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Chinese Diaspora in Hollywood: Avenues for Soft Power and Influence ^[1]

For an artist, an Oscar speech is the culmination of work, past experiences, and accomplishments that have shaped both personality and art. When Chloé Zhao was awarded the 2020 Academy Award for Best Director, her acceptance speech made it clear that Zhao's nationality, family, and life in China prior to moving to Los Angeles deeply informed her work as a filmmaker in Hollywood.

Despite being far from home, members of the Chinese diaspora continue to carry aspects of "Chineseness" and attachment to the country. The presence of the Chinese diaspora in the American filmmaking industry could counteract China's failure to market and leverage its own industry for soft power. If China wants to use the filmmaking industry as a means to build public diplomacy, it has no other choice than to rely on other actors.

The Censors

Hollywood, as a dominant force in the global entertainment industry, emerges as a key player in shaping perceptions and disseminating Chinese cultural narratives. As Rosen argued there are compelling reasons to believe Hollywood blockbuster movies have been more effective in promoting Chinese interests than Beijing's initiatives have been.

In the realm of the filmmaking industry, China is controlling from a distance what Hollywood is putting out. In some instances, sensors have helped China dictate the American industry's producing choices as the Chinese government leveraged its control over market access to pressure Hollywood to promote China's soft power (Yipeng Li, "The Hollywood-China Relationship: 2012-2022," master's thesis). This was implicitly achieved by limiting the number of foreign films allowed to screen in China, which created a significant financial incentive for Hollywood studios to conform to Chinese censorship and promote Chinese culture and values in their films.

Yet, those alternatives fall short of ideal for China, which loses its ability to control the narrative in most cases. The presence of China abroad—the diaspora—comes to act as the perfect cultural agent. Bringing a much more positive account of the country, the diaspora is the perfect agent to build China's soft power through the movie-making industry.

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The Role of the Diaspora in Promoting Soft Power for China

While Hollywood presents a promising avenue for China to bolster its soft power, it is essential to recognize the pivotal role of the Chinese diaspora within it in shaping perceptions and fostering cultural exchange. Considering its size, it will be a missed opportunity for the Chinese diaspora not to contribute to their home country's soft power. The diaspora on- and off-screen provides valuable contributions to building China's soft power and resolving the narrative issue. There are positive examples that points to this conclusion.

For instance, *Turning Red* portrays the special mother-daughter relationship in Chinese families. It also depicts the Buddhist aspects of religion, customs, and daily living with many significant qualities. The film attempts to represent Chinese cultural identity through symbols such as food, architecture, and animals. The typical audiences are Chinese-American and Chinese-Canadian and have reported feeling seen. This is a testament to the accurate representation of the movie.

Domee Shi, the director of the movie from Chinese heritage, based the movie on her own life. *Turning Red* followed up her short animation movie *Bao*, for which Shi also drew from her experience as a child of immigrants in Toronto after moving from Chongqing, China. In this short film, she takes the popular Chinese dish of baos (??) to create a relatable image of motherhood, growing up Chinese, and explores the deep comfort and relation of the population to food. In China, food indeed represents health and community, it is a conveyor of one's mood. Anecdotally, most people will ask you "have you eaten yet?" (????) as a greeting insinuating, "how are you doing?" Working with Chinese American production designer Rona Liu, both ensured that little Chinese cultural details were present in the movie, something only individuals of Chinese heritage could pick up on. All this contributed to the accurate representation of Chinese culture in this Pixar production.

The Role of the Diaspora in Rebuilding Chinese' Confidence in Hollywood

China represents a massive market. This huge domestic demand is notably what pushed Hollywood to start co-producing with China 📄. Not being able to distribute movies in China will be a lost opportunity considering the possibilities for profit in the country. However, with the rise of the censors, American productions have struggled to reach the Chinese market. For years, Hollywood movies were loved by Chinese audiences. Yet, over the last four years—beginning when tensions between Washington and Beijing worsened during the pandemic—we have seen a sharp decline in Hollywood movies in Chinese box office rankings. In 2023, no American films ranked among the 10 highest-grossing in China despite highly anticipated sequels.

By appealing to domestic audiences through the themes of collectivism, family, religion, and cultural practices at the heart of diaspora-driven movies, making use of the Chinese diaspora in Hollywood appears as the way forward for the United States to regain influence in China. Chinese audiences reportedly got tired of the individualistic qualities of American heroes, thus embodying the cultural differences between China and the United States (Geert Hofstede, *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind: Intercultural Cooperation and Its Importance for Survival*. London: Harper-Collins business, 1994). China is in fact a much more collectivist society, meaning that they put greater emphasis on group interests rather than individual interests (Geert Hofstede, *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind: Intercultural Cooperation and Its Importance for Survival*

. London: Harper-Collins business, 1994).

By being on- and off-screen, the Chinese diaspora in Hollywood production could potentially weigh in executive decisions and put a greater emphasis on the collective and the family in American movies. These are notable themes that are explored in *Turning Red* or *Everything Everywhere All at Once*. Leveraging the diaspora in that sense could help Hollywood regain market share in China and win over Chinese audiences' hearts.
