

Nov 04, 2016 by [Adam Clayton Powell, III](#)

Beijing Film Festival: Technically Dazzling, Ultimately Disappointing ^[1]

BEIJING – The 3rd Beijing International Film Festival was a public diplomacy showcase this week for Chinese cinema at its best. Banners throughout the capital promoted the festival, the awards ceremony and, not least, the film-selling market in a country that now proudly proclaims itself as the world’s leader in movie theater revenues, ahead of the U.S.

And yet, and yet...

From the opening ceremonies to the closing awards show, China’s answer to the Oscars, the festival reflected the strengths and weaknesses of video production in the Middle Kingdom. The venue was huge, seemingly much larger than the Hollywood home of the Academy

reflected world class techniques – huge musical numbers, crane shots over the audience.



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And yet, and yet...

Start with the huge hall. It was visually impressive, with an unusually wide stage backed by a large, high projection screen for animations and other videos that tied into each production

number. But the hall was far from full: whenever the director went to a long shot, television viewers could see many empty seats.

Empty seats?

You never see empty seats at the Oscars, or the Emmys, or any other major award show in the U.S. – and for a very simple reason. Waiting just outside of camera range are legions of stylish attractive extras who rush into the audience to fill seats as soon as anyone gets up to not learned that simple trick. And it should be easy to you do not exhaust here, it is people.



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Presenter Jackie Chan was enthusiastic and energetic, bantering in both Chinese and English. But even with such celebrity guests as Keanu Reeves and French film director Luc Besson, the repartee seemed flat. And musical numbers featuring stars including Sarah Brightman, billed here as “the Goddess of Moonlight” did not seem to have the warmest of welcomes. From audience shots selected by CCTV, the performers could only evoke occasional laughter and mild applause from the audience.

And then there were all of those empty seats.

The problem was not with the production technology or the performers: the problem was with the script. There were fewer good jokes in the multi-hour awards show than there are on any 25-minute Jon Stewart TV show. There are better production numbers in Africa’s Grammys, the Kora Awards - not bigger, just better. One example from Tuesday’s awards show:

performers here have yet to master lip synching.

It's not as if Beijing does not have the resources and sheer muscle to produce the largest television programs in the world. The annual Spring Festival on CCTV – this year headlined by Celine Dion and Lang Lang – is billed as the biggest single television production on the planet. And even while CCTV's annual extravaganza is on the air, other Chinese TV channels have huge productions of their own, this year featuring Psy performing – naturally – “Gangnam Style.”

And we all remember the opening ceremony for the 2008 Olympic Games.

So there is no shortage of money, production, or technology. The problems are elsewhere. One key problem is content: scripts and concepts. Without good concepts and scripts, the most brilliant production is. . . empty. Think of all of the big-budget Hollywood movies that bombed, from “Heaven's Gate” to “John Carter”. Big budgets and slick production are not enough.

(Disclosure: Last week the USC School of Cinematic Arts launched a joint Master Class program here with the Beijing Film Academy and Naga Films to improve Chinese cinema.)

All of this suggests lessons for CCTV as it prepares to launch a major daily television program service in America – five hours a day, starting in September ([see more here](#)): To be effective public diplomacy, CCTV America will need to attract an audience. And to attract an audience, expensive production and glitzy effects will only go so far. They will need content.
