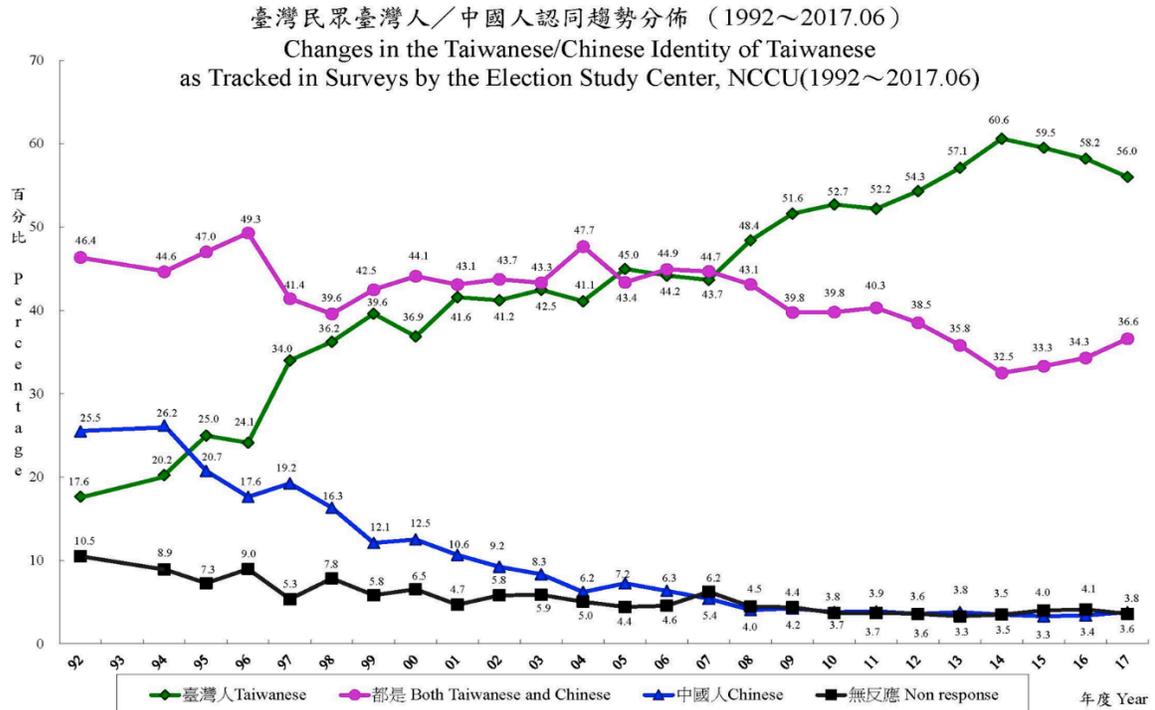


Figure 1. Changes in the Taiwanese/Chinese Identity of Taiwanese from 1992 to 2017, retrieved from <http://esc.nccu.edu.tw/app/news.php?Sn=166>

The popularity of local movies is now decreasing. There are fewer admissions per capita for Taiwan-made film down from 0.26 in 2011 to 0.17 in 2015; in addition, Taiwanese don't support Hong Kong and/or mainland China film, down from 0.12 in 2011 to 0.03 in 2015 (Taiwan Film Survey 2015). In contrast, Taiwanese support other foreign film, especially Hollywood movies up to 1.26 from 1.00 in 2011 (See Table 1). From Table 2, it shows the Hong Kong and/or mainland China film approved for screening in Taiwan maintain from 4.71 to 8.25% of all films approved for screening in Taiwan. In Table 3, the data shows that the percentage of box office receipts in Taiwan-made film can be 6 times higher than that in Hong-Kong and/or Mainland Chinese film. When tracking attractions of Taiwan-made film, in fact, study finds that Taiwan-made film may hit mainland China Market very well even listed as an import movie in China. *Our Times* was successfully made into a talking point and hit a Taiwan-made movie new high in China; in addition, local comedies and romances are quite popular in Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia (Taiwan Film Survey 2015).

Table 1: Admissions per Capita in Taiwan, 2011-2015

| Year | Taiwan-made film | Hong Kong and/or mainland Chinese film | Other foreign film | Total |
|------|------------------|----------------------------------------|--------------------|-------|
| 2011 | 0.26 | 0.12 | 1.00 | 1.38 |
| 2012 | 0.16 | 0.05 | 1.00 | 1.21 |
| 2013 | 0.19 | 0.04 | 1.07 | 1.30 |
| 2014 | 0.15 | 0.03 | 1.09 | 1.28 |
| 2015 | 0.17 | 0.03 | 1.26 | 1.46 |

(Reprint form Taiwan Film Survey 2015, p.12)

Table 2: Domestic, Hong Kong, mainland China and other foreign films approved for screening in Taiwan, 2011-2015

| Year | Domestic film | | Hong Kong and/or mainland Chinese film | | Other foreign film | |
|------|---------------|------------|----------------------------------------|------------|--------------------|------------|
| | No. | % of films | No. | % of films | No. | % of films |
| 2011 | 65 | 13.18% | 37 | 7.51% | 391 | 79.31% |
| 2012 | 76 | 14.93% | 42 | 8.25% | 391 | 76.82% |
| 2013 | 101 | 16.19% | 50 | 8.01% | 473 | 75.80% |
| 2014 | 76 | 11.55% | 31 | 4.71% | 551 | 83.74% |
| 2015 | 94 | 13.84% | 43 | 6.33% | 542 | 79.82% |

(Reprint form Taiwan Film Survey 2015, p.13)

Taiwan-made local movies had the highest market share 18.65% in 2011 (Taiwan Film Survey 2014, See Table 3); in contrast, it hit a lowest record as 0.1% of year's box office in 2001, the year the Motion Picture law was revised to meet WTO demands (Lin, 2007)¹ This study explores what changes in Taiwan's film policy when the government plans to develop the CCI to increase economy but fails to consider Taiwanese citizens' needs for collective identity.

Strategies of CCI and the conflict of collective national narratives

Chen (2017) finds that consumers search for new knowledge and ideas about their favorable identity and representation which might be ignored by movies produced by traditional social elites in Taiwan. Based on discussion above, movie fans cross-straits have different collective needs for their identity. To serve the Chinese market, it might produce movies that Taiwanese fans would not support. For example, *Double Trouble*, a co-production with mainland China, causes complaints of fans because this film shows negative images of Taiwanese when they went to theater with an aim to support local film. Although Taiwanese have shown their choices, the Taiwanese government, film experts and social elites still promote the idea that to prosper the film market, Taiwan must target mainland China's film market or co-produce more film with mainland China. Taiwanese government planned to produce more co-production with mainland China from 12 movies in 2010 to 36 movies in 2014 and aims to make Taiwan movies reach market share of mainland China from 4.6% in

¹ 林文淇, 台灣電影 retrieved from http://www.comm.hkbu.edu.hk/cmr/Event/2071026_Linwenchi.html in 2012.

2010 to 6.9% in 2014 (Report of Government Information Office, 2009) . If the prosperity of Taiwan-made movies is related to satisfy some needs of

Table 3: Market share in Taiwan, 2010-2014 (Taipei City)

| Year | Taiwan-made film | Hong Kong and/or mainland Chinese film | Other foreign film | Total | |
|------|----------------------------|----------------------------------------|--------------------|---------------|---------------|
| 2010 | No. of films screened | 38 | 38 | 352 | 428 |
| | Box-office receipts (NT\$) | 225,582,606 | 164,647,888 | 2,696,736,145 | 3,086,966,639 |
| | Percentage of receipts | 7.31% | 5.33% | 87.36% | 100.00% |
| 2011 | No. of films screened | 36 | 38 | 406 | 480 |
| | Box-office receipts (NT\$) | 712,506,985 | 100,549,646 | 3,006,441,597 | 3,819,498,228 |
| | Percentage of receipts | 18.65% | 2.63% | 78.71% | 100.00% |
| 2012 | No. of films screened | 51 | 41 | 343 | 435 |
| | Box-office receipts (NT\$) | 430,433,697 | 152,531,257 | 3,035,000,680 | 3,617,965,634 |
| | Percentage of receipts | 11.90% | 4.22% | 83.89% | 100.00% |
| 2013 | No. of films screened | 54 | 44 | 389 | 489 |
| | Box-office receipts (NT\$) | 529,863,483 | 131,789,464 | 3,134,963,327 | 3,796,616,274 |
| | Percentage of receipts | 13.96% | 3.47% | 82.57% | 100% |
| 2014 | No. of films screened | 54 | 28 | 416 | 498 |
| | Box-office receipts (NT\$) | 427,833,400 | 91,164,192 | 3,188,665,367 | 3,707,662,959 |
| | Percentage of receipts | 11.54% | 2.46% | 86.00% | 100% |

(Reprint form Taiwan Film Survey 2014, p.14)

Taiwanese collective identity as Chen (2013) had shown, the government's several policies may have discouraged similar production of previous popular local movies by cancelling bonus incentives for excellent box office in 2013, encouraging co-production with mainland China, not releasing timely information of box office, funding production companies not in an open way, failing to encourage more local blockbusters, and funding art movies without commercial values when local film market is still weak. These strategies mix with the CII's approaches and create weaker production infrastructure for Taiwan-made movies. From Table four, it is obviously to find that although average production cost 51.46 million NT dollars in 2015 is higher than that in 2011(47.91 million NT dollars), the percentage of production costs for the development process and the postproduction process are both in a down trend. For the development process, it is down from 6 percent in 2011 to 2.64 percent in 2015. In addition, for the postproduction process, it is down from 30 percent in 2011 to 18.77 percent in 2015. These indicators show a possibility that fewer preparation for story rights, screen writing fees and fewer postproduction fees for better quality or special effect.

Table 4: Average production costs for Taiwan-made films, 2011-2015 (excluding promotion and advertising)

| Time period | | 2011 | | 2012 | | 2013 | | 2014 | | 2015 | |
|-----------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|------------------|-----|-------|-----|-------|-----|-------|-------|--------|--------|
| Average production costs (NT\$ million) | | 47.91 | | 63.59 | | 57.37 | | 61.11 | | 5.146 | |
| Production process | | % of total costs | | | | | | | | | |
| Development | Story rights/ screenwriting fees(%) | 6 | 6 | 2 | 2 | 4 | 4 | 2.51 | 2.51 | 2.64% | 2.64% |
| | Personnel(%) | 23 | | 21 | | 42 | | 44.45 | | 44.77% | |
| Production and shooting | Equipment and facilities (%) | 64 | 20 | 83 | 34 | 77 | 16 | 72.94 | 11.44 | 78.59% | 13.11% |
| | Costumes and properties (%) | | 6 | | 20 | | 12 | | 7.86 | | 11.14% |
| Time period | | 2011 | | 2012 | | 2013 | | 2014 | | 2015 | |
| | Sundry expenses(%) | | 15 | | 8 | | 7 | | 9.19 | | 9.57% |
| Postproduction | Development, printing, editing and sound recording(%) | 30 | 27 | 15 | 10 | 19 | 9 | 24.54 | 8.32 | 18.77% | 10.47% |
| | Sundry expenses(%) | | 3 | | 5 | | 4 | | 6.59 | | 3.46% |
| | 2D VFX(%) | | — | | — | | 2 | | 0.79 | | 1.65% |
| | 3D VFX(%) | | — | | — | | 4 | | 8.84 | | 3.19% |
| Total(%) | | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100% | 100% |

(Reprint form Taiwan Film Survey 2015, p.14)

In Taiwan, multiculturalism is supported by the government. Hakka Affairs Council and Council of Indigenous People are listed as governmental branches. Public Television Service are funded by the Taiwanese to protect cultural rights of minorities. Hakka, languages of indigenous people are listed as official languages in Taiwan.

With a background of dominant Chinese ideology, Mandarin dominates official language. Four ethnic groups in Taiwan, “Hoklo” people is counted about 70 percent of Taiwanese population and is the group asking for the subjectivity of Taiwan with the most affirmative action. However, the culture of this group is suppressed and their language was forbidden once. It is easy to observe that the dominant popular local movies usually present some favorable images of “Hoklo” although their children usually fail to use their mother language. When positive “Hoklo” images are usually ignored by traditional movie producers, local fans are also decreasing. In fact, there are more tradition, memory, history needs to be explored and those might be a political taboo if local movies are aiming at Chinese markets. Therefore, for America and Korea, they use the idea of “arm length” to keep away government’s funding to interfere movie content. It is the popular market that make people to resist the dominant ideology and gives moviegoers their right to express their opinion about their culture. Chinese market is huge; however, it is not easy for Taiwan producers to compete with Hollywood and Chinese film companies. In terms of consumption, there are personal identity and social identity to stimulate consumers’ needs. Collective needs are local people’s motives to watch a local movie. In contrast, meeting moviegoers’ personal identity needs is harder for local movie producers when high production funding of Hollywood movies is considered. If Taiwanese government keeps aiming at producing more movies with mainland China and use this nation’s office film award to promote Chinese film, it is easy to predict that local people’s collective needs are hard to get satisfied by these movies. Korean popular culture turns into a success not because they produce products mainly to target other nations’ fans. In fact, for Korean’s movie charts, their highest grossing film of all time are majorly Korean-made movies. Miller (2002, p.35) vividly described Alexis de Tocqueville’s eulogy to early nineteenth-century life in the United States:

“(The Ethos of Democracy)...forcefully rejected European ruling-class accounts of civilization and how to stimulate it.....a widespread belief in the US that equality militated against artistic transcendence.”

Content of popular culture is an arena for people to contend their attention to issues they care. Hartley (2006) uses citizen consumers to describe creative industry is a plebiscitary business and it is related to identity politics. R.O.C. in Taiwan is listed in a divided nation. Whatever shown in local popular movies turns into flow as power to define history, tradition, knowledge, and collective memories. This paper argues that the main cause of the failed development of Taiwan's film industries as CCI is its failure to serve Taiwanese collective identity. In contrast, it may serve politics better with a vague Taiwanese collective identity when the government might face the issue of reunification with mainland China. Even after political party rotation in Taiwan’s government, film industries are still tangled in cultural politics, citizen identity and consumption demands.

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