

THE CHINAFICATION OF HOLLYWOOD: CHINESE CONSUMPTION AND THE SELF-CENSORSHIP OF U.S. FILMS THROUGH A CASE STUDY OF *TRANSFORMERS AGE OF EXTINCTION*

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With 11 figures

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Summary: For Hollywood films, the international box office is now financially more important than the domestic market. China will soon become the world's largest box office for Hollywood films. To gain access to the Chinese market foreign films must be approved by China's government. Movies must not disparage Chinese culture, landmarks, or the government. Eager to comply, Hollywood producers are not waiting until they are reviewed to make changes and instead are self-censoring in advance rather than risk being denied access. In this paper, I use a representation-in-relation-to approach to cultural geography that positions a film's text in relation to its production practices to understand the way Hollywood is remaking itself to appeal to China. The representation-in-relation-to approach takes practice seriously without jettisoning the power of representation. I apply this approach to *Transformers: Age of Extinction*, which through its production practices provides a case study on what trade publications are referring to as the 'Chinification of Hollywood.' In an industry driven by profit, the Chinification of Hollywood is a form of influence that further limits the creativity and uniqueness of Hollywood movies by prescribing what gets made and how it is represented. *Transformers: Age of Extinction* is an important cultural text, not for its narrative content, but for how its representation relates to the production practices that allowed it to become China's largest grossing film at that time and the only billion-dollar blockbuster of 2014.

Zusammenfassung: Für Hollywood-Filme ist das internationale Geschäft heute finanziell wichtiger als der heimische Markt. China wird sich bald zum weltweit größten Markt für Hollywood-Filme entwickeln. Um Zugang zum chinesischen Markt zu erhalten, müssen ausländische Filme von der chinesischen Regierung genehmigt werden. Filme dürfen die chinesische Kultur, Sehenswürdigkeiten oder die Regierung nicht herabsetzen. Hollywood-Produzenten, die sich an die Regeln halten wollen, warten aber nicht, bis sie überprüft werden, sondern zensieren sich im Voraus selbst, anstatt Gefahr zu laufen, dass sie nachträglich Änderungen vornehmen müssen oder ihnen der Zugang verweigert wird. In dieser kultur-geographischen Studie wird exemplarisch analysiert, in welcher Weise Hollywood filmische Produktionen anpasst, um den chinesischen Markt anzusprechen. Die Analyse erfolgt anhand des Films *Transformers: Age of Extinction*, der anhand seiner Produktionspraktiken beispielhaft vorführt, was in Fachkreisen als 'Chinesifizierung von Hollywood' bezeichnet wird. In einer vom Profit getriebenen Branche ist die Chinesifizierung von Hollywood eine Form des Einflusses, der die Kreativität und Einzigartigkeit von Hollywood-Filmen weiter einschränkt, indem er vorschreibt, was gemacht wird und wie es dargestellt wird. *Transformers: Age of Extinction* ist ein wichtiger kultureller Beitrag, nicht wegen seines narrativen Inhalts, sondern weil seine Umsetzung in beispielhafter Weise eine Anpassung an Marktvorgaben illustriert, die es ihm ermöglichten, Chinas damals größter Kassenhit und der einzige Milliarden-Blockbuster von 2014 zu werden.

Keywords: Hollywood, China, film, representation, censorship, co-production, cultural geography

1 Introduction

What do the movies *Terminator Genisys* (2015), *The Mummy* (2017), *The Expendables 3* (2014), and *Transformers: Age of Extinction* (2014) all have in common? They all received very negative aggregated reviews, are action/science fiction movies, were made in Hollywood, grossed higher in Chinese box offices than in the U.S. domestic and grossed twice as much in international box offices. *The Mummy* alone received a whopping fifteen percent Tomatometer score on Rotten Tomatoes but at the time was Tom

Cruise's biggest ever opening box office weekend hauling in \$169.3 million worldwide. As these examples suggest, with the turn of the new millennium, international ticket sales, especially in the ever-expanding markets of China, Russia, and Brazil, dominate American box office revenue. The Chinese box office alone is growing at an astounding rate and U.S. producers want access. As CURTIN (2007, 1) notes, "Hollywood moguls [must] reconsider prior assumptions regarding the dynamics of transnational media institutions and reassess the cultural geographies of media consumption. For increasingly they find

themselves playing not only to the Westernized global audience but also the world's biggest audience: the Chinese audience." What tends to translate well across cultures is big-budget action features that are short on meaning but long on special effects, stunts, and the spectacular. *Washington Post* writer O'BRIEN (2014, 1) posits that this trend is killing one movie genre in particular: "Comedy is dead, and [Transformers Director] Michael Bay is to blame". O'BRIEN notes that "Hollywood knows that American comedies don't work overseas, but American action movies do". Further, what gets greenlit for blockbuster production does not follow a domestic logic but rather an international one. Though the tired sequel and franchise narratives showed a slight downturn in domestic consumption in 2017, the international box office propelled sales to the highest grossing year ever (TARTAGLIONE 2017).

Hollywood domestic sales have remained placid for the last two decades and producers are looking to China to expand its market. Hollywood films account for about forty-to-fifty percent of the Chinese box office each year. Foreign movies are regulated by the Chinese government, which caps imports at thirty-four foreign films per year. Crucially, for foreign films to become one of these lucky thirty-four, the movie must be approved by China's State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film, and Television (SAPPRFT). According to CURTIN (2007, 279), "What global conglomerates didn't anticipate was the laborious effort it would require to establish marketing operations on the ground and to secure clearances from government authorities". This review process has caused most, if not all producers of big-budget blockbusters, to begin self-censoring their productions well before the Chinese government sees them. In an industry that defines success through ticket sales, this 'Chinafication' of Hollywood is a form of influence that further limits the creativity and uniqueness of Hollywood movies by prescribing what gets made and how it is represented.

Given the impact of Hollywood's Chinafication, in this paper, I ask: How is Hollywood adjusting its production practices and geographical imaginaries to increase profits in an era in which Hollywood producers depend on China for an ever-increasing portion of their ticket sales? To answer this question, I use a more-than-representational approach to film geography. Specifically, I apply a representation-in-relation-to the practices of film production approach to analyze how *Transformers: Age of Extinction* (hereafter, *Transformers 4*) became paradigmatic of how filmmakers modify their products to be attractive to

both U.S. and Chinese cultures as well as to the government of The People's Republic of China.

I begin by positioning this research with current cultural geography literature on representation studies. I find that the representation-in-relation-to approach advocated there has been deployed by media and film geography, especially in relation to mediatization, haptics, affect, and film production. Following this, I examine the history and economic dominance of China in the U.S. film market and how U.S. productions gain access to that market. I focus here on the role and effect of The People's Republic of China on U.S. films that would like to be released in China. With this background in place, I consider the ways *Transformers 4* appeals to Chinese audiences and The People's Republic of China through, among other things, a geographic bricolage of Hong Kong, Detroit, and Chicago.

2 Representation-in-relation-to

ANDERSON (2018, 1) notes that "cultural geography is once again concerned with representations". He reports that, whereas new cultural geography was focused on representation as a signifying practice or text, recent engagements with representations have focused on what representations do, how they do it, and the material-affective encounters of living with representations in everyday life. This change results from a "hermeneutics of suspicion" where the "presumption that people's access to the world was primarily an interpretive one always already mediated by 'signifying systems'" (ANDERSON 2018, 2). The hermeneutics of suspicion has led to a focus on representations as they are practiced rather than representations as a referential system. In short, there has been a shift from what representations stand for to what they do. Anderson refers to this turn as a representation-in-relation-to approach where some other non-representational practice is combined with representational analysis to examine how representations operate as signifying systems and cultural practices. This representation-in-relation-to approach is a recognition of the impact of non-representational theories (NRT) in human geography and NRT's focus on "practices and materiality over imagery and the symbolic" (CAMPBELL 2012, 400). The response to NRT in media geography has not been to jettison representational studies for something else, but rather to follow LORIMER's (2005) more-than-representational approach, according to which NRT is something that adds value to representational analysis.

A representation-in-relation-to approach is evident in research on media geography and geomeia studies. ADAMS (2011) presents a taxonomy for the field of media and communication geography by conceptualizing these intersecting fields as media/communication in places/spaces and places/spaces in media/communication. With the former, the focus is on the places of consumption as well as the “arrangement of communication opportunities and limitations” (ADAMS et al. 2017, 4). The latter emphasizes representations and mediations as well as spaces of interaction, or the social contexts of mediated spaces. In contrast, FAST et al. (2017, 11) define geomeia studies as “the role of media in organizing and giving meaning to processes and activities in space.” They posit that geomeia is not just about the technologies through which mediated content is delivered but also includes the places, people, performances, practices, institutions, and organizations through which they are produced and consumed. A key theory of geomeia studies is mediatization, which emphasizes how media are always already entwined in everyday life and social institutions. According to HJARVARD (2013 2-3), “mediatization studies are concerned with the long-term structural change in the role of the media in culture and society, in which the media acquire greater authority to define social reality and condition patterns of social interaction.” With mediatization, media is not separate from culture but involved in its very production and reproduction (JANSSON 2017; HEPP 2012).

Film geography appears to be, at last, stepping out of the era of the dominance of textual analysis and the ATR (author-text-reader) taxonomy (SHARP and LUKINBEAL 2015) by emphasizing representations-in-relation-to haptics (BRUNO 2002), affect (CARTER and McCORMACK 2006), tourism (ESCHER 2006; ESCHER and ZIMMERMAN 2001), and production practice (LUKINBEAL 2006). Haptics repositions a discussion of cinema from optics, voyeurism, and text to an embodied and emotional cinematic event that removes the subject/object dualism embedded in textual analysis. Haptics, instead, situates the cinematic subject and object as a co-production that emerges together (HADI CURTI et al. 2013). According to CRANG (2002, 27), this shift is one that moves from “a focus on the motion of images swirling around an analytically stationary and embattled subject to a view of the subject in motion and occupying the same terrain as the images” or as CRAINE et al. (2013, 264) put it, “we become the image”. CARTER and McCORMACK (2006, 236) have argued that while textual analysis works well to “rehearse

or disrupt particular discursive codes and scripts,” film analysis should also involve consideration for how it amplifies “the passage and transition between affect and emotion.” For film geography, affect is a “matter of the production and circulation of affects prior to yet also providing the grounds from which distinctive intensities of feeling emerge” (CARTER and McCORMACK 2006, 240). LUKINBEAL (2005) has deployed a representation-in-relation-to approach by emphasizing film’s double ontology as image and industry where the former explores the signification of cultural text and the later the cultural economy of film production practices. Through an examination of the cinematic landscapes of San Diego, he probes the epistemological tension between text and practice. Using the concept of the taskscape, he positions cinema in relation to film production and how business practices are mediated not only by the texts under production but also by everyday home and business owners as well as industrial professionals (LUKINBEAL 2012; LUKINBEAL and SHARP 2017).

Transformers 4 is an enlightening cultural text not so much for its narrative content but because of the text’s relation to its production practices that helped constitute its final product. This paper offers a case study of a representation-in-relation-to the practices of film production approach where one of the central aims of the producers was to appeal to the Chinese market without disassociating other markets and the franchise’s international fanbase. Both overt and subtle messaging is layered into the film to produce a variegated product that performs these tasks. Beyond the final product, the legacy of Hollywood’s engagement with the Chinese film market and the production process of *Transformers 4* leaves a trail scattered across various media sources and policy documents that are used here to trace the practices that led to this film’s creation. Below are some of the practices of the film’s multinational corporations to succeed in this burgeoning market and produce the only billion-dollar plus grossing feature of 2014.

3 The rise and dominance of the Chinese film market

As of 2017, China is the largest film market in the world after the United States. From 1979 to the early 1990s, most films shown in China were Communist Party propaganda films. In 1994, however, China imported its first foreign film, *The Fugitive* (1993), which grossed around three million dollars there. This was an “event of historic significance” because

it revitalized the Chinese film market and opened it to subsequent imports (ROSEN 2002, 52). From 1995 to 2000, China imported around six to ten films a year (YAN 2015). This evolution of the Chinese film market would eventually affect U.S. film producers. Throughout the 1990s, the U.S. domestic and international box office receipts were roughly equal, averaging around nine-to-ten billion dollars per year. This equivalency changed in 2004 when the U.S.'s international box office sales increased forty-four percent to \$15.7 billion; they have continued to grow each year since. The U.S. domestic market, on the other hand, has remained stagnant at around \$9-11 billion annually since 2002. In 2016, China constituted twenty-five percent (\$6.8 billion) of U.S. international box office sales (Fig. 1 and Fig. 2). The continued growth in the Chinese box office is not surprising when we consider that in 2013, over 5,000 new movie theaters were built in China with an average of fifteen theaters built per day in 2015 (O'CONNOR and ARMSTRONG 2015).

Over the last decade, as Chinese film consumption grew so did U.S. companies' interest in the Chinese film market. Since 2008, U.S. productions have accounted for at least one-quarter of China's total, annual box office receipts. In February of 2012, China and

the United States drafted a memorandum of understanding (MOU) that sought to expand U.S. film producers' access to Chinese theaters dramatically. The MOU raised the number of foreign films imported to China to thirty-four and hiked the cut of box office receipts that the foreign production studio would receive from thirteen to twenty-five percent, a financial arrangement known as 'revenue-sharing' (O'CONNOR and ARMSTRONG 2015, 4). Furthermore, at least fourteen of the thirty-four films had to be in either IMAX or 3D format. Both the Obama Administration and Hollywood executives saw this as a "breakthrough for expanding American film access to China's burgeoning art and entertainment markets" (O'CONNOR and ARMSTRONG 2015, 8). Unsurprisingly then, in 2014 (when *Transformers 4* was released) thirty-two of the thirty-four revenue-sharing foreign films imported by China were from the U.S. Besides revenue-sharing films, there are two additional mechanisms by which Hollywood obtains access to the Chinese market. These mechanisms are 1) flat-fee films and 2) U.S.-Chinese co-productions. Flat-fee films are those movies sold to China by U.S. studios for a one-time fee. Most companies do not choose to do this because, without a share in the ticket sales, they only receive a fraction of the film's total worth.

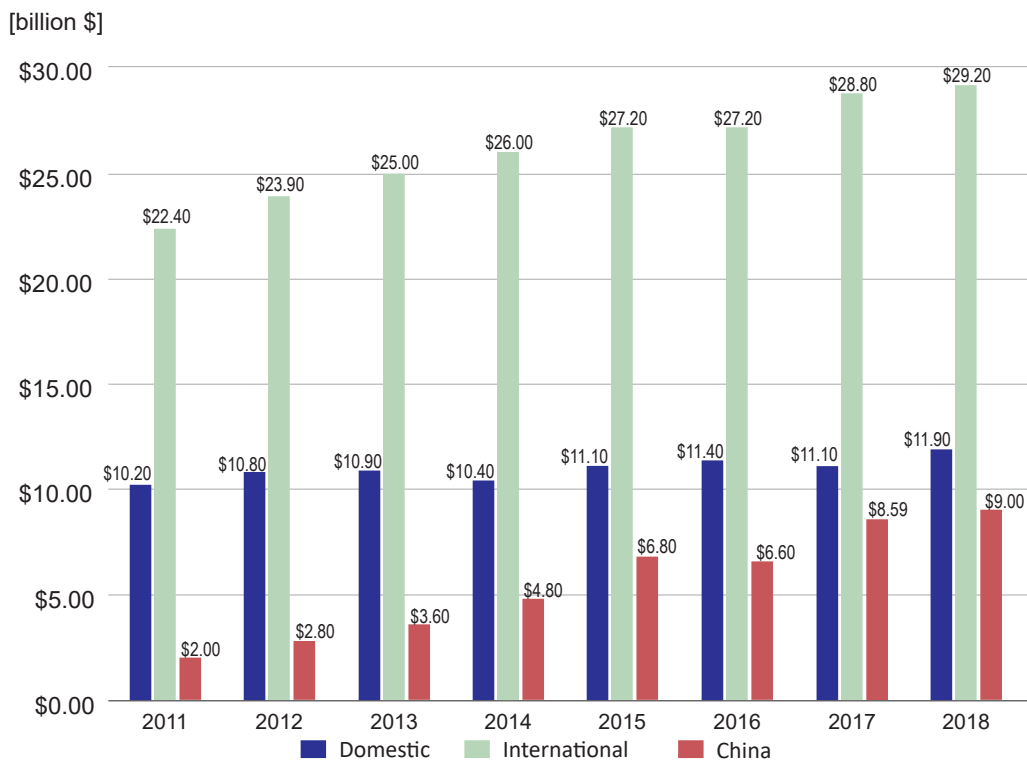


Fig. 1: China's growing box office (in billions of dollars). Data source: MPAA 2019

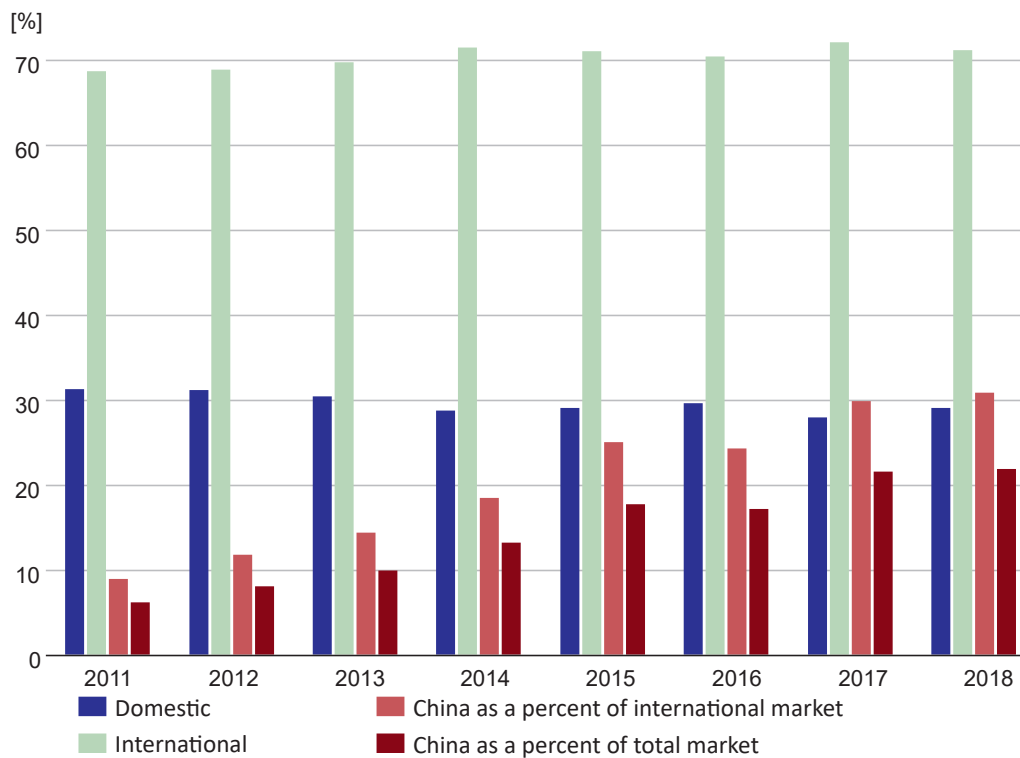


Fig. 2: China as a percent of the world's total film market. Data source: MPAA 2019

Co-productions are movies made jointly by U.S. and Chinese companies. In this arrangement, the American studio receives fifty percent of the revenue from box office receipts from China. Significantly, co-productions commit production to certain creative obligations. These obligations involve “having at least one scene shot in China, casting at least one Chinese actor, receiving a minimum of one-third of the movie’s total investment from Chinese companies” and include, “positive Chinese elements” (O’CONNOR and ARMSTRONG, 9). Thus, the business practices associated with co-productions directly impact the diegetic geographies of the films that access the Chinese market. *Transformers 4* was the highest-grossing film in the history of Chinese cinema at the time and was a co-production with the American company, Paramount, and the Chinese companies, China Movie Channel and Jiaflix Enterprises. This co-production represented the first time the state-owned China Movie Channel/Jiaflix invested in a Hollywood film.

All films, including co-productions, are submitted to China’s State Administration of Press, Publications, Radio, Film, and Television (SAPPRFT) for approval. SAPPRFT is the Chinese government agency that regulates and censors film

productions. According to SAPPRFT regulations, all imported films must “adhere to the principles of the Chinese Constitution and maintain social morality” (O’CONNOR and ARMSTRONG, 9). According to O’CONNOR and ARMSTRONG (2015, 3) “China’s regulations and processes for approving foreign films reflect the Chinese Communist Party’s position that art, including film, is a method of social control.” The purpose of these regulations, CAIN (2014, 1) notes, is “to promote Confucian morality, political stability and social harmony.” Thus, “any films depicting demons or supernaturalism, crime or any other illicit or illegal actions within China’s borders, disparagement of the People’s Liberation Army and police, and anything that could be perceived as anti-China - including merely damaging Chinese sites or monuments - are prohibited” (O’CONNOR and ARMSTRONG 2015, 9). SAPPRFT regulations further prohibit excessive nudity, violence, and profanity, though these are more likely to be overlooked.

When not involved in co-productions, Hollywood producers will often elect to self-censor themselves to help secure their film as one of the thirty-four that make it into China that year. The representational geographies produced for the dis-

tribution and consumption in the U.S. and China must, therefore, be understood through these international business practices and Chinese governmental regulations. These representation-in-relation-to practices are the geographies of the unscene (SHARP 2018) or those practices that occur outside of a film's diegesis but greatly influence diegetic scenes. It is for this reason - these geographies of the unscene - that you will rarely if ever again see Chinese culture portrayed in a negative light or an evil Chinese villain in a Hollywood blockbuster. What you will see more of is Chinese locations, Chinese actors as heroes, and Chinese product placement, even when there is no logical explanation of these in the movie's narrative.

Transformers 4, directed by Michael Bay, is one such film that sought to optimize its Chinese box office return from the outset of the production process. When it came time to produce the fourth movie of this highly profitable franchise, Paramount sought to continue the trend of increasing their Chinese sales. In 2007, the first *Transformers* movie made roughly \$37 million in China. Seven years later, this return increased 860% to \$320 million with the release of *Transformers 4* (BOX OFFICE MOJO 2018). The *Transformers* movie franchise shows a similar statistical trend to the rest of the global film market for Hollywood: A growing international market and a stagnant and declining domestic market (see Fig. 1; Fig. 3). The most dramatic change in the international market for the *Transformers* franchise is how much the Chinese film market ac-

counts for the total international market. China only accounted for 5% of the first movie's total market and 10% of its international ticket sales (Fig. 4). Compare this to *Transformers 4*, for which China garnered 29% of its total box office receipts and China comprised 37% of the international total. *Transformers 4* grossed \$1.1 billion worldwide, with \$245 million of that coming from U.S. sales and \$320 million in sales coming from China (COONAN 2014). With numbers like these, the Chinese market is now more critical to the *Transformers* franchise than the U.S., a fact that manifests in the films' content, as I will show in the next two sections.

4 Appealing to Chinese audiences and censors

The *Transformers 4* production team worked diligently to make sure that the film was appealing to both Chinese consumers and the Chinese Government. To highlight Chinese culture and increase Chinese sales, *Transformers 4* hired Chinese actors, used iconic Chinese locations, made overt, positive references to the Chinese government, and included overt product placements of Chinese goods. According to Yu (2014, 1), the film owes its success in part to "popular actress Li Bingbing and heartthrob Han Geng, and lashings of product placement for everything from Chinese milk and PCs to Red Bull and authoritarian styles of government."

In one scene a central character (from Texas) uses a credit card from the China Construction

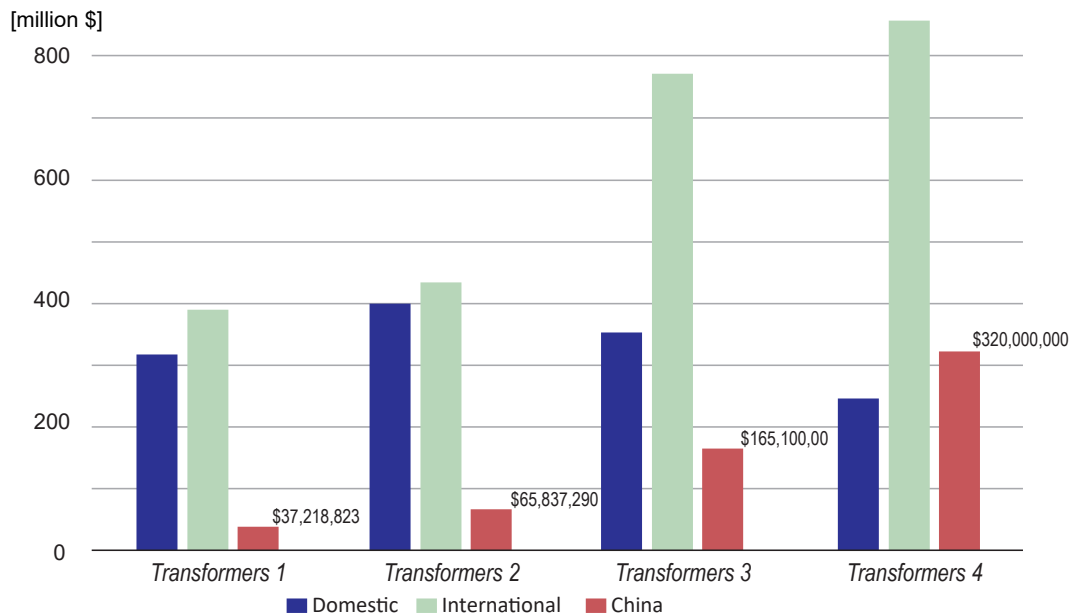


Fig. 3: Transformers movies 1-4 global market in millions of dollars. Data source: BOX OFFICE MOJO (2018)

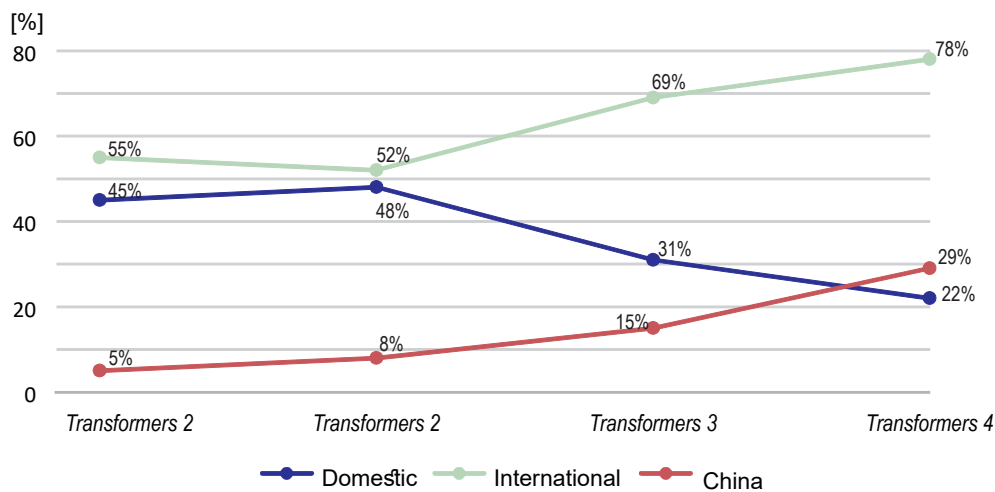


Fig. 4: Transformers movies 1-4 global market share. Data source: BOX OFFICE MOJO (2018)

Bank at an ATM at the Hole n' the Rock tourist attraction in Moab, Utah. According to a statement from the China Construction Bank (CAMSING GLOBAL 2017), "Cade uses the card to track the enemy's whereabouts and eventually save the planet with the Autobots." As such, bank representatives believe they have "fully demonstrated our product's features through seamless integration with the plot." The bank further describes their card as the "equipment for heroes" and shortly following the movie began marketing a new "Transformers theme Dragon Credit Card" (Fig. 5). At least twenty Chinese brands paid for product placement including a packaged duck meat product. Four of them paid over a million dollars to have their products featured. Unsurprisingly, the film won the 2015 worst product placement award from Brandchannel for an impressive 55 brand placements (SAUER 2015). These overt appeasements to the Chinese audience reflect a representation-in-relation-to the business practices of target marketing.



Fig. 5: Transformers theme Dragon Credit Card

To further attract the Chinese audience, the film premiered in Hong Kong and closed at the Shanghai International Film Festival. While the movie was shown, "leading cast members posted videos in China wishing nearly 10 million high-school students good luck on their college entrance exams" (COONAN 2014, 1). During the production of the film, producers hosted the reality TV show on the China Movie Channel, *Transformers 4 Chinese Actors Talent Search Reality Show*. It attracted around 70,000 contestants who competed for a chance to play bit parts in the movie as either a King Fu fighter, sexy goddess, cute Loli, or a computer geek (M1905 2017). The judges included a Paramount executive and managers from M1905, China Movie Channel's official website. While other blockbusters, like *Iron Man 3* (2013) and *Looper* (2012), were highly criticized for making alternate Chinese versions, Paramount and Jiaflix boasted they would only have a single worldwide version of *Transformers 4* and release it simultaneously in China and the U.S. On Weibo, a popular Chinese microblogging site, the SAPPRFT's approval notice of *Transformers 4* was posted. Weibo also listed all of the Chinese products to be featured in the film along with a notice that there would be no Chinese special edition of the film (Fig. 6). Using a representation-in-relation-to approach reveals how the producers of *Transformers 4* sought to position Chinese consumers as one with the image (cf. CRAINE 2013), or as co-producers (cf. HADI CURTI et al. 2013) of the film by monetizing the production process as a cultural spectacle and event.

Transformers 4 strategically embeds iconic Chinese landscapes into the third act of the narrative in a way that is respectful to SAPPRFT. This is done by high-

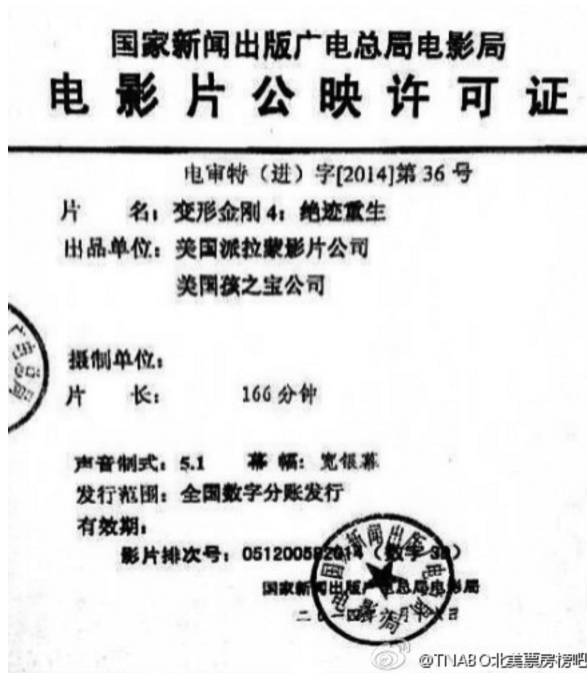


Fig. 6: SAPPRT's approval notice for *Transformers 4*

lighting positive, modern, and historical locations while not filming the major destruction sequences in China. Achieving this required the splicing of locations together and site-doubling at critical moments in the narrative. While the movie begins in Texas and does location shooting in Chicago, Detroit, and Utah, the narrative jumps to China, where its climactic finale takes place. Act three of the film begins with an establishing shot of Beijing where the camera lingers on the Beijing National Stadium, built for the 2012 Olympics, an iconic site that highlights China's current importance in world affairs and culture. Later, we see an aerial shot of the Great Wall of China. The fake company, KSI, which is central to the narrative, resides in the Tianjin Grand Theatre, a massive 220-acre facility surrounded by an artificial lake that is centered on a musical fountain imported from Las Vegas (LUKINBEAL and SHARP 2019).

Chongqing Wulong Karst Tourism Group Company and Pangu Plaza paid over a million dollars each to have their locations featured in the film. The Wulong Karst National Geology Park is a UNESCO World Heritage site with a unique series of natural limestone bridges and canyons. The park signed a contract with M1905 and later filed suit claiming that the park and park signage were not highlighted enough. Further, they sought unreimbursed damages to the park as well as were upset that the portrayal of the park was made to appear proximate to Hong Kong when in fact it is roughly

1,000 kilometers away. Pangu Plaza similarly sued for breach of contract and lack of screen time. To facilitate settlement of these suits, Paramount added additional footage of the park on DVD and TV releases and held their Beijing opening at Pangu Plaza (BURKITT 2014).

The cost to film at these two Chinese locations is nothing compared to what two U.S. states paid to host *Transformers 4*. Paying to be a film location in the U.S. is typically done through state tax credits. The *Transformers* franchise had previously used Chicago, Illinois as a narrative location as well as Detroit, Michigan for pyrotechnics and action sequences. Both states provided tax incentives for *Transformers* film's 3 and 4 even though Ian Bryce, a producer of *Transformers 3* stated they would likely have filmed in Chicago without the incentive (BERGEN 2010). Although Detroit, Michigan accounts for thirty-eight percent of *Transformers 4*'s overall budget, it is never identified in the film but instead is used as an arena for postindustrial blight and destruction. Although Chicago does play a significant narrative role in the film, its derelict postindustrial locations are also used as locations for crucial destruction sequences. Whereas Michigan gave *Transformers 4*, \$20 million in tax credits (SKID 2013), Illinois provided \$6.1 million (NOVAK and FUSCO 2017).

In the film, the narrative moves from Beijing to Hong Kong using the famous Stonecutters Bridge, the second longest cable-stayed bridge in the world when it was completed in 2009. The first action sequence in Hong Kong occurs in the high rises of Quarry Bay, at Quarry Bay Street and King's Road. However, because destroying Chinese landscapes and landmarks might be construed as anti-Chinese, the filmmakers shot the destruction scenes that appear to play out at this location on a set built in an empty lot in downtown Detroit, at Clifford Street and Washington Boulevard (Fig. 7). Featured unwittingly in this action sequence are the famous Spanish gothic style United Artist Building, the Grand Park Centre, and one of the oldest skyscrapers in Detroit, the neo-gothic style Fyfe building. During the fight, Optimus Prime and some of the Autobots' spaceships are hit and appear to crash just over Mount Parker in Hong Kong; however, they land in Wulong Karst National Geology Park.

Shortly after the battle at Quarry Bay/Detroit, a large, ominous alien ship flies slowly into Hong Kong's harbor, and we see two panicked Hong Kong government officials running scared; one says, in English, "we have to call the central government for help." BLUM (2014), a writer for the *South*



Fig. 7: Detroit set (empty lot in foreground) playing Hong Kong (Google Street View©Google 2016)

China Morning Post, writes that when that scene was shown in a theater in Hong Kong, “nearly everyone in the theater with me laughed out loud.” To make it more appealing to SAPPRT, when the film’s Chinese government is notified of the attack in Hong Kong, the government officials are determined to help. Significantly, the location used to represent the central government is Pangu Plaza, a grandiose complex of five buildings adjacent to the Olympic Village complex. The tallest building of the

Pangu Plaza complex represents the head of a dragon, while the line of four other buildings next to it represents the dragon’s undulating body (Fig. 8). While the film shows these buildings as the home of the Central Government, its daily life function is a mixed-use complex with one of only two seven-star hotels in the world. Walking out of Pangu Plaza, a government official states in Chinese, “The central government will protect Hong Kong at all costs. We have fighter jets on the way.”



Fig. 8: Pangu Plaza (wikicommons)

During the final battle scenes, which occur in Hong Kong's downtown financial core, the camera gives the audience a tour of the area's principal locations. These include the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre, the International Finance Center, the Central Government Office complex and Tamar Park, and the stunningly beautiful harbor, skyline, and mountains. However, because it is against SAPPRT regulations to show damage to Chinese locations, the location at which the final destructive battle takes place is actually at Steelworkers Park and at Damen Silos, both of which are on the south side of Chicago. The Steelworkers Park, a sixteen-and-a-half-acre waterfront industrial re-use public park, was an original part of the U.S. Steel's South Works which opened in the early 1880s and closed in 1992. The cartographic bricolage of Hong Kong/Chicago continues in the final battle scene which mainly takes place on a small peninsula near Hong Kong's Convention Center. This peninsula, which just minutes before in the narrative did not exist, also does not show up on Google Earth (Fig. 9). The silos on the peninsula are simultaneously proximate to both the Steelworkers Park in Chicago and the Hong Kong Convention Center. The Damen Silos in Chicago (Fig. 10) occupy an abandoned property used by homeless, urban explorers and graffiti artists. The Damen Silos were built in 1906 for the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad when Chicago was a big player in the grain trade. In *Transformers 4*, the grain silos are given Chinese

characters, and the background of Hong Kong's harbor is superimposed behind the silos to enhance the film's geographic realism (Fig. 11).

This analysis which positions narrative places in the representation, -in-relation-to the film's production practice, shows how capitalism and governmental policies mix with cinematic language to produce a geographical imaginary for a movie. The complex more-than-representational geographies of *Transformers 4* is a multinational cultural product that generated revenue in China, the U.S., and from around the world, all the while satisfying SAPPRT representational regulations that preclude the virtual destruction of China. The denigration of post-industrial sites in Chicago and Detroit is all the more ironic when we position their representation-in-relation-to their state's tax incentive that paid *Transformers 4* to come to their cities to blow up these properties to preserve an untarnished image of Chinese properties and its geographical imaginary to viewers around the world.

5 Conclusion

The stunning rise of the Chinese film market to global dominance highlights the fact that, since 2004, Hollywood has been looking to international sales to increase revenue. According to Hanneman, President of International Distribution for 20th Century Fox, the markets of China, Russia, and Brazil "have exploded" (BOWLES 2013). For its part,

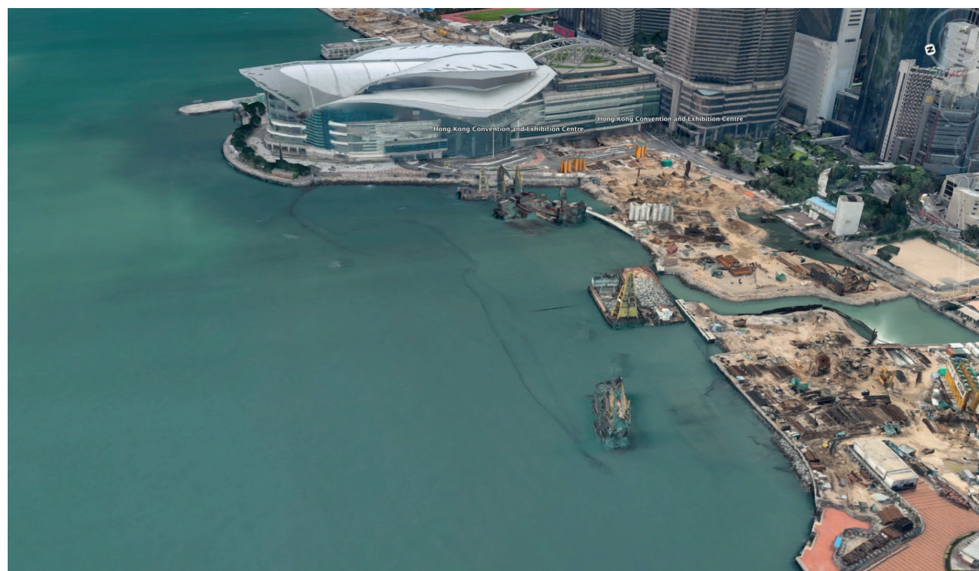


Fig. 9: Google Earth 3D model of the Hong Kong Convention Center and shoreline (©Google Earth, 2018 Landsat Imagery)

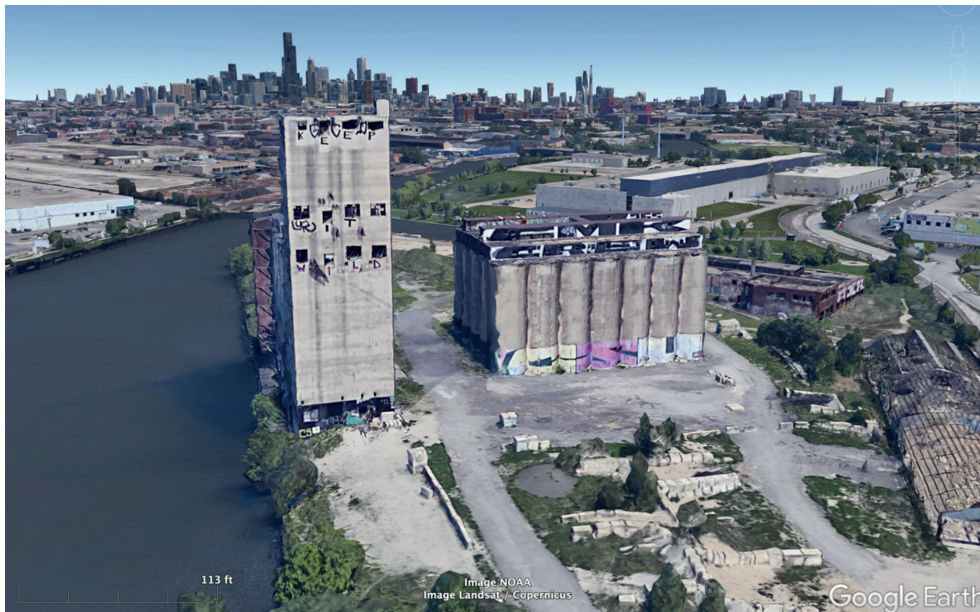


Fig. 10: Google Earth 3D model of the Damen Silos in Chicago (©Google Earth, 2018 Landsat Imagery)

China is seeking to capitalize on the rise of their film market by creating thousands of new movie theaters and by gaining access to knowledge and technology from Hollywood production companies through the use of co-productions. Hollywood studios now depend upon the international box office for a majority of its revenue, but now must also be flexible and adjust its content to turn a profit in the Chinese market. To turn a profit after becoming one of the thirty-four annual imports into China, Hollywood must adapt its representations and production practices to please SAPPRT. Because the Chinese government perceives film as a means of social control, they must protect their country's image from foreign producers. It is not often economically feasible; however, for a Hollywood production company to make a movie, submit it to Chinese censors, and reshoot scenes when individual elements are struck down. For this reason, Hollywood filmmakers must produce representational spaces that are resonant with American and Chinese viewers which require consideration of SAPPRT regulatory practices when planning their productions rather than being denied admission to the Chinese film market.

In this paper, I used *Transformers 4* as a case study to explicate a representation-in-relation-to production practices approach for cultural geography. This approach draws from trade journals, policy documents, and news sources to expound on the practices that underlie how and why this film developed and executed a Chinese market strategy both in its production practices and in the creation of its geo-

graphical imaginary. In the past, European film markets have bemoaned the effects of globalization by Hollywood on their film cultures. Now it is America's turn to bemoan the effect of China on Hollywood's film industry as their domestic market no longer commands all of the decisions making processes of the industry. The effects of the Chinafication of Hollywood are just beginning, and although the MOU signed in 2012 was up for renegotiation in 2017, tensions between the U.S. and China have increased since Trump's election and the expanding trade war. However, in the long run, expect to see more formulaic spectacle-driven action films and fewer comedies, because, there is no need to translate loud booms and special effects.

In just four films, the *Transformers* franchise shifted from earning most of its revenue domestically to earning most of its revenue internationally, mainly in China. *Transformers 4* was a co-production with China Movie Channel and Jiaflix Enterprises which allowed it to obtain a higher amount of revenue (than an imported film) from Chinese box office sales. Although *Transformers 5* shifted its production base to the UK to take advantage of their tax credit program, the franchise continued its Chinese product placement strategy; however, this time it was far less successful and ridiculed by Chinese social media as deeming (RAHMAN 2017). *Transformers 4* employed Chinese actors and actresses, had Chinese product placement, premiered in Hong Kong, closed in Shanghai, and had its entire climatic third act set and filmed (mostly) in China. Filming highlighted many iconic loca-



Fig. 11: Google Earth 3D model of the Hong Kong Convention Center with approximate location of the Damen Silos in Chicago (©Google Earth, 2018 Landsat Imagery)

tions that showed China in a modern and progressive light. Importantly, there was no ‘Chinese’ edition made for this film but rather a single production released globally. Using digital editing and montage, *Transformers 4* saved its worst destruction for Chicago and Detroit, which it spliced seamlessly into Hong Kong. Making sure that the two main quadrants of the Chinese film market (men under 25 and women under 25) turned out to see the movie, the leading actors from the movie posted videos to Chinese high school students wishing them the best on their college entrance exams. These production practices sought to position Chinese people, places, businesses, and the government as co-collaborators not only in the production of the film but central to the representational geographies depicted in the film.

From a representation-in-relation-to approach to cultural geography, *Transformers 4* shows us that this mundane cultural product lacking in textual signification has an underlying unscene geography that reveals the architectonics from which this film built its diegetic scenes. This more-than-representational geography of film production explains why *Transformers 4* felt at times a bit like “an extended commercial for the central government of the People’s Republic of China, justifying their efforts to keep Hong Kong under control” (DETWEILER 2014). COHEN (2014), a features editor for *Variety*, similarly claimed that it was a “splendidly patriotic film, if you happen to be Chinese.” In the final analysis, I have to agree with DETWEILER (2104) when he stated that,

“Michael Bay Shill[s] for China (& Undercut[s] Hong Kong).” Perhaps this should be expected, however, when a film makes a billion dollars in the process.

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