

**Film gatekeepers corp. presents...**

**So this is China?**

Chinese cinema(s) distribution and circulation:  
between global markets, capitalist art-houses, and  
informal venues of resistance.

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## Abstract

This paper argues that our access of Chinese films is mediated by politicized canons, non-transparent global distribution patterns, and the commodified need of cultural audiovisual references. To observe how global distribution and circulation of Chinese cinemas materialize an exploratory case study was used to analyze those Chinese films that have been distributed in important art-houses in Argentina, Mexico, Brazil, Chile, and Peru in recent years. The analysis shows how distribution for that part of the global south is translocal and problematically rooted in European and U.S. hegemonic media capitals. This has implications for how we think about China's ideological projection.

Este documento argumenta que el acceso a los filmes chinos está mediado por cánones politizados, patrones globales no-transparentes y la necesidad comodificada de referencias culturales audiovisuales. Para observar cómo la distribución y circulación del cine(s) chino se materializa, se utilizó un estudio de caso exploratorio para analizar las películas chinas que han sido distribuidas recientemente en importantes festivales de cine en Argentina, México, Brasil, Chile y Perú. Este análisis muestra cómo la distribución hacia esos lugares del 'sur del mundo' es trans-local y está problemáticamente arraigado en capitales mediáticas hegemónicas en Europa y Estados Unidos. Esto tiene implicaciones sobre cómo comprendemos la proyección ideológica de China.

本文试图论证中国的电影传播受到了三个因素的影响：政治调控力量，不透明的全球电影发行结构和文化的商品化。本文将通过研究近年来中国电影在阿根廷、墨西哥、智利和秘鲁的艺术剧院的发行传播来分析中国电影的全球传播特点。在被研究的这些南方国家的里，中国电影的传播呈现出了跨区域 的特征，并且其传播机制根植于欧美国家所创造的媒介资本霸权之中。本文对于读者深刻了解中国的意识形态的全球传播有着一定的借鉴意义。

**Keywords:** Chinese cinemas; global film distribution; film festivals; Latin America

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## Introduction

In a filthy community kitchen, in some poor neighborhood of Buenos Aires, Lai Yui-Fai is learning how to dance tango from his boyfriend. Love and aversion go back and forth as the two men try to control a life that is turning into a tragic milonga. They both left Hong Kong just before it was handed over to China (1997) and they embody one of many stories (fiction or not) of migration, informal labor, family ties and toxic relationships. This is the sense one gets after watching *Happy Together*, a film by Hong Kong director Wong Kar-Wai, who won best director in Cannes Film Festival. It is a movie that takes place in two parts of the world -Argentina and Hong Kong- and was distributed by an immense network of corporations that privileged its screening in Europe and North America. *Happy Together* was never theatrically released in Mainland China and it reached Argentinean audiences almost a year after its passing through art house venues where it was praised for its provocative theme and innovative narrative. As I watch this film now in YouTube with subtitles in Spanish, I can't help but to see it as a cause and a consequence of a particular kind of filter which works to shape the representations of other's lives: the commodified distribution of culture.

In that vein, the intention of this paper is to understand what role global distribution and circulation of Chinese cinemas play in how China's cultures and economic power are ideologically projected. In other words, how does the 'outside' circulation of Chinese film affect how we understand China's struggles with capitalism and its own image?

As part of the de-centered film market, capitalist art-houses (i.e. international film festivals) play a role as gatekeepers in the way we constantly construct an image of an everyday more present China as an economic power and culturally stereotyped space.

For a Latin American context –as part of the global south-, problematizing such a cultural construction of China becomes more necessary as Chinese cultural industries grow in numbers and global influence, and fears and anxieties about such powers get replicated overseas.

How we reproduce what we know about China is intrinsically linked to the cultural representations we encounter and engage with. So rather than accepting that all state-approved films are propaganda or that we should embrace ‘banned’ Chinese movies as a political opposition to their government, I argue that Chinese cinema(s) can be a possibility for us to understand Chinese realities in a broader and more contested way. Moreover, we need to question what we have historically understood as Chinese films and never take for granted which discourses resonate and which are ‘worth watching.’

Because film is a way to experience distant spaces, there is a social impact that can be expected from a constrained or equitable landscape of Chinese audiovisual distribution and circulation. In other words, a limited or diversified access of narratives about *and* from China will result in a limited or diversified way to ‘imagine’ the realities of that foreign land. Therefore, film can help us to understand how China’s global projection is ideologically constructed; and film distribution is a window to analyze Chinese historical process that are always changing.

This paper is divided into four sections. Firstly, I challenge the concept of Chinese cinemas based on academic debates about the categories that more accurately allow us to study and write about Chinese movies, which have grown in global scope parallel to its economic power. Taking into account the complex relationships between China, the rest of the world and its own geopolitical territories, I engage with the work Sheldon Hsiao-Peng Lu (1997), Yingjin Zhang (2004, 2010), Michael Curtin (2007), Will Higbee (2010), and Chris Berry (2010) and their use of transnationalism and translocality to talk about the always changing landscape of Chinese cinemas. Here I suggest that using translocality as a framework is not only more coherent with the dynamics of global film distribution, but also useful to understand the complexities of Chinese filmic production.



Secondly, I take up Sean Cubitt's (2005) and Ramon Lobato's (2012) argument about the importance of audiovisual distribution and circulation, not simply as what lies 'in between' producers and audiences, but as the key spatial and temporal powers that allow, limit and suppress our knowledge and ignorance about Chinese cultures and self-image. Drawing on this framework, I analyze the main corporations and institutions that distribute Chinese films in the global 'independent' market and analyze their relevance as translocal business spheres that are mostly connected with Hong Kong (one of Asia's media capitals).

Thirdly, using Cindy Wong (2011) and Nikki J.Y. Lee & Julian Stringer (2012) as my main points of reference, I focus on Western film festivals as problematic capitalist art-houses that globally distribute Chinese cinemas and in turn construct the circulation of a particular 'Chineseness'. As Geremie Barmé (1999) states, the ideological privileging of the 'dissent' or 'underground' Chinese movies and artists is a bias in the name of 'independence' that covers a tightly dependent network on capitalist niche consumption.

Film cultures are embedded in market logics and particular commodified aesthetics. It is an illusion to see Chinese cinemas as abstracted from the capitalist ideology of its institutions (governmental and corporative). Hence, it is important to understand film festivals' roles in constituting patterns of distribution. Because the relation between film festivals and China's institutions for film is not an oppositional dichotomy, I want to explain how both of them work together in global cinematic landscapes that intersect in complex ways linking global capitalism and art commodities.

Finally, to observe how global distribution and circulation of Chinese cinemas materialize I develop an exploratory case study that analyzes those Chinese films that have been distributed in important art-houses in Argentina, Mexico, Brazil, Chile, and Peru in recent years. What stories are they telling us (and therefore privileging) about the context they come from? Instead of focusing on the question of how to expand the reach of Chinese cinemas, as extensive media reports in the Mainland have published – see, for example, China Radio International publications in 2003- I am interested in *who* is putting that culture knowledge into circulation and under *what* conditions. Here I focus

in particular on the New Chinese Documentary Movement so vastly studied by Lu Xinyu (2010) as a possibility for a more open circulation of Chinese narratives. Its nature as low budget and 'outside' the mainstream audiovisual institutions might compel us to think that such films are also an example of an informal global distribution.

In the end, I conclude that how Chinese films have been distributed in Latin American film festivals intersects with Eurocentric politicized canons of the 'good' film, the commodified need to diversify the cultural references about China, and with films that use informal circulation as their main asset as a way to resist the blindness of official distribution patterns such as those represented by conglomerates. This suggests that Chinese ideological projection is more complex and nuanced than is suggested by theories of cultural hegemony or soft power.

## **Take 1.**

### **Chinese cinema(s), capitalism and state power**

To begin this discussion about Chinese cinemas I want to start by exploring the concept itself and arguing that cinematic culture cannot be constrained in a singular nation-state centered understanding. I have used cinema(s) in plural as a way to acknowledge the diversities that constitute the global networks I'm interested in studying. What does "Chinese cinema(s)" exactly refer to? Films made by Chinese nationals? Movies that tackle China's history, issues and fictions? Sinophone productions? Moreover, how can we come up with a term that reduces the violence that is constituted whenever we use the word 'Chinese' as an aggregator of diverse cultural expressions?

There is an imperialist past that contemporary Chinese territories inherited and reinforced. For Shu-Mei Shih (2011), a leading academic in the concept of the Sinophone, to speak against the homogeneity of 'Chineseness' is necessary in order to respond to any claim of China's national-territorial integrity. Today's China, she argues (p. 709), has consolidated the colonial project of the Manchu dynasty (Qing) and their conquest in all inner Asia during more than two centuries. At the same time, such hegemonic history has privileged a vision of China that annexed and blurred non-Han ethnicities such as the Uygur, Mongolian, Tibetan and Muslim; not to mention the geopolitical differences with Taiwan, Macao, and Hong Kong. Therefore, writing about any Chinese cultural phenomenon as a category is always puzzling.

The contemporary Chinese nation state, although porous and contested amidst its own constitution and globalization, is taken for granted as a totalizing category for analyzing realities because it simplifies any analysis. Similarly, as nationality is essentialized, film itself is taken as a finished product. Chinese cinemas are not one subject, but a spiderweb of peoples whose work is to construct cinematic discourses.

The sole statement of what Chinese cinemas *are*, does not do justice to the diversity of subjectivities involved in its historical processes.

To establish a frame that challenges the national-centered concept of Chinese films and its conceptual divisions I will start with a transnational and translocal frameworks that situate themselves in opposition to visions of a 'Greater China.' The problematic relation between the Mainland, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Macau can be avoided by integrating all three territories under a big umbrella of 'Greater China', but such a framework can only do lip service to nationalist claims.

In addition, a frame that combines all four territories and that even includes overseas communities can also be misleading. All spaces, however geopolitically intertwined in practice, cannot be taken into the same 'basket' since there are power inequalities and contradictions amongst them. For instance, Hong Kong, in opposition to Taiwan, today has a privileged position when allocating its films in the Mainland market since it can go more easily above the government's quota system designed to limit the screening of foreign productions.

Over the last twenty years, writes Yingjin Zhang (2010), Western critics have discussed a shift in the paradigm of national cinema categories and its dichotomies: "From unity (national consensus) to diversity (several cinemas within a nation state) (...), from elitist (intellectual minds) to popular (mass audience)" (p. 17). In other words, Chinese cinema(s) is not 'made in China' cinema, since it is historically, politically, territorially, ethnically, and linguistically dispersed. For Zhang, this messiness can be read in a series of commonly used divisions such as the different 'generations' of Chinese directors (which creates the false idea of a canonical style). According to him, China's fractured spaces and geocultural positions results in cinemas that are always fluctuating and crossing borders, always unfinished.

It is precisely such contradictions of Chinese films and the Mainland's relation with its 'Greater China' discourse versus its 'special administrative regions' that enables academics to use 'transnationalism' when referring to Chinese cinema(s).

In his book *Transnational Chinese Cinemas: Identity, Nationhood, Gender* Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu (1997) clarifies that any study of national cinema has to be inevitably a transnational one. Published a few months before Hong Kong passed from a British colony to part of the Chinese nation on July 1st 1997, his work became a landmark for future film studies. He observes capitalism as the inevitable force that produced transnational cinemas after the 1900s, when the creation, distribution and exhibition of movies became geopolitically decentered.

What this means for the Chinese contexts is that the 'Chineseness' look and feel of its movies crosses different identities and complicates "how 'nationhood' has historically silenced ethnic and cultural minorities" (1997, p. 17). This argument, despite being very similar to Shih's concern over the produced inexistence of linguistic minorities when the Chinese nationality is taken a whole, ended up with a framework that resembles the 'Greater China' umbrella. By subsuming the cinemas of Hong Kong, China, and Taiwan as 'transnational Chinese cinemas', Lu *did* bring complexity to the existent literature but all the same only just displaced the national within a supranational framework. Will Higbee and Song Hwee Lim (2010, p. 13-14) refer to this vision as 'pan-ethnic'. In their call for a critical transnationalism, the latter two authors state that while there is nothing new in acknowledging film's global flows and networks, the specific contexts for production and distribution of films must drive our attention.

Chris Berry (2010) and Higbee & Lim explain (precisely in a journal called *Transnational cinemas*) two main dangers with the transnational film concept. Firstly, the use of transnationalism to celebrate the global exchange of talent and knowledge in the film worlds undermines the power unbalances that take place in filmic creation and circulation processes, and also ignores the aesthetic, political and economic implications of those 'crossing border' relations (Higbee and Lim, 2010, p. 9-15). Secondly, the risk of reducing transcinema practices to market terms can produce a rhetoric that assumes the state as an obstacle and globalization as a natural 'imperative' flow (Berry, 2010, p. 123).

According to Higbee & Lim (2010), a critical transnationalism, therefore, also needs to include 'cultural China' (i.e. regions of Singapore), Chinese-languages films,

diasporic filmmakers such as Ang Lee (who also produces films in English), and the interrogation of how any film activity that is perceived as transnational “negotiate with the national” in political, cultural, economic, and ideological levels (p. 18).

In 2010 -the same year *Transnational Cinemas* first got published in the United Kingdom- Zhang argued for a shift from the national to the local. Highly suspicious of the bias that any framework based on nationalities might have, he argued that in a contemporary context it is more accurate to talk about trans-local productions rather than trans-national productions. Private businesses are located in cities such as New York, Seoul, Taipei, and Beijing. Besides, films, casts and staff do not necessary represent the national cultures involved (2010, p. 138). In Chinese contexts, film has historically always been localized around the urban centers that were able to construct and attract creative labor. Polylocality and translocality are, according to Zhang, a necessary shift in order to move away from the centrality of the nation-state.

Since I argue that there is a social impact to be expected from a constraining or diversified landscape of Chinese audiovisual distribution, then the way the translocal nodes of distribution flows are geopolitically located have an important weight over the global unbalances in access. Translocality helps us have a more contested understanding of Chinese film because it makes explicit the complex contradictions between corporate accumulation of screening rights in media capitals such as Hong Kong -together with the tensions with Mainland government- and the atomization of screening rights in Europe and United States’ sites of commodity exchange and cultural arbitrage. In addition, the political economy of film distribution under a translocal lens is useful because it unveils that the commodification of art-house films is intersected with the dynamics of an urban-sited (i.e. film festival) cultural strainer.

The following take would tackle how important it is to acknowledge the role of the state in the latter complexity of Chinese cinemas. This is key so we don’t undermine the fact that localities are still permeated by the power of the national (culturally, socially, and moreover, politically).

## 1.1. Chinawood and state power

With a population of 612 million spectators in 2013 and an emerging market, the Chinese film industry appears to have endless potential. In 2004 it reached a record of 212 films produced, almost double the annual average of 1990 (Zhang, 2008, p. 116). China's preached goal is to 'catch up' with rich audiovisual industries like India's Bollywood (actually the largest in the world in terms of production) and even to pose a future 'threat' to all-mighty Hollywood (the largest in terms of revenues).

Moreover, in terms of box ticket income, it has already 'caught up'. According to the European Audiovisual Observatory report of 2014, in 2013, China reached an internal box office revenue of 3.54 billion dollars, the second largest after the United States. In addition, it is third, after India and the U.S., in number of spectators (Audiovisual 451, 2014, pg. 21-23).

Such figures are publicized by the Chinese government as a symbol of success and internationalization. But no matter how transnational the global circulation of film is, the control that the state has over cinematic production and the Mainland's weight in its relations with its other territories cannot be ignored.

For Ying Zhu and Stanley Rosen (2010), tight silencing of 'sensitive' topics is the most evident consequence of how "Socialism with Chinese characteristics' *still* mandates" an important role in the film industry (my emphasis, p. 3). However, this observation is only a fraction of the power of the PRC's institutions in cinematic production and circulation, since the capitalist logic of economic profit have also influenced film policy making in the Mainland.

These tensions, I must say, are one of the particularities of the Chinese context that most Western theories fail to grasp in their totality given their ideologically-driven liberal-democratic framework. For instance, director Feng Xiaogang, famous for his 'New Year films'— big blockbusters comedies or action dramas specifically made for families to

watch during vacations- is a living example of the tensions between the relations with the PRC state institutions, capitalism, and a creative worker's agency.

His film *Back to 1942* (Yī Jiǔ Sì Èr) (2012), a historical drama that recounts the famine in Henan province (central-east China) during the war with Japan, was not only the 2013 Chinese pick to send to the Academy Awards' consideration for the Best Foreign Language Film category, but it is also a glimpse of the constant changes and struggles inside Chinese cinema(s) and its relation with an ever more capitalized transnational cultural industries.

*Back to 1942's* cast includes United States actor Adrien Brody (famous for working with Woody Allen and Roman Polanski) in, precisely, the role of a brave *Time* correspondent who publishes the tragedy of the famine. The high-budget movie unveils a dark episode of Chinese history. However, the events depicted occurred before the founding of the People's Republic, and even help to explain and discursively legitimize the later triumph of the Communist Party in 1949.

A blogger from *The New York Times* and editor of a leisure magazine in Shanghai posted last year about the movie, saying: "The buzz exposes China's selective and self-serving approach to history: the censors allow *Back to 1942* but hardly tolerate any account of the largely manmade Great Famine that took place under Mao in 1958-62 and left tens of millions dead" (Sebag-Montefiore, 2012). This reading, while part of an ever more polarized Western-centered opinion that politicizes and condemns PRC government as an undemocratic-human rights abuser, also leaves a dangerous ground for an interpretation that sees any Chinese cultural production as a simple expression of state propaganda, as if filmmakers and cultural workers were mainly employees of the Communist Party.

This tension crystalized in April 2013. When receiving the Film Director Guild's director of the year award, Feng made it clear just how contradictory the relation between film producers and state institutions is. He used part of his acceptance speech to complain about the "great torment" of censorship. Ironically, the word censorship was cut in the broadcasting of the event. He continued: "A lot of times when you receive the order [from censors], it's so ridiculous that you don't know whether to laugh or cry,



especially when you know something is good and you are forced to change it into something bad. Are Hollywood directors tormented the same way?" (Feng, 2013). It was an unexpected complaint coming from one of the most 'mainstream' Chinese filmmakers.

His resentment is shared by a number of filmmakers inside the Mainland: censorship is mutilating creativity. But what about when the market is the main dynamic that enforces such restrictions? Moreover, when the institutional arm of the Communist Party works as the market's biggest backrest by reducing public subsidies for the film industry, therefore leaving all the financial weight to private investors.

Let us stop for a second in history. By 1995, the tendency in the PRC was to make huge marketable films; two thirds of them "were cheap knockoffs of Hollywood and Hong Kong-style entertainment films" (Zhu, 2010, p. 30). But the poor quality entertainment movie fever backfired, since it led to lower profits as audiences resented such productions.

By 1997, when media mogul Rupert Murdoch convinced the then Chinese president Jiang Zemin to attend a private screening of *Titanic*, produced by his 20th Century Fox studios, his move was catalogued as a "masterstroke," (Martel 2010). A few days later, Jiang wrote a critique of the film for the official Chinese journal: 'I invite my comrades of the politic bureau to see the movie, not to promote capitalism, but to help us succeed. Let's not believe that we are the only ones who know how to do propaganda'. The text was about "the program that Jiang Zemin orders to the 'cultural' institutions of the party: China must begin working, reconstructing its obsolete cultural industries and beat Hollywood in its own territory" (Martel, 2010, p. 230).

Under this logic we have a Chinese film board subsumed by its own limits for playing too much under capitalist strategies. In order to make a profit, formulaic movies were produced over and over again while more critical self-reflexive stories stayed in the background.

The febrile commercialization of Chinese cinemas, doing everything possible to make another commodity out of the domestic publics, also had implications regarding

the agency of filmmakers. In the desire to attract bigger audiences, some directors such as Zhang Yimou "had abandoned their elitist auteur pretensions" and even "their position as dissidents and begun to be absorbed into commercial film production" (Zhang, 2008, p. 119) after he directed *Hero* and *House of the Flying Daggers*. As it appears, in this director's case, the lavish market logic now does the 'dirty job' for the Chinese film bureau. Chinese censorship norms have ended up feeding the same logic of neoliberalization such policies critique.

After the year 2000 and the entry of China as a World Trade Organization member, SARFT<sup>1</sup>'s new regulations (approved in September 2003) forced film institutions to have a preapproved script before getting permission to shoot. The finished film can be submitted to local censorship boards, as long as the content is not related to sensitive subjects, such as the Cultural Revolution or June Fourth Movement; though was 'sensitive' *is*, is highly contested inside the state's loose guidelines.

The results of such new legislation was that, in 2004, only one film, out of 214 that were submitted for film censors' review, was denied approval for exhibition in the Mainland. "In comparison, in 1997, 88 films were produced, but only 44 obtained approval for release" (Zhang, 2008, p. 114). These measures of prior checking not only gave an advantage to government officials (in terms having control ahead of the shooting), but also enforced filmmakers' self-censorship.

For authors Zhu and Rosen the changes inside the Ministry of RFT since 1995, as described by them (2010), are a relaxation of the production licensing policy, extending the right to produce feature films. As a result, the time period from 1995 to the mid-2000s is referred to as 'the era of globalization', when Chinese studios started doing big-budget movies resembling their Hollywood competitors. That became the new standard. "Chinese critics attributed Chinese cinema's renewed popularity to the film industry's new 'big picture consciousness' meaning a revelation about budgets and

<sup>1</sup> Since 2012, the SARTF is known as SAPPRFT (State Administration of Press, Publications, Radio, Film and Television) after it merged with the GAAP (General Administration of Press and Publications).

quality" (Zhu and Rosen, 2010, p. 29). However, there are problems in this campaign of 'catching up' with Hollywood.

Located in Dongyang (Zhejiang Province) Hengdian World Studios, China's largest film studios, sometimes called 'Chinawood' have become the biggest materialization of the complicity between PRC state and transnational media capitals. Property of Chinese mogul Wang Jianlin, head of Dalian Wanda group, the Hengdian studios make it clear that the Mainland can *do* Hollywood, but cheaper.

Instead of becoming the "Hollywood of the East", Canada based scholar Yuezhi Zhao argues, Zhejiang is likely to serve as one of the production bases of Global Hollywood, with inexpensive labor and lower production costs. "Any notion that China can achieve success 'all its own' is probably farfetched" (Zhao, 2008, p. 163-236). Instead of becoming vehicles for the internationalization of Chinese films, 'movie cities' such as Dongyang and Qingdao (Shandong province) act as platforms for Hollywood's penetration into the Mainland market. Reciprocity in this matter, Zhao argues, is not likely to work in Chinese filmmakers' favor, since the 'Chinawood' technical and human infrastructures are not likely to guarantee that more Chinese movies will be released in United States' multiplexes. In that order, since the absence of the nationalist projection of Chinese cinemas is intertwined with the overseas interest and will to distribute Chinese films in a geopolitical economy that does not privilege them, we need to think about film distribution in terms of tensions that include censorship as part of the gatekeeping process of what movies are finally accessed.

## **Take 2. Distribution, a messy spider web**

Film distribution, though it cannot be understood separately from the global production and exhibition processes, can be a nexus for the study of the imbalances and sometimes contradictions in public access to films. While film studies tend to focus on the production of feature movies and their analysis as texts, such views only sketch part of the picture, since they never question how are those films are being circulated as cultural commodities and what actors play an economic and ideological role in who gets to experience films.

During the 'life' of a movie, from its creation to when we watch it in a theater, distributors have multiple and overlapping roles. Whether conglomerates, state institutions, production companies, or the directors themselves, whoever distributes a film is in charge of handling its release in a particular territory and format (such as DVD, Television, Internet) during a period of time. Regarding feature films, distribution companies will also be in charge of the advertising and sometimes of subtitling and adapting the technology necessary for the theaters to screen the films. In the intersections of this process, one film can be distributed by different companies and institutions into different territories. How distributors recover their investments is by charging exhibitors a percentage of the ticket sales profits (which can reach 40 per cent in the U.S.); these numbers vary according to the temporality of the film and its constructed prestige. For instance, the box office share of big blockbusters tend to be higher for the distributor during the first week or two of the premiere.

This has not always been the case. Historically, a monopoly or handful of companies have been empowered to distribute movies globally. Those dynamics have become more and more scattered and with more intermediaries as capitalist aim pressures for higher revenues and new markets.

In his book *Shadow Economies of Cinema* Ramon Lobato (2012), explains distribution as a governing power that determines the localities and peoples that films can reach (reviewed by Trowbridge, 2013, p. 226-227). Between what he calls 'formal distribution' (that which is measurable by states or corporations) and the 'informal distribution' (less controlled and eventually in the boundaries of legality) Lobato examines a broad spectrum of tones and shades that allows for a non-binary legalistic view of cinematic distribution.

Despite how de-centered the distribution process is, one can observe a huge volume of corporate concentration. Authors Toby Miller et.al. (2012), when publishing a study of how Hollywood film concentration has affected developing contexts in Latin America, notice that 75 per cent of the circulation power in the United States market is concentrated into 5 companies: Paramount with 17.2% of the market share, 20th Century Fox with 16.2%, Warner Bros with 16.2%, Buena Vista with 15%, and Sony/Columbia with 10.4%<sup>2</sup>. As the authors argue, "such textual power is of particular significance in determining screen diversity" (p. 198). The domination of the outlets allow the big distribution companies to also control the negotiation and licensing of film circulation and, therefore, the key flows of where money is made.

Because distribution regulates such conditions over the diversity or scarcity of texts we access, Sean Cubitt (2005) and Lobato (2009) understand it as phenomenon that "works to shape film culture in its own image" (2009, p. 169). While Cubitt sees distribution as the "site of production of exchange-value and thus of profit" (p. 194), for Lobato, distribution's political economy is an important part of the conversation, but not the last. An analysis of cultural power and cultural control is also necessary to look beyond the presence or denial of certain cinematic texts. Following Graeme Turner's (1988) concept of film as a "social practice," Lobato strives for an understanding of distribution and circulation as a key to the history of audiovisual culture and how it will be in days to come.

<sup>22</sup> These numbers correspond to data gathered by the authors Toby Miller, Freya Schiwy, and Marta Hernández Salván (2012) during the first half of 2010: 1 January–12 August 2010.

For Chinese contexts, the distribution of films produced or co-produced with Mainland institutions is highly dependent on the state to function according to its policies. Directly under the State Council of the People's Republic is the SAPPRFT (State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television), the state's most important arm regulating PRC's cultural industries and communications. Under its umbrella, the China Film Group Corporation (CFG), together with Huaxia Film Distribution, are the only two conglomerates that have the power over distribution licenses for foreign films inside China. In 2005, the CFG created the China Film Promotion International, which distributes Chinese films overseas and does 'film festival travelling' to export Mainland movies. Currently, around 10 percent of the PRC productions and co-productions are being screened overseas (Zhou, 2013, interview).

According to the report of the private entertainment research company Entgroup (2010) -that does not include Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan- Asia-Pacific is the 'natural' immediate distribution objective for Mainland productions and co-productions. Asia represents 54 per cent of global overseas box-office revenues; in 2010, 140 Chinese films were exported to such region (p.42). After North America and Europe, Latin America is the third region of interest for Chinese entertainment businesspeople, with special focus in Mexico and Brazil, both of which represent over 70 percent of ticket sales. In 2010, four Chinese films, claim the report, had important theater screenings in Latin America: *The Kung fu Dream (Karate Kid 5)*, *Astro Boy*, *The Mummy 3* and *Lust, Caution* all of which, argues the brief, were selected because they had positive feedback in North America (p. 42).

*The Kung fu Dream* (2010), starring Jackie Chan, was co-produced mainly with Columbia Pictures and China Film Group's resources; and its worldwide distribution was kept mainly by Sony/Columbia in Europe, North America, Asia, and Latin American theaters and 'house' formats (i.e. DVDs or Blu-ray). Similarly, *The Mummy 3* (2008), which story is located in ancient China, is a high budget coproduction between U.S., China, Germany, and Canada that was distributed mainly by United International Pictures, a company owned by Paramount and Universal to distribute their own joint productions.

*Astro Boy* (2009), on the other hand, was produced -amongst others- by Hong Kong company Imagi Animation Studios and distributed in North America by the U.S. company Summit Entertainment. However, its distribution was atomized elsewhere, since local companies were in charge of the distribution in Brazil, Argentina, Chile, and even Hong Kong and China. Likewise, Taiwanese director Ang Lee's *Lust, Caution* (2007) –coproduced by Chinese, Taiwanese and U.S. companies- was globally distributed by a diverse selection of organizations. While Focus Features (a division of Universal Studios) did the distribution in the U.S., in other countries such as Argentina and Brazil, that was taken on by local companies.

The four examples above are a mirror of how corporations that capitalize media industry knowledge (i.e. Entgroup) have integrated the transnational discourse of Chinese cinemas in order to better 'sell' the Chinese market better to overseas investors and creative workers. In other words, by using Hollywood-like big budget blockbusters as the references of the success of Chinese films ('successful' enough to reach South America) there is a risk of legitimizing the co-production standard that mainly uses Chinese diasporic stars (Jet Li and Jackie Chan), exotic landscapes (Forbidden City and the Great Wall), and cheap creative labor (subcontracting of animation artists) as *the* references of which strategic direction should Chinese filmmakers should take.

Also, the distribution of these blockbusters crystalizes not only in highly concentrated corporative distribution markets that always leads to the same U.S. big studios, but also allows for a more arbitrary audiovisual circulation; such is the case for *Astro Boy* and *Lust, Caution*. Ang Lee's film, despite having a lower budget and a film festival-oriented purpose, is an example of how the enhancement art houses provide to such movies feeds into a system of formal distribution that is networked but still highly dependent on Western and European intermediaries.

Chinese film distribution in non-Asian countries has experienced growth since the beginning of this century, especially with martial arts movies. *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) –also directed by Ang Lee- is seen by Chung (2007) and Klein (2004) as the first Chinese-language film (and also diasporic film) to become successful in U.S. box offices as well as in art houses; that is, international film festivals such as Cannes.

The production of the film involved companies allocated in five different countries, and a pan-Asian crew and cast, in what Klein identifies as following typical Hollywood production practices. While Sony Pictures Classics bought the distribution rights for the United States' theaters, Columbia Pictures (also owned by the Sony Pictures conglomerate in California) distributed it in Latin American territories and several countries in Asia. The movie earned over 200 million dollars worldwide, 13 times its production budget.

For the case of martial art blockbusters, Chung (2007) notices how the overseas distribution of all three of the most recent examples *Crouching Tiger, House of the Flying Daggers* (2004), and *Hero* (2002) are controlled by established Hollywood companies: Sony Pictures Classics had the first two and Miramax had the latter. The exhibition of all three films combined its art house potential with wide release (in multiplex).

Although there is a broader understanding of kung fu films as 'mainstream', in the U.S. market these foreign movies are categorized and sold as 'independent'. Since "the distributors strategize to market Chinese films in the category of the foreign art film to guarantee box-office success" (Chung, 2007, p. 420), the dichotomy between blockbuster and 'art film' is blurred when looked at through the magnifying glass of capitalist global distribution. While appealing to the artistic value of such movies, marketers, distributors and exhibitors have in fact pursued them for their commercial potential.

Because there is no pre-planned product placement (such as toys or mainstream advertising), in the distribution of 'independent' foreign films, distributors employ low-cost options based on long term 'reputation' building and marketing strategies that can position the movies as art films. The distributors might even buy the rights of a film during its production stage so it can capture more attention. Such was the case for *Hero*, that got "word-of-mouth" promotion by Miramax two years before it was released, Chung writes (2007, p. 420). Sony Pictures had a different strategy for *Crouching Tiger* (screened in 43 countries) and *House of the Flying Daggers* (screened in 28 countries). The distributors waited for the film to obtain film festival awards and press coverage before releasing it in other countries, a process that is carefully managed, since



distributors track down the press' response of the potential contexts where they intend to release their product.

As the latter examples show, the biggest scenario for Chinese cinemas (and any 'independent' or non-English speaking film) to obtain a place in the global market is problematically intersected with the U.S. audiovisual market. The Independent Film and Television Alliance (IFTA), based in Los Angeles, established in 1981 the American Film Market (AFM) as a "global marketplace" where thousands of filmmakers, distributors and investors from different nationalities meet every year during eight days to negotiate and seal deals regarding 'independent' films. The AFM acts like a door to Western markets and possible future co-productions with Mainland filmmakers.

I write the word 'independent' in quotes because, again, the way the U.S. film industry and the audiences read as independent differs broadly. While we might differentiate independent movies as art-house directed, for the IFTA's framework, the concept refers to a film where at least 51 per cent of production costs were covered by an organization other than the non-major six U.S. studios<sup>3</sup>. In other words, if there is a movie that had a financial budget that came, for instance, 40 per cent from 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox but the rest was covered by other -or overseas- investors it is still framed, sold, and circulated as an 'independent' feature film<sup>4</sup>. The market event, also situated in California, provides free online access to a catalog that is updated regularly. That database, as an example of how the national is no longer a relevant variable for global capitalist film distributor, does not have the countries of origin as a variable for browsing. Instead, language, genre, year (or expected year), budget and company are the only searchable characteristics.

<sup>3</sup> The six major studios are Warner Bros., Paramount Pictures, Walt Disney, Columbia Pictures, Universal Studios, and 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox

<sup>4</sup> U.S. blockbusters such as *The Hunger Games*, *The Expendables*, and *The Twilight Saga* all range as independent films. "Confusion arises because many prominent films were released or distributed in the U.S. by a studio. However, the copyright continued to be held by the film's independent producer/distributor who also retained the worldwide distribution rights outside of the U.S.", clarifies the IATA of their official web page (2014)

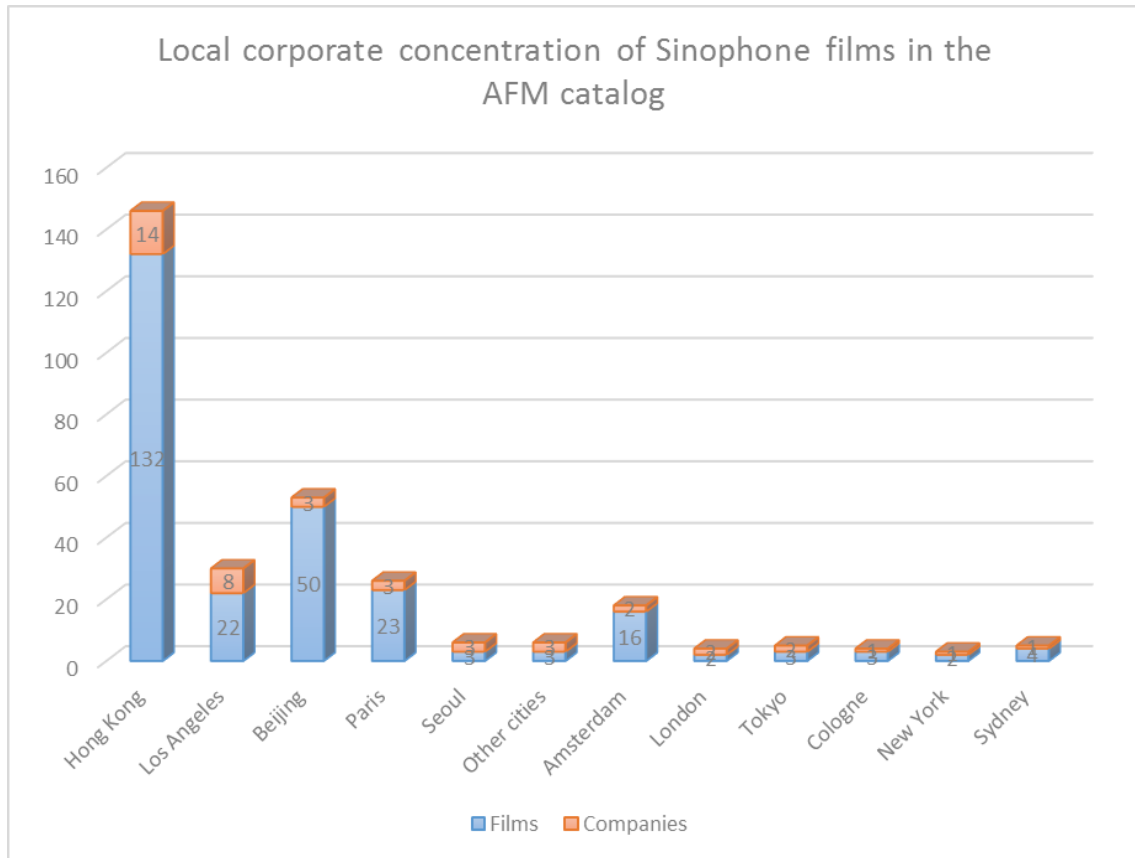
For the purpose of this paper I will call the global marketing of these films simply the as AFM catalog movies to move away from such a market-oriented vision of the 'independent'.

The AFM catalog (available in nine languages) contains around 7.000 independent motion pictures and even highlights Cannes's film festival upcoming movies. By June 2014, 263 of those films had Mandarin and or Chinese as one of their languages, 141 were in Cantonese (eventually overlapping both languages since many movies are available in both), 4 in Tibetan, and 3 in Mongolian. It is to notice that several of these films, despite having Chinese-context themes and languages, are not directed or produced by filmmakers related to any Chinese nationalities, which, again, forces us to think about the paradigms and boundaries of 'Chineseness' and even Sinophone cinemas.

More than 50 percent of the films in this catalog are in the hands of seven companies: with the largest offer portfolio (26 films), PRC's state owned China Film Promotion Int'l tops the list. The rest of the companies are private and mostly based in Hong Kong, such as Golden Network Asia Limited, All Rights Entertainment (in Hong Kong and Paris with a transnational staff), Edko Films (which produced many of Zhang Yimou's blockbusters) and Mei Ah Entertainment Group.

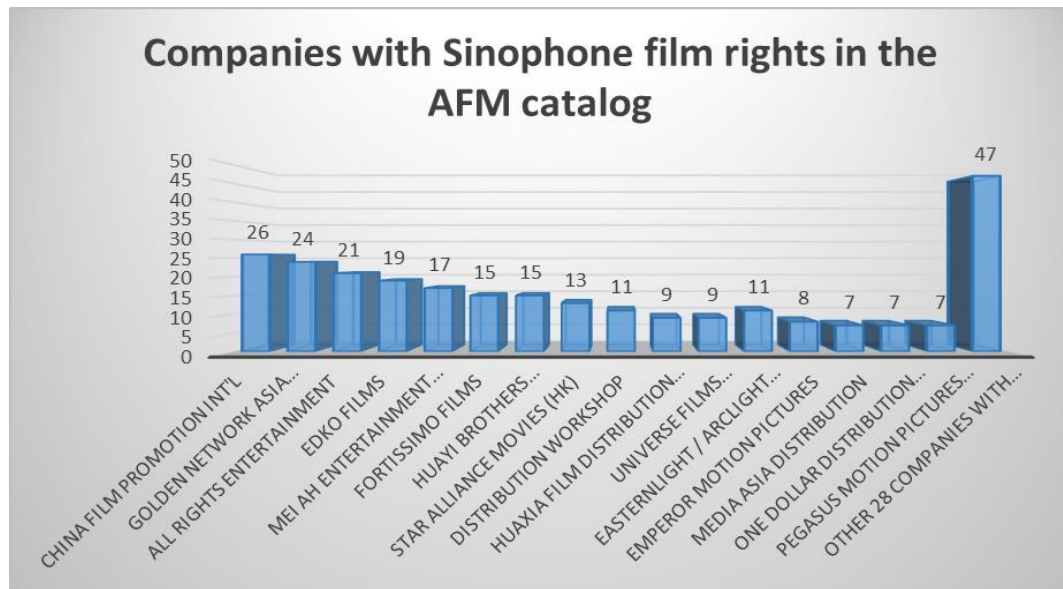
The biggest concentration of films and companies is in Hong Kong and Los Angeles, while Beijing, despite producing a large number of films, has fewer companies with distributive power over such movies. It is interesting, however, to observe how companies in Paris and Amsterdam amass an interest amount of 39 Sinophone films amongst the AFM catalogue.

**Figure 1. Local corporate concentration of Sinophone films in AFM catalog**



Note. Sources from [www.thefilmcatalogue.com](http://www.thefilmcatalogue.com) Reviewed on June 26, 2014

**Figure 2. Companies with the rights of Sinophone films in the AFM catalog**



Note. Sources from [www.thefilmcatalogue.com](http://www.thefilmcatalogue.com) Reviewed on June 26, 2014

What does the atomization of distribution rights imply? Firstly, while the state owned organization China Film Distribution has the biggest diversity of Sinophone films in the AFM catalog this does not imply that it gets the biggest share of the market or even a greater amount of ‘sales’ to Western exhibitors. Nevertheless, the nationalism promoted primarily resonates and reinforces ‘Chineseness’ with the Mainland. Their statement about the company’s goals says: “In the pursuit of the Chinese Dream, we should actively participate in the construction of Globalization as a common goal of human values”. Most recently used by President Xi Jinping, the ‘Chinese dream’ involves an idealistic good life and the achievement of sustainable development for the PRC. It leaves no doubt that the cultural projection of the Mainland has film as one of its ideologically aligned axis and is understanding globalization as a benign cultural encounter.

Secondly, the fact that Hong Kong companies amass an even bigger amount of AFM catalog movies reassures its position as an audiovisual financial power in the region and also as the Mainland’s ‘door’ to the outside corporative audiovisual market.

Hong Kong, together with Tokyo and Seoul, are the 'media capitals' of Chinese film distribution in this sphere.

And thirdly, the translocality of Chinese cinematic distribution by companies located in Los Angeles and European cities brings us back to Cubitt's argument (2005) about the networked characteristic of distribution, not as 'placeless' but as conservatively rooted in "ex-colonial capital relations" (p. 208). While hegemonic sites of filmic exchange (California) have their share in the transit of Chinese movies, the hegemonic sites of film-artistic curation in European metropolis can claim to provide an 'alternative' Chinese product that appeals to a specific audience segment.

Distribution of movies screened in film festivals cannot be separated from the dynamics of the distribution of blockbusters. As some movies 'move' between such spaces -negotiating audiences and markets in both big theaters and art venues- it is no longer accurate to follow the supposed dichotomy of mainstream-art venues, since in practice they intersect in many levels. As I have showed, *Crouching Tiger* is an example of such transnational movement not only because it became a milestone for Chinese language films being screened in diverse venues in the West, but because it also reflected power imbalances in the processes of film production as well.

Ang Lee spent most of his career between Sino-spoken and English-spoken cinema, the latter being his most recent tendency. Though some of the stories of his feature films such as *The Wedding Banquet*<sup>5</sup>, released seven years before *Crouching Tiger* (1993), literally moves between both the Western and the Asian social worlds, Lee is still a privileged diasporic director educated in U.S. theater academia. His talent, which was first sponsored by a Taiwanese government grant with his first feature film (*Pushing Hands*), became highly valued in Hollywood circles. While it looks like Lee's filmography goes 'back and forth' from 'east to west'; in fact, Lee's Eastern inspired projects have been mostly created as co-productions and his Western inspired projects have been developed as Hollywood's studio productions for his more Western inspired movies. He enjoys a status that Shih (2007) calls "flexible subject", due to a marketable ability in

<sup>5</sup> *The Wedding Banquet's* story is about the human and family dramas that implicate a fake wedding only for immigration and social pressure interests.

culturally different contexts. Such flexibility is due to Lee's "translatability in the transpacific political economy of power" (p. 42- 59), such as when a U.S. audience consumes an ethnic culture. It is not the case that both Taiwan and U.S. audiences have decoded Lee's films in similar ways, but rather that such comfortable translatability is a result of the unequal neocolonial relationship between the West and Taiwan. The ethnic minority director enters into American racial politics, argues Shih (2007), because his movies are "nonthreatening". Lee's Sinophone co-productions are clearly a flag that the Chinese state likes to rise. This director's success in integrating his work into the global market is seen as model by other Chinese filmmakers.

In an interview given in June 2013 to *China Radio International*, Zhou Tiedong, president of China Film Promotion International, blamed what he calls "cultural discount" as the responsible variable that has prevented Chinese films from being more welcomed in the West. Such a 'discount', or conceptual depreciation of Chinese films is due to cultural differences. "People from other cultures sometimes cannot quite understand what Chinese films are talking about", he stated (2013). In other words, Chinese movies fail on overseas screens because they are 'too Chinese', because they don't cater into a 'global taste' like Lee's movies do. While a very problematic concept, global aesthetics or storytelling preferences are an enigma for policy makers like Zhou, who calls for Chinese audiovisual narratives to shift towards "universal values" and the "human perspective". His main concern can be summarized with the question 'why can Hollywood tell stories with Chinese 'elements' and thrive but when we do it, we do not? *Kung Fu Panda* can be an illustration of the first situation and *Infernal Affairs* of the latter, since the U.S. remake, *The Departed*, was far more globally successful.

How to 'remedy' such a gap between 'global audience' sensitivities, for Zhou, is through the boosting of co-productions with the Mainland. In others words, the institutional discourse of the PRC towards the West (and even Hong Kong) is basically a bargain between an easier access to a potentially immense domestic audience potential in exchange for the 'lending' of Hollywood's stars, marketing spotlight, and global creative recognition. In the official statistics, such policies have already had a tangible result; there has been a rise in co-produced films, and the earnings of such productions rose from 58.8 percent in 2006 to 99.96 per cent in 2010 (Entgroup, 2010, p. 41).

While officials might value this as a success without ever putting into question U.S. global cinematic hegemony, in the end, every co-produced film is not slit into an even 50-50 economic or cultural divide. As financial shares and cultural elements are negotiated, the results in China for compromising their creative workers into a Hollywood-aligned system will never compensate the fact that, in the end, this process has enabled the global expansion of Hollywood studios which have now found a home in China.

In his analysis of Hollywood's dominance of Chinese kung fu movies, Chung (2007) concludes that despite the fact that most of the revenues coming from Asia, the profits and biggest economic benefits will ultimately go to those who "determine the 'rules' of distribution for both the U.S. and international markets" (p. 422), that is: major Hollywood distributors. Under current market conditions, only directors such as Ang Lee, "who are capable of producing films that meet the taste of global Hollywood audiences" have benefited from the overseas appetite for new kung fu movies, writes Chung (p. 422).

The question of why we are experiencing such narrow access to Chinese film has, at first, three reasons that are acknowledged by the members of the industry and PRC state officials: Hollywood's hegemonic position, producers' and distributors' focus on regional markets and unwillingness to risk investment in territories where there is not a guaranteed audience for Chinese films (for instance, overseas Chinese communities), and the culturally local-national rooted stories that, as Zhou notices, do not appeal to non-Asian audiences.

However, it is important to point out more structural reasons for the unbalanced access. There is an inequitable translation in the global market that is both a cause and a consequence of the Western centered global cinematic landscape. In addition, the actors involved in the decision making of that market are not ideologically-free, since liberalism tends to have a place in the politicization (for 'good' or 'bad') of any cultural product coming from China. These positions feed into the preconceived taste of critics, film festivals, moviegoers, and other cultural curators. Film producers, therefore, tend to

obey a canon that they help to construct in such a way that is intertwined with the 'safe investment' of an established auteur prescribed film.

Historian Valentina Vitali followed the latter point during a *Chinese Film Forum UK* symposium when arguing that Taiwanese filmmaker Hou Hsiao-Hsian and other Asian directors has been privileged in European film festivals "on the basis of an auteur mode of film appreciation" (Rawnsley, 2013, p. 536); a practice that has been replicated in European magazines which publicize and encourage the consumption of these directors.

Moreover, is the question 'why are there distribution imbalances between the booming of Chinese cinemas and our access to them' *the* one question that begs to be asked? Doesn't it include the danger of turning it into a utilitarian resource that will ultimately lead to the question of 'how can Chinese cinemas attain a wider global circulation'? For now, I intend to explain how film festivals ground these imbalances in very problematic ways for the rest of the Global South.



### **Take 3. Festivals, a party for commodities**

In this part of the paper I will analyze how the construction of the 'festival movie' happen, since it is a slippery concept among the contested aesthetics and canons of what is 'film-festival worthy'. In other words, what forces come into play during the gatekeeping process that privileges only a select few types of movies?

Since the first Mostra Cinematographica di Venezia in 1932 film festivals have gone a long way in their expansion and diversification. Despite the birth of these venues as institutions located in an Italy under Benito Mussolini's Fascist regime, they later flourished in post Second World War Europe, with Berlin as a showcase of the benefits of Western democracy, values, and capitalist society. Only after the 1960s can one observe the creation of films festivals in Asia or in Latin America, as events to promote local and regional productions that otherwise, would have gone unnoticed to the broader public.

Film festivals, as an invention deeply rooted in the West, mediate our knowledge of global cinematography while shaping the audiovisual world itself. Following Cindy Wong (2011) and Janet Harbord (2002), I propose that the film festival category of cinematic value, as a creation in opposition to mainstream Hollywood, cannot be analyzed through such a dichotomy, but is a result of a capitalist art venue ideology and a highly managed construction of 'taste'.

Problematizing the type of cinema that is favored in film festivals is relevant since there is a need for further reflection on the role of programmers and other gatekeepers of 'high culture', and how they depend on and constitute the global market of intellectual and artistic commodities. The power of those who choose is not only embedded in their subjectivities and what they consider to be valuable, but more profoundly, it is embedded

in a very problematic relation between global capitalism and bourgeois ideology. We tend to take these processes as given.

I call film festivals circuits 'capitalist art-houses' because big film festivals do not exist just because of 'art for art's sake', but that they are also part of a network that is highly dependent on capitalist niche consumption. This is why it is important to complicate the contradictions that mutually constitute these venues and how they interact with the creation of spaces for new and subaltern voices to be heard. Festivals open a door for Chinese movies claiming that they would otherwise never be accessible. But it is still a door, only those that are 'chosen' can get in, so the transcultural value of these festivals was never intended to apply to everyone.

The structure of how film festival gatekeeping processes occurs is mainly determined mainly by three aspects: the composition of the networking and symbolical hierarchy within the festivals, the canon of the movie's 'look and feel', and the oppositional dichotomy between commercial film and 'festival film'. All of these aspects intersect in the construction of 'worthy' film festival movies; as a category that is never complete, but always open to the interpretation of how we understand these venues.

Firstly, not all film festivals have the same power when producing knowledge about cinema in global or transnational landscapes. While functioning as networks, festivals also 'survive' by reproducing the significance of their prestige.

Despite the fact that there is no 'ranking police' or homogeneity among film festival systems, there is a recognized category of 'A' level festivals to designate those that are accredited by the International Federation of Film Producers Associations (FIAPF), a European creation. To this date, 14 festivals have this accreditation or are in the process of getting it: the 'big three festivals' (Berlin, Cannes, and Venice), Shanghai (China), Moscow (Russia), Karlovy Vary (Czech Republic), Locarno (Switzerland), Montreal (Canada), San Sebastián (Spain), Warsaw (Poland), Tokyo (Japan), Mar del Plata (Argentina), Cairo (Egypt), and Goa (India). Regardless of this narrow accreditation, other festivals outside the FIAPF recognition -such as Toronto, Sundance, and New York film festivals also have clout among the international press and the festival networks.

This 'big-festival' filter is a result of the hierarchies among capitalist art venues. At the same time, a movie's acceptance into 'A' category venues tend to be advertised as a reaffirmation and legitimation of the choice made by the small city based 'less important' festival. It hardly ever happens the other way around; since it is unlikely that Venice would promote one of its screenings as a selection from last year's Lima Film Festival.

In addition, film festivals reflect unequal geopolitical positions as many are located in 'resorts': in cities where leisure and vacationing for local and international social groups is used in the festival's marketing. Janet Harbord (2002) describes this nature as "a particular manifestation of the way that space is produced as practice. Festivals advertise cities, set them in competition, region against region, global city against global city" (p. 61).

As antiquity and scope combine to portray European film festivals at the 'top' of a discursive hierarchy, the effects of such an inflexible structure are tangible with what Cindy Wong (2011) calls 'canonical films': works, directors and viewpoints that get circulated and legitimized, since those exclusive venues hold the power to choose what cinematic genre should be embraced. Hence, festival networks are themselves reinforcing global film knowledge.

The discursive construction of film festival worthiness films is intersected mainly by the need for a 'look' and anti-commercial legitimation. Despite the fact that the standard aesthetic value in festival films is arbitrary and constantly changing, there are certain tendencies that they have in common. Festival films tend to be 'harder' to watch than Hollywood blockbusters. These films are austere (which allows for festivals to finance their production) and they favor minimalism, the quotidian, and focus on the characters, rather than formulaic narratives. Their narratives tend to be "evocative, spare, and nonlinear; coherence must be constructed, not found" (Wong, 2011, p. 79). All the above characteristics form part of an 'auteuristic' cannon.

The cannon is used for justifying a rhetoric of 'higher art', one that is economically and ideologically detached. However, there is a codependent relationship with the 'undesired' Hollywood universe; the separation between art culture and billboard

culture is in itself unclear and in fact that Hollywood is the antithesis of film festivals is a myth. Not only is there an exchange of actors, titles, public relations, and 'new talents', but there is also the intention to be profitable: "The seals of approval that film festivals provide are all part of the profit-making enterprise of Hollywood" (Wong, 2011, p. 132). Hollywood producers have used Cannes as a showcase for their films. At the same time, while Cannes' chairs might see themselves apart from Hollywood, they thrive for the presence of its mainstream stars and glamour that attract world attention. Correspondingly, the Marché du Film at Cannes (created in 1959 by a syndicate of producers) is a space that uses international attention and gathering for business and selling opportunities.

The tension of commerce versus art, states Harbord (2002), is purely symbolic for a cultural purpose. Referring to Arjun Appadurai, Harbord explains that the exclusivity festivals offer, if understood as a luxury good is "rhetorical and social", since "the level of value relies on the features of the product itself and the management of its circulation" (p. 69). Not only are the exchange of the values of the 'good' film produced, exchanged, and commodified, but the knowledge about such commodities becomes more and more exclusive.

By discursively shifting the axis of money centered criteria into artistic value criteria, film festivals manage to 'cleanse' the capitalist aura that is structural to their existence, and their imagined apolitical veil.

There are two main ways in which film festivals are key arbiters in global cinematic distribution. They accomplish this firstly, through their share of the exchange of cultural products which, at the same time, is interrelated to the legitimation of their elusive canon of what makes a 'good' film. Three decades ago, distributors did not charge for the screening of their movies at festivals, since the publicity itself was perceived as enough gain. But Wong (2011) has noticed that, as festivals proliferate, they themselves become clients and distributors.

Film festivals' market venues, whether explicitly formulated as such or not, are the spaces where sellers (producers) negotiate with buyers (distributors or agents) the price for the rights to sell tickets for films in different regions and formats. Wong claims

“these deals have replaced the vertical integration of Hollywood and its own theater chains, for example, with more fluid and competitive intermediaries” (2011, p. 142).

When the number of intermediaries grows at the same rate as the commodification of ‘artistic’ films, the screening fees that festivals have to pay in order to guarantee important titles (that come pre-filtered by ‘big’ festivals) also tends to increase. In an interview with Latam Cinema digital magazine, Marcelo Panozzo (2014), artistic director of the Buenos Aires Independent Film Festival stated: “Many agents have started to ask for crazy numbers, and that is bad for the movies, which remain enclosed in this trap, with exhibition rights of three or four thousand dollars that no one can afford”. Therefore, if a movie is not distributed to the same extent as others it does not imply that it is intrinsically worse than the others. Sometimes, it is just unaffordable.

Secondly, festivals construct their own distribution by also intervening in the film production, therefore blurring the line between production and circulation. Film festivals reproduce themselves and, by doing so, they also facilitate the auteur to enact himself/herself through ‘differentiated’ production that feed whatever programmers want to watch. An example of how managed such circulation is, is the fact that film festivals generate new talent, not only by putting *ópera primas* (premieres) into circulation, but also by funding the training and production of new filmmakers. Large festivals include short film programs and student productions “not only to build audience but also to continue flows of new films and positions of power: today’s student may be tomorrow’s auteur” (Wong, 2011, 51-52). Festivals are highly interdependent networks because the circulation of knowledge through international venues affirms the choice of supporting a certain director more than another.

Dangers are also involved in this support of new filmmakers. Shroeder (2002) identifies that, over the past twenty years, there has been a tendency “for filmmakers to create transnational products through casting, setting, narrative, and aesthetic choices that facilitate the films’ marketing to international audiences” (p. 89). This accommodation helps to maximize the satisfaction of the co-producing parties and their unconsented interests between market and politics.

### 3.1 Chinese cinema(s) in capitalist art-houses

Since 1988, when Zhang Yimou's *Red Sorghum* became a milestone for Chinese cinema(s) after winning the Golden Bear in the Berlin International Film Festival, there has been an ever growing appetite in this type of venue for stories about the 'unknown' China.

Lee & Stringer (2012) have written about the transversal relation between Chinese auteurs, audiovisual aesthetics and film festivals, by looking into them spatially and temporally. They explain that at the same time as China is seizing onto any publicity opportunity such as widening its global reach through film festivals and taking advantage of its growing economic power, "events such as Cannes, Venice and Tokyo have needed to engage with Chinese films and filmmakers in order to demonstrate their contemporary relevance as gateways to the world" (p. 246).

The pattern that they found in their study is a confirmation of the weight of the poly-locality of film festival taste: the majority of festivals that have been receptive to Chinese cinemas are located in cities with port infrastructures: Cannes, Venice, Rotterdam, Tokyo, and Pusan -among the high-profile festivals (pg. 244-245)- as well as New York, Vancouver, and Rotterdam. To a degree, this is no surprise, since port cities, as commercial gateways, are spaces where corporate powers invest in cultural and economic capital. They are places of transit that have strategically built infrastructures of cultural distraction such as capitalist art houses that attract glamour and tourism.

Venice and Cannes are, according to Lee and Stringer's analysis (2012), the two main points of reference for mapping for Chinese cinema overseas. Cannes favors Chen Kaige, Zhang Yimou, Hou Hsiao-hsien and Wong Kar-wai by inviting them repeatedly to the event. This is later reflected by increased interest of French financiers who invest in co-productions with such directors; projects that will, in turn, be referenced in film festivals.

The tendencies in Venice are also auteur-centered, though much less conservatively than Cannes, since it favors a larger variety of filmmakers and there are few examples of "synergistically or opportunistically" co-productions with Italian financiers. Venice has been keener to support Zhang Yuan and Jia Zhangke (Lee and Stringer, 2012, p. 247), though all of China's auteurs tend to appear in both festivals.

In addition, the authors (2012) contest the notion that Western 'A-category' film festivals are the starting point and initial platforms for the recognition of Chinese talent. They find Tokyo, Rotterdam and Pusan as always ahead of Cannes in the recognition of emerging Chinese talents. The latter two festivals "are in the vanguard of developments in the overseas representation of Chinese cinema" (p. 256) because they award prizes to Chinese directors in the early stages of their careers. By the time they receive awards in the West, they are already familiar to the festival programmers in Asia.

Even though Lee and Stringer's extensive analysis of the data available about the presence of Chinese films in international film festivals is very valuable in terms of how they make the information abundance about the topic more comprehensive, they stop short of taking a critical position in approaching the political and economic forces that intervene in the selection of Chinese movies.

No matter how 'objective' the decisions and judgments of the people empowered within the festivals are, "festivals have been ideologically constructed as free spaces where films of all subject matters are welcome" (Wong, 2011, p. 90). This rhetoric of freedom, as opposed to censorship, is also part of the ideals of a liberal-democratic Western project.

On the grounds that 'strong' - yet unbalanced - festival networks work for the material and symbolic benefit of all actors in the festival circuits (Hollywood, cities, filmmakers), it is not likely, states De Valck (2007), that Cannes will stop using the "anti-Hollywood rhetoric and foster anti-American sentiments to cultivate its self-image as an independent, politically correct, and leading center for 'alternative' film culture" (p. 207).

Other academics -Barmé (1999), Donald (2000), Zhao (2008), McGrath (2011), Wong, 2011)- have criticized the art-house privileging of Chinese films that are either

'banned' in the Mainland or are noncompliant with SAPPRFT's guidelines (and therefore never officially screened in China).

In the past century, the release of internationally acclaimed movies like *The Blue Kite* (1993) [Lán Fēngzheng], *Farewell My Concubine* (1994) [Bàwáng Bié Jī], and *To Live* (1994) [Huózhe] was officially halted in the Mainland. A combination of elements such as politically sensitive content, sex scenes, and resistance from filmmakers to edit their work contributed in different ways to the fact that these films were initially only released overseas. However I do not intent to undermine the understanding that censorship still plays an important role in spectators' changing and contested notions inside and outside China, I want to acknowledge that these battles over the legitimate meaning of Chinese cinema alter the public imaginary we have of Chinese cultural industries.

An example of these struggles is Nanjing born director Zhang Yuan, one of the first banned directors to have international recognition. He directed *Beijing Bastards* (Běijīng Zázhǒng) in 1993 and produced it outside the official state system. The film represented a view of alienated urban young rock musicians. As Barmé describes it, "the movie had enough 'attitude' to make him a hot item outside China and to establish him as a prominent alternative artist within the country" (1999, p. 191). The movie debuted in the Locarno Film Festival, and that same year it was screened in the Toronto Film Festival. Three years later, Zhang Yuan produced *East Palace West Palace* (Dōng Gōng Xī Gōng), which portrayed the issues about gay life and sexuality in contemporary Beijing. The movie appeared at the Cannes Film Festival but he did not. Chinese authorities confiscated his passport for eight months and only after long negotiations, the film board agreed to let him resume his work.

Part of Zhang's fame in West had to do with being the first to experiment with taboos and antiestablishment characters, a side of China that was shadowed and largely unknown in the West. In fact, *Beijing Bastards* was distributed on British television and advertised as "China's first rock and roll movie... banned by the Chinese authorities". Donald explains this judgment as the "assumption that Western rock and Western youth



have been there before -and that the China factor simply reaffirmed the importance of the Western dominant subversive relation" (2000, p. 109).

More recent examples of Chinese directors who were banned for a number of years from making movies in China include Jian Wen, whose movie *Devils on the Doorstep* (Guǐzi Láile) premiered in Cannes in 2000 without the approval of Chinese authorities; and Lou Ye, after submitting his movie *Summer Palace* (Yíhé Yuán) [2006] to Cannes without official permission. By screening and advertising these films anyway, Cannes acted not only as a 'protectorate' for oppressed artists, but it also maintained its reputation of a guard that saves 'art' from 'politics'.

International film festivals feel attracted to 'independent' directors because their identity as harassed artists trapped in a totalitarian state fit into an art-market niche. "If mainstream culture was the preserve of the state (a highly dubious assertion), then these 'independent' figures represented something 'authentic'", Barmé argues (1999, p. 191). In other words, the ban only increases the film's capital abroad. Western film festivals' programmers and distributors "were eager to embrace the image of the dissident artist yearning for freedom" (McGrath, 2011, p. 168), just like under Cold War era ideology.

The rebel-foreign media relation has its roots in "the formulaic categories first developed as a result of the Western media relations with dissidents in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union" (Barmé, 1999, p. 192). The fact that these rebels now happen to be Chinese is a variable that does not diminish the historically developed tradition of the Western press to reproduce a transnational public opinion that is highly managed.

An example of how the latter ideological bias can affect a filmmaker's agency happened in April 1999, when Zhang Yimou withdrew his films *Not One Less* (Yíge Dōu Bùnénɡ Shǎo) and *The Road Home* (Wǒde Fùqīn Mǔqīn) from the Cannes Films Festival, because they were not selected to compete for the Official Selection award. He believed that because on that occasion his movies were openly supported by the Chinese government, the jury saw them as supporting the CCP's party line. In a letter to the festival's executives -that he cleverly also sent to the *Beijing Youth Daily*- Zhang explained why he withdrew his films:

"I believe you have a serious misunderstanding about the movies... Everyone has their own opinion about whether a film is good or bad. But what I cannot accept is that the West has for a long time politicized Chinese films. If they are not anti-government, they are just considered propaganda. I hope this bias can be slowly changed". (Cited by Zhu and Rosen, 2010, p. 54)

He received various criticism for this decision. Cultural workers in China do not have a simple task, as so much (perhaps too much) is expected from them. For a filmmaker it is difficult to negotiate their position between official cultural structures, the expectations of the alternative artistic sphere, their publics, and avoid being labeled a dissident or lacky.

### **3.2 Dependent independence**

In China, the term 'independent filmmaker' implies autonomy from the government's studios, financing and control. "But when shown in the West, such 'independent' films also have been called 'underground' (*dixia*) to emphasize their apparently subversive nature" (McGrath, 2011, p. 167). This is how an ideological veil is put onto the dissident.

As many 'independent' Chinese films *are* dependent on foreign investment and elite audiences, McGrath (2011) calls attention to the fact that "the often misleading marketing of a film as subversive, underground or 'banned in China' has become a mutually beneficial phenomenon" (p. 167) and that critics, intellectuals and artists help to reproduce this ideology.

For McGrath (2011), it is evident that 'independent' directors address foreign audiences as a consequence of how dependent they are on funding from abroad. In this sense, elite foreign art-viewers tend to find themselves presented with the aspects they want to see about China, namely that which reinforces their ideologized preconceptions of what 'authentic' China life looks like. For some Chinese critics, 'underground' movies tend to be rewarded abroad mainly because of 'political' reasons. McGrath call this

phenomenon the "cynical 'banned in China' marketing strategy" (2011, p. 171). In addition, the aesthetics of 'independent' Chinese films are also put into question. Movies that focus on the everyday life of marginal characters (migrant workers, prostitutes, orphans) have become, according to McGrath formulaic conventions that –by the 2000s- have been reproduced “in an almost assembly-line fashion for consumption by the global festival audiences” (p. 172).

Put differently, what makes Chinese films successful commodities for capitalist art-house consumption is a distribution system that encourages the flow of productions that can navigate between what Western-liberal audience wants to watch and the need for narrative innovation that can maintain festival’s status as gatekeepers of creative transnational beings.

Since Chinese ‘festival films’ are sold to limited cultural elites, the danger of commoditized cultural dissident is that it does not enable social critique of class structures where it could inspire political activism. Therefore, it never fulfills its promise of threatening state or corporate power, as it turns into a consumer product for wealthy and intellectual spheres of consumption. The contradiction of 'independent' movies lies in that they "serve to oppose the dominant culture but also to produce cultural capital that distinguishes its consumers" (Michael Newman cited by McGrath, 2011, 172).

This does not mean that 'banned films' are not worth watching. On the contrary, most of them are rich with political messages and tackle uncomfortable topics. However, privileging them simply amplifies Western ideological rhetoric by 'selling' (promoting) films with an aura of the prohibited 'truth'.

It is possible here to build a conceptual bridge between Lobato’s (2012) understanding of film distribution as mainly a shadow economy that is as important as the formal quantifiable distribution, and McGrath’s (2011) assertion of how misleading the 'banned in China' label is when observed from a perspective outside of film festival access.

Despite many movies angering Chinese authorities over the past few decades, many more never went through the scrutiny of official channels, were never even

submitted for approval for screening in the Mainland or never even made it to a censor's hands. With the arrival of less expensive digital media, according to McGrath (2011), many of these films are even available in Chinese video stores, pirated DVDs and Internet. The result is that most of those "films are only 'banned in China' in the West" (p. 169).

Today, the ecosystem of officially 'distributable' movies coexists with those films that are produced without the consent of state institutions and that have only been shown outside the Mainland because directors are hesitant (opportunistically or not) to present their projects for clearance. Such extra-legal commerce is not peripheral, but central to this translocal market. What Lobato calls 'distribution from below' is a global norm that cannot be unacknowledged. However, both of the diverse forms of distribution are not abstracted from the political-ideological forces that we already saw as complex arbiters of what deserves circulation in the first place.

## **Take 4.**

### **Próximamente (o no)... in a theater near you (?)**

What we know about film is what festivals know about film, as they contribute to a wider field of knowledge. They “exist in the context of the establishment of cinema as a serious art that is worthy of academic pursuit as well as art patronage”, argues Wong (2011, p. 15). Festivals produce catalogs, online publications, press conferences, and even academic work. This situates these organizations as knowledge producers on a large scale and shows how strong links among scholars, critics and journalists take place. It is in these unequal exchange systems, where the “academization of the popular” (Wong, 2011, p. 29) happens.

Since distribution creates the possibility for some films to be accessed while negating others, and film festivals are an important node in the distribution network, I will now explore how these dynamics intervene in the circulation of Chinese cinemas in Latin American art houses. Such a stance does not intend to totalize or universalize *the way* Chinese cinemas are distributed in Latin American, but to use film festivals as a window into why attention should be driven towards film festival hierarchy.

For this paper, I chose to qualitatively analyze the recent digitally available film festival catalogs (from 2005 to 2014) in five Latin American countries<sup>6</sup>. How I chose what

<sup>6</sup> It is very important to clarify that I did not use the catalogs of the same time periods for every festival due to the lack of digitally available archives. This are the editions I had complete access to: Mar del Plata International Film Festival (2012-2013), Buenos Aires International Independent Film Festival (2008-2014), Guadalajara International Film Festival (2011-2014), Monterrey International Film Festival (2004-2013), Morelia International Film Festival (2003-2013), Rio International Film Festival (2011-2013), Sao Paulo International Film Festival (2013), Valdivia International Film Festival (2013), Santiago International Film Festival (2005-2013), Lima Film Festival (2009-2014), and Lima Independent Film Festival (2012-2013).

classifies as Chinese cinemas or not goes beyond the festival's definitions of a movie's nationalities which is based on terms of production or the director's nationality. Searching through the catalogues with my definition of Chinese cinema garnished a result of 143 very diverse Chinese films –not all of them strictly Sinophone-, that include 12 titles that were screened in more than one festival during the periods of time I was able to observe<sup>7</sup>.

In Argentina, Mar del Plata International Film Festival and Buenos Aires Independent Film Festival (Bafici) are both important regional venues. With 29 editions, Mar del Plata begun in 1954 and now is one of the few festivals in Latin America with a film market (Intercine) that mainly focuses on the international promotion of Argentinean cinema.

Argentina is also one of the three audiovisual powers in Latin America (together with Brazil and Mexico) and has a historical tradition in sustained editions of international film festivals. Also, it is the only Latin American country that has its national film institution amongst the 34 producer associations of the FIAPF, which, as we already discussed, plays a stratifying standardizing role in capitalist art venues. The China Film Producers' Association and the Shanghai Film Festival are also in this 'certified' sphere.

In Mexico, I chose to look into the catalogs of the Guadalajara International Film Festival, which is now on its 29<sup>th</sup> edition and has an Ibero-American Film Market since 2003; the Monterrey International Film Festival, which is young (only 10 years) but is still rich as an overseas showcase to the point of having China as 'guest country' in 2007; and the Morelia International Film Festival.

In Brazil, Rio and Sao Paulo, despite having the smallest amount of files available online, provide a glimpse into a Portuguese spoken-centered international film venue. As the biggest recipient of Chinese diaspora in Latin America (over 200.000 people) and a member of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) political-economic alliance, Brazilian links with China are dominated by their positions as regional

<sup>7</sup> See Appendix A for complete list

powers and mouthpieces of models of development that are, at least rhetorically, more cooperative than the historical problematic north-south agreements.

In Chile, I looked into the Valdivia International Film Festival and the Santiago International Film Festival. And in Peru, I used the available catalogs of Lima Film Festivals and Lima Independent Film Festival.

Despite the fact that, comparatively, Peru (one of the countries in the region that have been most influenced by Asian cultures) and Chile do not have a strong audiovisual capacity vis-à-vis the other Latin American industries in this case study, they are important because of their historic economic relations with China, mainly based on the latter's interest in natural resources.

I highlight these state-level relations because any analysis of distribution cannot overlook the use that cultural objects have for inter-national affairs. With the spread of Confucius Institutes in Latin America since 2006, when the first one opened in Nuevo Leon Autonomous University (Mexico), their role in cultural diplomacy has extended and supported the work of Chinese embassies worldwide. For instance, four of the 42 Confucius Institutes in Latin America are located in Peru, where it has hosted free Chinese film screenings in universities and public libraries.

However peripheral and poorly publicized these institutional showcases are, they can give us an idea of a 'Mainland-centered' view of Chinese cinemas as a vehicle for 'exporting' Chinese culture. While most of the films presented in this small screening in Peru portray stories of ancient China's epic wars and social traumas with opium, it is interesting to observe that several of them are also family dramas and tragedies in rural China: *Tuya's Marriage* (2006) by Quan'an Wang, *Mongolian Ping Pong* (2005) by Hao Ning, and *Ju Dou* by Zhang Yimou. These cultural diplomacy-directed screenings in Latin America are a strategic mixing of 'expected' dynasty situated stories with the 'unexpected' narratives of the countryside which extend a discourse of China's linguistic and cultural diversity when taken away from its romantic frame.

Film festivals highlighting of 'guest countries' can also be read as projections of cultural diplomacy when there is direct involvement with public institutions. In 2007, the

Monterrey International Film Festival held a special showcase of Chinese films, a retrospective look at the work of Tian Zhuang, and 12 short films made by students. Curiously, two of the movies were in fact Hong Kong-produced (Johnnie To's *Exiled* and Ho-Cheung Pang's *Isabella*) but appear in the catalog as simply 'Chinese'.

The curatorial work for Monterrey was coordinated by the dean of Beijing Film Academy, Zhang Huijun, and had the support of the Chinese Embassy in Mexico. The discourse portrayed in the festival's catalogue is covered with references of mutual friendship. "We have brought excellent Chinese films, and with them the best wishes from the Chinese people", wrote Zhang in the document (2007, p.22). This and similar statements throughout the catalog provides an understanding of films as a bridge between peoples from different lands.

Such discourse can neither be interpreted as state propaganda or purely PRC softpower, nor as an open space where Chinese filmmakers are able to freely enter Mexican cinema circles. The showcase was curated by a specific academy to highlight a specific cannon (Fifth Generation filmmakers like Tian Zhuang Zhuang, Zhuang Yimou, and Chen Kaige), portray fragments of its past told through 'human' stories (the Japanese invasion, war in Korea), reproduce a pan-Chinese cultural perspective, advertise their animation students, and publicize a more 'liberal' creative image of the Mainland with short films that directly denounce poverty in the countryside and informal labor in the cities. None of the 22 feature and short films of the showcase in Monterrey tell a story about the Communist Party's good will or about revolutionary heroism; this is not to say that the showcase was apolitical and all about artistic value, but rather it was highly political precisely because it was meant to make a statement of how creatively free filmmakers are in China and because it emphasized that 'underground' films are not the only ones worthy of international prestige.

I have chosen to focus in the titles and directors that repeat throughout the festivals for this case study due to constraints which make it impossible to analyze all of the 143 films identified as Chinese cinema. Even though there is no 'hand' consciously maneuvering which films go where (it is mostly a process based on random opportunity), it is important to make a stop and question not only why there are certain regards



privileged but also how did they traveled through space and time. In this case, twelve movies were distributed in more than one Latin American festival.

**Table 1. Chinese movies screened in more than one Latin American film festival observed for the case study.**

Movie	Director	Production	Film festival edition	Premiere
<i>Fujian Blue</i> ( <i>Jīn Bì Hǔhúang</i> )	Robin Weng	China	Santiago Film Festival - 2008 Bafici - 2008	Vancouver Film Festival (Dragons and Tigers award)
<i>I Can't Live Without You</i> ( <i>Bu neng mei you ni</i> )	Leon Dai	Taiwan	Santiago Film Festival - 2008 Bafici - 2009	Taipei Film Festival
<i>Crossing The Mountain</i> ( <i>Fan Shan</i> )	Yang Rui	China	Bafici -2010 Monterrey Film Festival - 2010	Berlin International Film Festival
<i>Egg and Stone</i> ( <i>Jidan he Shitou</i> )	Ji Huang	China	Rio Film Festival -2012 Santiago Film Festival - 2012	Rotterdam International Film Festival
<i>A Touch of Sin</i> ( <i>Tian zhu ding</i> )	Jia Zhangke	China	Mar del Plata Film Festival- 2013 Sao Paulo Film Festival - 2013	Cannes International Film Festival (won Best Screenplay)
<i>Blind Detective</i> ( <i>Máng Tàn</i> )	Johnnie To	Hong Kong / China	Mar del Plata Film Festival - 2013 Rio Film Festival - 2013	Cannes International Film Festival
<i>My Blueberry Nights</i>	Wong Kar Wai	Hong Kong / China / France	Morelia Film Festival - 2007 Santiago Film Festival - 2008	Cannes International Film Festival
<i>The Grandmaster</i> ( <i>Yi dai zong shi</i> )	Wong Kar Wai	Hong Kong / China	Morelia Film Festival - 2013 Santiago Film Festival - 2013 Sao Paulo Film Festival- 2013	Berlin International Film Festival
<i>Visage</i>	Tsai Ming Liang	Taiwan / France / Belgium / Netherlands	Bafici - 2010 Santiago Film Festival - 2010	Cannes International Film Festival

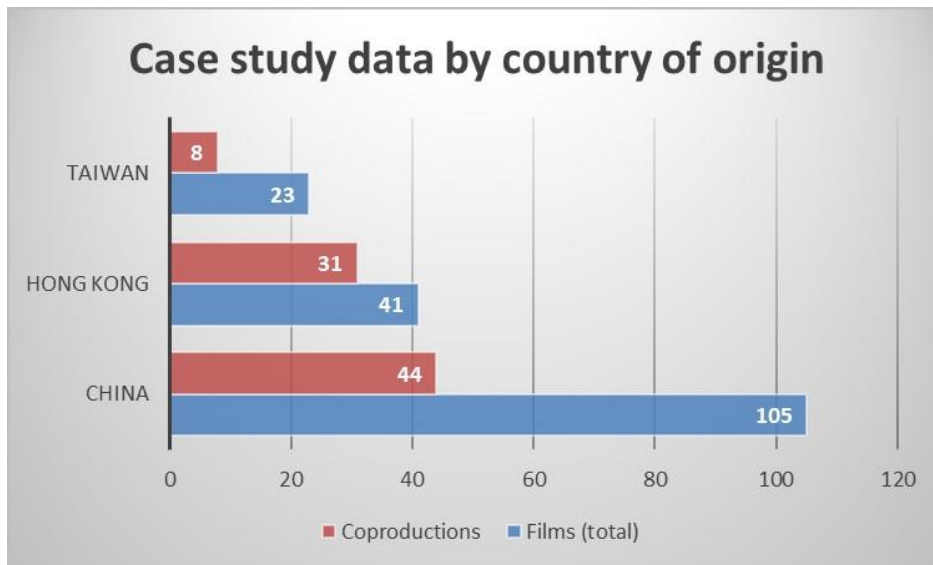
<i>Stray Dogs (Jiao You)</i>	Tsai Ming Liang	France / Taiwan	Valdivia Film Festival - 2013 Bafici - 2014	Venice Biennale (Grand Jury Prize)
<i>Walker</i>	Tsai Ming Liang	China / Hong Kong	Mar del Plata Film Festival- 2012 Lima Independent Film Festival - 2013	Youku (Chinese online video site)
<i>People's Park</i>	Libbie D. Cohn and J.P. Sniadecki	China / United States	Mar del Plata Film Festival- 2012 Lima Independent Film Festival - 2013	Locarno International Film Festival (Switzerland)

The predominant stories told by the movies in the table are about marginalized and abused characters, moving between the metropolis and the countryside, children and youth left behind and striving to survive in poverty (a particular aspect in five of the movies) all as a result of social alienation, the state's obliviousness, and the post-1980s Chinese modernity project.

The films that are radically different from this narrative track are *Blind Detective*, a comedy- drama; *The Grandmaster*, a historical martial arts movie; *My blueberry nights*, a story about women's soul searching and quest for love across the United States; and Tsai's *Visage* and *Walker*, two conceptual films that question modernity's obsession with speed and rationality.

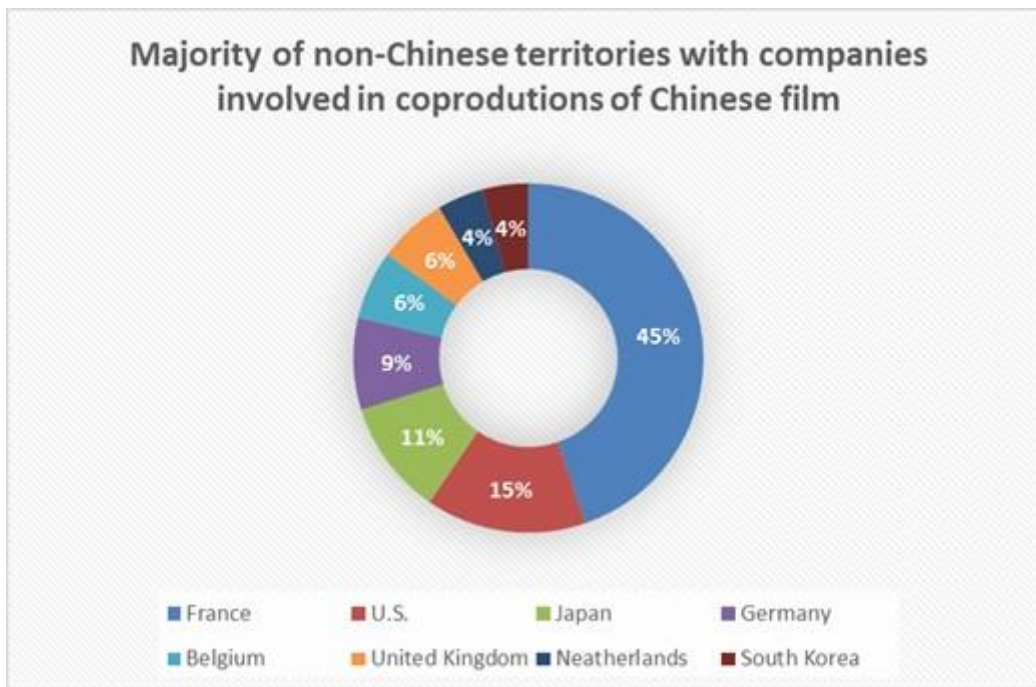
Furthermore, there is a dispersed spatial production of the movies: 4 from the Mainland, 4 co-productions between Hong Kong and the Mainland, 3 films from Taiwan that are mostly coproduced with France, and 1 coproduction between the United States and the Mainland. When looked into the overall landscape of the Chinese films found in the Latin American film festival, the same tensions between Mainland films and co-productions can be observed.

**Figure 3. Case study data. Graph of Chinese film coproductions with Taiwan and Hong Kong**



In addition, the latter amount of co-productions are mainly allocated in France, as the following graph shows.

**Figure 4. Case study data. Graph about countries involved in coproductions of Chinese films**



From the chart I focus in three films: *A Touch of Sin*, *Blind Detective*, and *People's Park*, and on two of the directors that have the most films screened in these venues: Wong Kar Wai and Tsai Ming Liang. This is not exclude other directors whose names appear repeatedly in Latin American film festivals and that are as relevant as the latter two for art houses (Jia Zhangke, Johnnie To, and Zhang Yimou), but rather to observe how their auteur view is a key that constitutes their high position in the hierarchical distribution amongst film festival and inside Latin America.

*A Touch of Sin* is a Chinese-Japanese co-production. Its title is a reference to the 1975 film *A Touch of Zen*, directed by King Hu and also awarded in Cannes Film Festival. The plot tells four fiction stories inspired on contemporary events that made it to the news in different provinces of China. The characters are a miner outraged with the corruption in his village, a factory worker with no economic stability, a receptionist that is assaulted in the workplace, and a thief.



**Figure 5.** Still from movie *A touch of sin* directed by Jia Zhangke

Note. Courtesy of Kino Lorber, Inc (Press kit from <http://www.kinolorber.com/film.php?id=1472> by August 14 2014

The film was distributed by Mk2 (Paris), a group that mainly distributes and advertises auteuristic films and that sold the distribution rights to Kino Lorber in United States. The rights for theatrically releasing *A Touch of Sin* were bought by local companies for every country it was released in, such as Paris Filmes in Brazil. Besides Cannes, it was also screened in film festivals in Vancouver, New York, Rotterdam, Adelaide (Australia), Canberra, Abu Dhabi, and Glasgow, amongst others.

*A Touch of Sin's* reception in global venues after its prize winning debut in Cannes was linked to the sensitive condemnations the film makes against state corruption, social alienation and capitalist exploitation. It is impossible to know which of these (or all) the Chinese film board liked the least, but the screening inside the Mainland has been frozen and media is not allowed to comment on it. Such actions have exacerbated its global circulation. A recent article published in the U.S. pro-Democrat magazine *The New Republic* is an example of such liberal privileging of its 'banned' status; it was titled "China doesn't want you to see this year's best Chinese film. Luckily, I saw it in the U.S" (Beam, 2013).

The fact that films like these are virtually (officially) unscreened in the Mainland, does not mean that they will therefore be massively available outside its borders. In Latin America, its small elitist art venue release may imply the same obstacles for distribution in China; however obstacles that come from different actors: market profit logic for the first and state for the latter.

Among Latin America film circles, the movie had positive reviews. In Argentina, blogger Martín Morales (2013) gave it a rating of 8 out of 10 points ('very good') and titled its post "China's dark side" (*El lado oscuro de China*): "Leave aside all the stereotypes present about crime in the Asian region, mafia, bandits, or smuggling. It is a daunting film, but also a direct critic to the country's social problems". Diego Batlle, a critic for Argentinean national newspaper *La Nación* and editor of the webpage *Otros Cines*, selected *A Touch of Sin* among the top 10 favorites of the 2013 Mar del Plata Film Festival. He wrote: The characters were selected "to portray the spiral of violence and the dehumanization that today result as the counterface of *that* China which is so proud and opulent in certain economic levels".

*Blind Detective* was also screened in the same edition of the Mar del Plata Festival edition as *A Touch of Sin* and it was accompanied by another Johnnie To film, *Drug War*. The first movie recounts a dramatic and absurd story of a blind policeman investigating a crime case.

It was distributed by Media Asia Film Distribution (a subsidiary of a real estate developer and hotel operator in Hong Kong), and which oversaw the distribution of the film in Latin American film festivals. Marcelo Alderete (2013), one of the six programmers of Mar del Plata Film Festival, saw the movie in Cannes and was disappointed that the film was screened in the midnight section and not in the prestigious official competition. He argued that one would have to "invent a new word" just to talk about To's filmic style. In addition, for Morales (2013) it was "weird", "bizarre", "excessive", but "good".

A completely different production and distribution scheme is the one followed by *People's Park*, a single shot documentary of dancing and leisure in Chengdu, Sichuan, co-produced by China and the U.S. It was produced and distributed by the directors themselves and with the support of Harvard Film Study Center and of the 6,699 dollars raised in Kickstarter for post-production costs. On their Kickstarter web page, the directors, Sniadecki and Cohn (2012), wrote that they wanted to capture the "vibrant sociality" of the park: "We fell in love with the people we encountered, and we went every day in July 2011 to dance with friends, sit with the families sipping tea, sing karaoke with retirees, and listen to the daily opera performances under the canopy of mighty sycamores".



**Figure 6. Four stills from the documentary *People's Park***

Note. Courtesy of <http://peoplesparkfilm.com/> (Press kit) Libbie D. Cohn & J.P. Sniadeck

In the Lima Independent Film Festival, *People's Park* won the 'Guerrilla award' for movies made under a short budget. After debuting in Locarno, it was selected – chronologically- by the Beijing Independent Film Festival, Vancouver, Vienna, Festival del Popoli (Florence), where it was awarded 'Best Anthropological film', Mar del Plata, and Riviera Maya Film Festival, among others.

On the one hand, *People's Park* didn't was not the subject of many reviews in Latin American media or blogs. However, in Argentina, Battlle (2012) selected it as a 'pearl' amongst the non-competitive sections of the Mar del Plata Film Festival. He stated he was not sure if it was a 'good' movie: "I am a passionate about what happens in the Asian giant, so I am grateful for this record". On the other hand, in the Lima Independent Film Festival (2013) it was highlighted for its technical quality as "impressionist" and as a "radical observation exercise".

Different from the above newcomers into film festival networks, Wong Kar Wai (director of *My Blueberry Nights* and *The Grandmaster*) had already won best director in Cannes for *Happy Together* and is a constant favorite for capitalist art-houses in the West. His two movies selected in Table 1 are very different.

*My Blueberry Nights*, that had a Western cast (Norah Jones, Jude Law, Rachel Weisz, Natalie Portman) premiered in Cannes and also was selected by Hamburg Film Festival, Oslo, Valladolid, and Munich. Different from most Chinese films in Latin American festivals, this one had theatrical screenings in countries like Argentina (Distribution Company), Chile (Bazuca Films) and Brazil (Europa Filmes), Colombia, Mexico, and Panama.

While catalogued as "cliché" in digital Chilean magazines such as 'Potq.cl', Curiel (2008) highlighted that this was the first time that Wong handed in a completely English-spoken film and that he maintained certain aesthetic-technical aspects of the film's framing and photography. However, this was "the most conventional, least risky" of his movies, one that beats the drum of "used formulas".

*The Grandmaster* also had theatrical screening in Latin America. In Hong Kong, that role was played by media conglomerate Mei Ah Entertainment, one of the giant production companies and multiplex owners in Hong Kong and the third highest Hong Kong company with Sinophone films 'for sale' in the AFM catalogue. In Anglophone countries such as the U.S., Australia, and the U.K., the movie was distributed by The Weinstein Company. In Argentina, a national company, Impacto Cine, did the distribution.

In Mexico, *The Grandmaster* was praised as "pure poetry" (Maristain, 2014) and as an attempt to "recover the traditional Chinese values that he (Wong) had forgotten during the last 30 years"; in a reference to *My Blueberry Nights*. Amongst Chilean digital journalists it was also perceived as his return to China, a return to the motherland.

Tsai Ming Liang is another well-known darling among European film festivals. But his productions are radically different from Wong's. Tsai is recognized by critics for his tendency to make 'slow' movies (*Visage*, *Walker*, *Stray Dogs*). Except for *Walker*—which was distributed online for free by the Hong Kong International Film Festival Society and was only later selected by Cannes- the official circulation of the other two films was made by companies located in Europe. The foreign sales of *Visage* are in the hands of Fortissimo Films (Amsterdam) and in France, of Rezo Films (Paris). *Stray Dogs* - produced by a company created by Tsai and other Asian filmmakers- Urban



Distribution, a French company that specializes in 'independent' films, did the theatrical release in France and Canada. The specialized company Cinema Guild did the same in the U.S. *Stray Dogs* became publicized after the 70th Venice Biennale, where it won the 'Grand Jury' award and was also in the subject of a political dispute due to the fact that it was catalogued as a co-production between France and "Chinese Taipei", under the argument that Italy doesn't recognize Taiwan.

Tsai's films, while experimental and usually never screened in big theaters, have received attention from the media in the Latin American countries where it has been screened. For instance, *Cinética*, a Brazilian online film magazine, did an exhaustive analysis of *Walker*, where it is described as a "performance documentary" (Andrade, 2013). Also, in an Argentinean blog, Juan Zino (2014) wrote about the strangeness of these auteuristic films: "Every two years I watch a Tsai Ming Liang movie and, during the first few minutes, I think 'what the hell is it that I liked about this?'" However, he goes on to write that it takes time to appreciate "poetry, sometimes subtle, sometimes in the edge of a yaw, but that always finds its own unique ways of expressing itself". A Chilean blog (*Civil Cinema*) also highlights the existential 'feel' of these films: "The tissue of society itself, of family and affection, seem liquidated, reduced to rubble" (...) Taipei is reduced to anonymous alleys (...) the happiness of the others remains out of these images. Unreachable" (Ramírez, 2014).

As we have seen, the preferences of festival films are never in a vacuum. Movies can stimulate dialogue over controversial global issues and generate strong political statements to affect an imagined shared consciousness. Likewise Ann Marie Stock writes: "Cinema linked the familiar and the faraway" (1997, p. 29). As such, two conclusions can be extracted from this case study providing a window of how Latin American has been linked with the faraway in these capitalist art-houses.

Firstly, what the above three films and two auteurs reflect is that film festivals are catalyzers and constrainers of dialogue. Despite there being a significant amount of Chinese film in Latin American film festivals -as a proof of Chinese cinemas crossing borders and testifying as rich creative narratives that have earned recognition- such success is also limiting, as affirmed by Lee and Stringer. Indicative of this, 'A-festivals' in

Europe shape the image that we have of Chinese cinemas, they also construct “expectations and assumptions concerning the kind of cinema represented by the signifier ‘Chinese’” (2012, p. 239). In turn, the non-celebrated audiovisual productions that do not foster this ‘taste’ are not only relegated to a lower status of artistic value, they are in all practically non-existent.

The film festivals of this study offer a selection of commodities, whose experiences cannot be found elsewhere in that context, while imposing a pre-judged canon that is problematically allocated by Europe. The price audiences pay to having such constrained view of Chinese cultures is a pre-shaped appreciation and circulation of that knowledge. The price that non-film festival publics pay is a blind acceptance of what there is to like and ignore about cultural references that come from that part of the world.

It is impossible to draw a definitive line to define the distribution of all the Chinese films included in this exploratory case study. There is a networked set of relationships that sometimes reflect high conglomerate concentration of profits, but sometimes also leaves ground for more participative screenings, such as those of *People’s Park* and *Walker*. It is nevertheless impossible to ignore that it was only after these Chinese films were praised in Europe that they were then ‘picked up’ by the Latin American film festivals which tend to include a world panorama every year. As Cubitt (2005) states, “media systems still operate on a deeply conservative maintenance of spatial relations. Ex-colonial capitals still have significant impact on the distributive systems of their old” (p. 208). According to Cubitt, this problematic geopolitical specific ground is a blockade to a more ‘evolved’ form of human communication.

In Zhang’s work (2004), on the hierarchical reinforcement of these films-auteurs circles is acknowledged and also taken by Lee and Stringer (2012, p. 240). The more favorable the comments certain Chinese films have in international film festivals, the more their types of films get produced in an effort to satisfy the global taste for such commodities. Moreover, there is a value added process evolves through film festival relations, awards and favorable critics. “By travelling the circuit, a film can accumulate value via the snowball effect”, writes De Valck (2007, p. 35).

At the same time as these dynamics allow dominant canons to be ever more and more globally distributed, the more access we (academics and students) have, and the more we write about them and legitimize their predominant status.

Secondly, because of the absence of film markets in Latin American film festivals (excluding Mar del Plata and Guadalajara) filmmakers and producers take their movies to the European Film Market (in the Berlinale) and to San Sebastián, in Spain. There is no space for a south-south cinematic regional dialogue without the impulse of state organizations.

What I find problematic here is the lack of sites where filmic cultures (even if they are constituted by purely by blockbusters) from the global south are able to encounter one another in places of mutual recognition. It is always the lens of Berlin, Cannes or Los Angeles distributors the ones used by Latin American film festivals to read Chinese cinemas. Despite the fact that the purpose of these venues is not to promote Chinese films –but rather regional and local productions- they *do* dedicate part of their programming to an overseas section. In other words, to balance their focus on the local, they give glimpses into foreign tendencies that are worth looking at in their contexts.

The self-reflection about the reproduction of what the ‘big’ film festivals choose as important or ‘good’ Chinese films is useful, but not easy. Without a hierarchy that determines what is ‘good’ to watch and what to advertise as valuable cultural beings, what different methodologies can Latin American film festivals use? How to escape the trap of a biased and stratified network without being excluded from the universe of global cinematic knowledge altogether? As the purpose of Latin American festivals is *not* to screen every Chinese movie produced every year, a more nuanced methodology for the decision process of ‘what to screen’ needs to be experimented with. A viable starting point is to give the same attention and programming time to ‘established’ film festival films as well as productions that come from contexts with nascent film discourses, such as schools and grassroots groups; productions that, when they make it, tend to be in the last pages of the catalogs.

Or perhaps it is misleading to put too much power into the hands of film festivals, privileging them as the only way to distribute a wider diversity of Chinese films in Latin

America. Given how problematic their nature as capitalist art houses is, is there a need to restructure cultural network gatekeeping that survives precisely because of its own market dynamics? Would that be ‘wasted ink’? Any alternative is still a small shift in the form and not the substance of film festival’s gatekeeping power, whose interdependence with Hollywood is so deep that it explains the success of film festivals in terms of their permanence as the ‘strainers’ of artistic value and audiovisual culture. It is in the hands of Latin American programmers and distributors to set a new agenda for self-reflection in order to avoid the unconscious desire to be, or at least ‘look’ like Cannes regarding every decision made about the circulation and appreciation of Chinese cinemas.

#### 4.1. New Chinese Documentary Movement and parallel circulation

I will use this brief part of the paper to acknowledge the importance of the New Chinese Documentary Movement (NDM) for any analysis regarding the global distribution of Chinese cinemas. Moreover, it is to highlight that this grassroots low-budget movies have gained so much significance among contemporary film critics around the world, that the Buenos Aires Independent Film Festival (Bafici) featured, in 2010, a special showcase called ‘Radical visions from China’ comprised of the work of eight filmmakers that are framed as part of the NDM.

**Table 2. New Documentary Movement Showcase in Bafici 2010**

Movie	Director	Production/distribution	Theme
<i>Bing Ai</i> (2007)	Feng Yan	Feng Yan Productions	A peasant woman challenges the government by refusing to relocate because of the Three Gorges Dam Project
<i>Disorder</i> (2009)	Huang Weikai	Huang Weikai Digital Filmmaking Studio / dGenerate Films	A collage of censored TV news footage in Guangzhou

<i>Disturbing Peace</i> (2009)	Ai Weiwei	Ai Weiwei (on YouTube and in his webpage)	An artist's struggle against arbitrary state power to defend an activist in a trial
<i>Ghost Town</i> (2008)	Zhao Dayong	Produced by David Bandurski, researcher of a journalism project at University of Hong Kong. / Distributed by Lantern Films, a company created in Hong Kong by Zhao and Bandurski to distribute independent film.	Portrait of an abandoned town in southeast China
<i>Survival Song</i> (2008)	Yu Guangyi	Yu Guangyi	A family's struggle to survive, while the government clears the area to build a reservoir.
<i>Using</i> (2008)	Zhou Hao	Guangdong Twenty-first Century Media Co. / dGenerate Films	Life of a heroin addict and their junkie community.
<i>Wheat Harvest</i> (2008)	Xu Tong	Xu Tong	Story of a young sex worker in Beijing who uses her earnings for an ill father in the countryside.
<i>Ximaojia Universe</i> (2009)	Mao Chenyu	Second Text Laboratory (created by the director)	An experimental film about the Ximaojia ethnic group

*Bumming In Beijing, The Last Dreamers* (1990) is considered by Berry (2010) and Lu Xinyu (2010) as one of starting points of reference of the NDM. Official television station employee Wu Wenguang borrowed equipment to produce a compilation of stories about informal cultural workers in China's capital. He followed an experimental theatre director, a painter, a journalist, and a freelance photographer in their respective quests to make a living out of their independent work as illegal immigrants in Beijing.

It was not until after 1992 that the concept of a somewhat cohesive NDM began to appear in China. The context was the aftermath of the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests and Deng Xiaoping's 'Tour to the South' in 1992, the latter of which marked the already ongoing structural changes that transformed China into a functioning member of the global capitalist economy.

According to Berry and Rofel (2010), the NDM has not yet received significant attention outside of China because the circulation of these films do not tend to be as

rapid as martial art blockbusters or 'artistic' productions. The fact that two decades after the release of *Bumming in Beijing* we are finally witnessing NDM's influence in Latin American capitalist art-venues (such as the Bafici) supports their argument.

While social uncertainty and frustration nursed the emerge of a consciousness that was reflected in the movement's documentaries, technology –specifically the introduction of DVD cameras in the mid-late 90s- played an important role in lowering the costs for independent filmmakers and in empowering new amateurs.

Many of these filmmakers were either working with China Central Television (CCTV) or linked to other broadcasters, a characteristic that has influenced the documentaries of the programming of these official state owned networks. "The roots of the NDM can be found both inside and outside the system", writes Lu (2010, p. 20). Their connection with television had a twofold consequence: it facilitated cheaper production and more mobile distribution (copied discs and digital files), and it allowed these directors to have a bigger "democratic significance, (since) as television employees, the filmmakers can also make more direct and sensitive contact with Chinese society" (2010, p. 30), precisely the audience they want to mobilize with their bottom-up approach.

Today the diversity of NDM producers has extended at almost at the same speed as digital cameras. Always changing, experimental and even using multimedia, the documentaries made by non-corporate initiatives grow at a high rate that is hard to calculate due to the fact that many of these productions stay on local screens (as they were meant to) and therefore go unnoticed by transnational audiences. Either way, NDM productions are not homogenous but rather sometimes even oppositional, as some use 'direct cinema' techniques that characterized the birth of the movement, others explore more individual self-reflexive and avant-garde narratives, such as *Ximaojia Universe*.

For Lu, the importance of the movement lies in its direct opposition to the 'Hollywoodization' of Chinese cinema, which she describes as "apolitical, ahistorical, delocalized, empty visual spectacles" (p. 39) that act as reinforcement of capitalist consumerism, alienation and middle class-upwardness illusions. "The emergence of

NDM is itself a challenge to the mainstream media”, Lu justifies (quoted by Zhao, 2010, p. 20).

The movement has also been intertwined with film festivals, but in a dynamic that is separate from the Chinese feature length films that we examined in Takes 4 and 5. The Yunan Multiculture Film Festival in the south of China is a recent space (it started in 2003) where NDM productions are screened. In addition, Japan has become an interesting site for the transnational support of the movement due to the constant selection of these Chinese filmmakers in the Yamagata Documentary Film Festival that is held every two years and features a New Asian Currents awards. In fact, *Bumming in Beijing* was first formally screened in their Asian program in 1991, during the second edition of the festival. The gatekeeping and distributive relevance of both of this venues is such that half of the movies screened in Bafici (*Ghost Town*, *Wheat Harvest*, and *Survival Song*, and *Ximaojia Universe*) were either in competition in Yunan, Yamagata, or both.

The curation of the showcase for the Argentinean Bafici was done by Canadian critic Shelly Kraicer, programmer in the Vancouver International Film Festival and consultant for other festivals. He described the showcase at Bafici as “a way of thinking that is in direct ideological opposition to the official modes forged and sustained by state power” and “radical spirits” “unearthing and representing officially unrepresentable realities” (2010, p. 357-358).

It is naïve to think that if audiences outside China have a wider comprehension about its culture because of NDM cinematic representations their entire approach to the Mainland will change. However, how we engage and contest stereotypes of Chinese culture might change into a more ‘worldly’ knowledge. While the global distribution of Chinese movies to generate revenues has led to the fracturing of productions sacrificing complexity, contingency, and locality, the New Documentary Movement offers a reflexive and transformative ways for understanding China’s present and contradictory modernization (Lu, 2010, p. 46-48).

While accepting the importance of the NDM, Judith Pernin (2010) and Margherita Viviani (2014) have moved the discussion forward by pointing attention to the

accessibility of these documentaries'. On the one hand, Pernin (2010) understands the independent film distribution as part of the rhizome system. She borrows such concept from Chris Berry's reading of Deleuze and Guattari:

"a rhizome is a system that contains a principle of organization and constraint, but also the possibility for a principle of chaos to exist and allow some elements to escape from it and pursue 'a parallel evolution' with the rest of the rhizome. The national cinema and television system in China represents the former principle, while independent films, by moving cinema practice away from its institutionalized territory to the 'minjian' (people's) realm, is an image of the latter" (p. 33).

For Viviani, on the other hand, it is more useful to observe who are the beneficiaries of their exhibition than to wonder about the uncertainty of a quantitative prospective audience. "Documentary is consumed by people who have a specific interest in the content, such as film professionals, film students, journalists, NGO workers and academics", she states (p. 116). Copied DVDs and downloadable files from the Internet become the general means to consume these movies, an activity that is usually done by small groups or alone.

The films of Table 2 represent the parallel distribution systems under which the NDM mobilizes its audiences. Some productions from filmmakers such as Hu Tong, Huan Weikai, and Zhou Hao are distributed worldwide by Brooklyn based company dGenerate Films, which specializes in independent Chinese movies. Titles such as *Using* can be purchased for \$195 U.S. dollars<sup>8</sup> for colleges, universities and other institutions, or for \$195 dollars for digital downloads that, due to licensing restrictions, can only be played twice. Hence, whilst having a shadow-like informal and open circulation, abroad, some of the movement's documentaries are also part of a capitalist niche consumption system that is fostered by an academic and film festival 'appetite' for 'provocative' stories from China.

A final aspect that needs to be acknowledged regarding the inclusion of NDM in this paper is the fact that it has been conceptualized exclusively as a Mainland

<sup>8</sup> Price available online (<http://dgeneratefilms.com>) by July 24, 2014



phenomenon due to the particular socio-economic juncture that catalyzed it. The production and distribution of most of the movement's movies are inevitably translocal, since they have historically received funding and promotion from film festivals and overseas academia. However, it has yet to be seen if the focus on productions from the Mainland is ignoring similar New Documentary-like initiatives in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and in overseas Chinese communities. The scholarly tendency to separate Taiwanese and Hong Kong aesthetic and narrative separate canons, can be blurring for us shared political anxieties of documentary producers in their experience and frustrations with social inequity in their own contexts.

## **Take 5. (...) ever after. Conclusions**

In the last ten years China has become Latin America's second trading partner. A decade ago, according to Deutsche Welle's reports (2014), transactions rose from 12 thousand million dollars to 261 thousand in 2013. As it becomes more urgent to see China beyond a gigantic economic power into a growing cultural industry power, it becomes crucial that academics, cultural workers, and policy makers start to analyze who gets to represent contemporary China, under what conditions and with which outcomes.

This paper was sought to elucidate how has Chinese cinema(s) been distributed (and therefore reinforced) globally, specifically in capitalist art-venues in Latin America, and what constrains and new opportunities those global circulation flows -always crossed by corporative, state, and ideological power- imply for the access we have of Chinese film.

What does the case study tell us about the ideological projection of China, its culture, and struggles with capitalism is threefold. Firstly, there is restraint. If we look only at the distribution data of Chinese films it will reflect a highly divided ecosystem where the biggest distributors are the ones that can diversity their offers by playing into the film festival system as well as the multiplex. Looking at which distributors get the most revenues or screening out of their movies needs to be balanced with the type of narratives they are circulating about China and which actors actually access them. As we have seen, martial arts action films are the one with the biggest resonance amongst theatrical distribution. This does not mean that it is an opposition to film festival's choices, since many movies and directors 'navigate' between both contexts.

Analyzing how filmic circulation is done (spatially and temporally) has shown us the shifts that take place among ways to access Chinese films (blockbusters, art houses, and grassroots movements' productions). These are not flows that are entirely controlled by the state in opposition to 'dissident' artists, but they are rather a messier exchange of knowledge in which the different gatekeepers of cultural value (such as critics, festivals, audiences) have their place amongst a cultural space that is constantly in tension.

There is also constraint among film festivals themselves. As 'nodes' in the global cinematic network, festivals discursively construct movies that are 'worth watching' while excluding or undermining anything that does not fit in their temporal canons. As Malaysian filmmaker Mansor Bin Puteh wrote in *Time* in July 1997: "Why are the same filmmakers from Asia getting recognition in Cannes? The answer is that they are making the types of films which are liked in Cannes" (Wong, 2010, p. 103). Film festival distribution is also highly Eurocentric since it not only acts like an ideological strainer, but also as a 'shopping cart' where mainly French, Dutch, and British companies encounter new products to diversify their catalogs. In this matter, film historian Miriam Hansen (1997) sees a shift from the early cinema (1920s to 1960s), when mass cultures were related to homogenization and cultural imperialism, into more ambiguous forms of global cultural consumptions: "Operating through diversification rather than homogenization the worldwide manufacture of diversity does anything but automatically translate into a 'new cultural politics of difference'", she states (p. 199).

All things considered, our access of Chinese films is mediated by politicized canons, non-transparent distribution global patterns, and the commodified need of cultural audiovisual references. When embracing an anti-mainstream film rhetoric as a way to legitimize gatekeeping processes, film festival's discourse is not only conceptually misleading -since it ignores the historic interactions with the blockbuster industry- but also reinforces the need for deeper self-reflection and a critical position towards the processes that can dangerously homogenize the knowledge of filmic taste.

Secondly, besides feeding a capitalist art-house market that needs to sell diversity, I also see Chinese cinemas as both part of and a resistance to its own circulation.

While many of the films of the case study were basically capitalized by Hong Kong conglomerates and Western companies, others crossed many of the licensing obstacles and did their debuts in Youku, where most of them are still available. More importantly, *all* of the films are part of an informal not always legal distribution that is impossible to quantify.

In addition, China's cinematic projection is also an opportunity in terms of the stories that film festival-privileged Chinese tell us about its self-image. As the case study shows, most of the films that were repeatedly screened in the Latin American film festivals analyzed narrate eye-opening issues about rural China and its painful social contradictions with urbanism, informal labor, and a market economy. They do so not as a response of a communist ideology that today is purely rhetorical, but in direct contestation against social inequities and alienation created by a global capitalist economy that has deepened exploitation and alienation.

If, as Arturo Escobar argues, regimes of representation are “places of encounter where identities are constructed and also where violence is originated, symbolized, and managed” (1994, p. 10), then Chinese audiovisual regimes of representation merge contradictory identities (and notions of nationality) with a Western expectedness of what Chinese historical heritage is. In the same line, films do not only represent but form and negotiate the social. As Stuart Hall (1995) states, “how things are represented and the ‘machineries’ and regimes of representation in a culture do play a constitutive, and not merely a reflexive, role” (p. 244). Escobar goes on explaining:

“Foucault’s work on the dynamics of discourse and power in the representation of social reality, in particular, has been instrumental in unveiling the mechanisms by which a certain order of discourse produces permissible modes of being and thinking while disqualifying and even making others impossible” (1994, p. 5)

While the development of translocal sites of audiovisual production in China (i.e. Beijing, Taipei, Hong Kong) have constructed an industry that mainly represent urban social realities and contradictions, the circulation in international film festivals (which are translocal sites per se) has also played its role in constituting Western expectedness about China’s struggles with capitalism and its own Oriental exoticness.

Furthermore, sites determine the value of cultural objects. In other words, the space Chinese films and filmmakers occupy govern their relevance as significant representations. The data collected from the film festivals expose a space that is dominated by five auteurs (Jia Zhangke, Jhonnie To, Tsai Ming-liang, Wong Kar-wai, and Zhang Yimou) and an array of stories that mainly portray the marginalized subjects of present China and obliquely tell stories about existentialism, historical heroism, ridiculousness, art, and even narratives that have nothing to do with China at all.

Thirdly, this paper has also seen a space for more diverse Chinese narratives amongst the data analyzed. As a networked system that allows for more 'loose' cultural elements such as the New Documentary Movement, Chinese cinema global circulation reaches Latin American film festivals as photocopies of the 'big' festival selections, but also eventually as a more direct encounter such as the Morelia Film Festival showcase with the Beijing Film Academy. In any case, parallel to the 'easy' martial arts blockbusters film festivals audiences have accesses an image of a highly critical Chinese society, one that is rebellious toward state institutions and frustrated with their social conditions.

If "what does not exist is in fact actively produced as non-existent, that is –as a non-credible alternative to what exists" (Santos, 2006, p. 15), such states of absence must be linked to further questions about how they are affecting our dialogue with other cultures.

As I have interiorized the 'isms' (systems of thought) to abstract knowledge, I am aware that this paper has started and ended under an umbrella of Western thought so understand cultural circulations amongst contexts in the 'South'. It will be enriching for future academics works such as this one to use thought from Sino-language texts.

In addition, many other questions remain unanswered about whether there is a multidirectional blindness. "Today, we [in China] are no longer willing to cast our eyes on the 'Third World'. Our understanding of the US and Europe far exceeds that of Asia, Africa and Latin America," comments Yuezhi Zhao (2010, p. 24).

While this study can help set a ground for other analysis about the relation between the lack of co-productions Latin America-China and the constraining distribution capitalist landscape that Chinese films face globally. This also ties us to a 'chicken and egg' question: are Chinese cinemas not being distributed in Latin America because of a common apathy towards it? or is there disinterest towards Chinese cinemas because Latin American audiences had never historically have the opportunity to engage with them due to lack of distribution? However a conundrum much is left to be said, written and shoot about the routes that Chinese cinemas will take as its global influence disproportionately awakens global interest.

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## Appendix A.

### Chinese feature and short films in Latin American film festivals

**Table A1. Mar del Plata Film Festival (2012-2013)**

Source: <http://www.mardelplatafilmfest.com/28/> (last revised on July 25, 2014)

Festival edition	Title	Director	Year	Country of production	Award
2012	Memories look at me	Song Fan	2012	China	Special mention
	People's park	Libbie D. Cohn and J.P. Sniadecki	2012	U.S./China	
	Walker	Tsai-Ming Liang	2012	China/Hong Kong	
	The land of hope	Sion Sono	2012	Taiwan/Japan/UK/Germany	
2013	A touch of sin	Jia Zhangke	2013	China	
	Blind Detective	Jhonnie To	2013	Hong Kong/China	
	Drug War	Jhonnie To	2012	Hong Kong/China	
	The new one-armed swordsman	Chang Cheh	1971	Hong Kong	

**Table A2. Buenos Aires Festival Internacional de Cine Independiente. Bafici (2008-2014)**

Source: <http://festivales.buenosaires.gob.ar/> (last revised on July 25, 2014)

Festival edition	Title	Director	Year	Country of production	Award
2008	Useless	Jia Zhangke	2007	China	Best Actress / Special Award from the Jury
	Night Train	Diao Yanan	2007	China / France	
	Fujian Blue	Robin Weng	2007	China	
	Little Moth	Peng Tao	2007	China	
	Crime and Punishment	Zhao Liang	2007	Germany	

	Fengming, a Chinese memoir	Wang Bing	2007	China/ Hong Kong / Belgium	
	We went to Wonderland	Xiaolu Guo	2008	United Kingdom	
	Help me eros	Kang-sheng Lee	2007	Taiwan	
	One way Street on a Turntable	Anson Mak	2007	Hong Kong	
2009	I can't live without you	Leon Dai	2009	Taiwan	
	Orz Boyz	Gilles Ya-Che Yang	2008	Taiwan	
	My life as McDull / Mc Dull, prince de la Bun / Mc Dull, the alumni	Toe Yuen	2001	Hong Kong	
2010	Bing Ai	Feng Yan	2007	China	
	Crossing the Mountain	Yang Rui	2010	China	
	Disorder	Huang Weikai	2009	China	
	Disturbing Peace	Ai Weiwei	2009	China	
	Ghost Town	Zhao Dayong	2008	China	
	I went to the zoo the other day	Luo Li	2009	Canada / China	
	McDull, Kung Ku Kindergarten	Brian Tse	2009	China/Hong Kong/ Japan	
	Oxhide	Lui Jiayin	2005	China	
	Oxhide II	Lui Jiayin	2009	China	
	Sun Spots	Yang Heng	2009	Hong Kong / China	
	Survival Song	Yu Guangyi	2008	China	
	Using	Zhou Hao	2008	China	
	Wheat Harvest	Xu Tong	2008	China	
	Ximaojia Universe	Mao Chenyu	2009	China	
	Petition	Zhao Liang	2009	China / France	Special Mention in Human Right
	Visage	Tsai Ming-Liang	2009	France/ Taiwan/ Belgium / Neatherlands	
	Yang Yang	Chengyu Chien	2009	Taiwan	
2011	Lao Wai	Fabien Gaillard	2010	China	
	Rivers and my father	Luo Li	2010	China / Canada	
	The old donkey	Li Ruijun	2010	China	
	Resampling the past	Marco Wilms	2010	Taiwan	
2012	Mr. And Mrs. Incredible	Vincent Kok	2011	China / Hong Kong	
	Postcards from the zoo	Edwin	2012	Indonesia/ Germany/ Hong Kong/ China	

	Warriors from the rainbow	Wei Te-Sheng	2011	Taiwan
	About July	Wei Te-Sheng	1999	Taiwan
	Cape No.7	Wei Te-Sheng	2008	Taiwan
	Love me not	Gilitte Pik Chi Leung	2012	Hong Kong
2013	Three Sisters	Wang Bing	2012	Hong Kong/ France
2014	Journey to the West	Tsai Ming Liang	2014	France / Taiwan
	A political Romance	Hsieh Chun-Yi	2013	Taiwan
	Stray Dogs	Tsai Ming Liang	2013	Taiwan/ France
	Ice Poison	Midi Z	2014	Taiwan / Burma

**Table A3. Guadalajara International Film Festival – (2011-2014)**

Source: [www.ficg.mx](http://www.ficg.mx) (last revised on July 25, 2014)

<b>Festival edition</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Director</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Country of production</b>	<b>Award</b>
2012	Hetun (Blowfish)	Chi-Yuam Lee	2011	Taiwan	
	In the mood for love (Fa yeung nin wa)	Wong Kar Wai	2000	Hong Kong	
2014	Rigor Mortis	Juno Mak	2013	Hong Kong	

**Table A4. Monterrey International Film Festival (2004-2013)**

Source: <http://www.monterreyfilmfestival.com/> (last revised on July 25, 2014)

<b>Festival edition</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Director</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Country of production</b>	<b>Award</b>
2004	Pan Tian Shou	Joe Chang	2003	China	
2006	Sunflower	Zhang Yang	2005	China	
	Life, Beyond Life	Wong Yan-Chun, Lui Cheuk-Hang	2006	Hong Kong/ China	
	Father and Son	Joe Chang	2005	China/ Canada	

2007	The Go Master	Tian Zhuangzhuang	2006	China/ Japan	
	Tea Horse Road Series: Delamu	Tian Zhuangzhuang	2004	China	
	Springtime in a smalltown	Tian Zhuangzhuang	2002	China/ Hong Kong/ France/ Netherlands	
	The Knot	Yin Li	2006	China	
	The Tokyo Trial	Qunshu Gao	2006	China	
	Innocent As I Was	Xiao Xiao	2007	China	
	Getting home	Yang Zhang	2007	China/ Hong Kong	
	Crazy Stone	Hao Ning	2006	China/ Hong Kong	
	Blooming Flowers in Springtime	Chang Zheng	2001	China	
	Mama	Li Jia	2001	China	
	Hot Pot	Du Peng	2002	China	
	Little Yard	Xie Xiaojing, Tian Zhuangzhuang, Cui Xiaoqin	1978	China	
	The Grassland	Wan Ma Cai Dan	2002	China	
	About Life	Yu Shui	2001	China	
	Mice's Wedding	Zhang Fan	2002	China	
	Jump, Jump	Guo Dawei and Tan Nuo	2002	China	
	The Pond	Huang Ying	2001	China	
	Rabbit's Tail	Luo Yin	2001	China	
	Mummy Story	Dong Zhengliang	1997	China	
	The Childhood	Liu Jia	2001	China	
	Exiled	Johnnie To	2006	Hong Kong	
	Isabella	Ho-Cheung Pang	2006	Hong Kong	
2008	The red awn	Cai Shangjun	2007	China	
2010	Crossing the Mountain	Yang Rui	2010	China	
	Little by little	Leung Kin Pong	2010	Hong Kong/ China	Best fiction short
2011	Chongqing Blues	Wang Xiaoshuai	2010	China	
	Hope Certificate	Ching-Yu Yang	2011	Taiwan	
	Snooker	Jeffrey Miller (U.S.)	2010	Hong Kong	
2012	The only flower (short)	César Pérez Herranz (Spain)	2012	Spain / China	
2013	Blossom with tears (short)	Huaqing Jin	2012	China	

**Table A5. Morelia International Film Festival (2003-2013)**Source: <http://moreliafilmfest.com/ediciones-ficm> (last revised on July 25, 2014)

Festival edition	Title	Director	Year	Country of production	Award
2004	Hero	Zhang Yimou	2002	China/ Hong Kong	
2005	Grain in ear	Zhang Lu (South Korea)	2005	China/ South Korea	
2006	Platform	Jia Zhangke	2000	China	
	Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles	Zhang Yimou	2005	Hong Kong/ China/ Japan	
2007	My Blueberry Nights	Wong Kar Wai	2007	Hong Kong/ China/ France	
2009	City Scene	Zhao Liang	2005	China	
2013	The Grandmaster	Wong Kar Wai	2013	Hong Kong/ China	

**Table A6. Rio de Janeiro International Film Festival. (2011-2013)**Source: [www.festivaldoriorio.com.br](http://www.festivaldoriorio.com.br) (last revised on July 25, 2014)

Festival edition	Title	Director	Year	Country of production	Award
2011	Sacrifice	Chen Kaige	2010	China	
	Under The Hawthorn Tree	Zhang Yimou	2010	China	
	Mr. Tree / Hello ! Shu Xian Shengm	Han Jie	2011	China	
2012	Ai Weiwei, never sorry	Alison Klayman	2012	U.S.	
	High Tech, Low Life	Stepehn Maing	2013	U.S.	
	UFO in her eyes	Xiaolu Guo	2009	U.S.	
	Egg and Stone	Ji Huang		China	
2013	Alone	Wang Bing	2012	Hong Kong/ France	
	American Dreams in China	Peter Chan	2013	China	
	Blind Detective	Johnnie To	2013	Hong Kong/China	



**Table A7. Sao Paulo International Film Festival. (2007, 2013)**Source: <http://37.mostra.org/en/> (last revised on July 25, 2014)

<b>Festival edition</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Director</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Country of production</b>	<b>Award</b>
2007	The World	Jia Zhangke	2004	China/ Japan/ France	Retrospective
2013	A touch of sin	Jia Zhangke	2013	China	
	Back to 1942	Feng Xiaogang	2012	China	
	Cableway Doctor	Lei Xianhe	2011	China	
	Caught in the Web (Suo Suo)	Chen Kaige	2012	China	
	Final recipe	Kin Jin-a	2013	China/ South Korea	
	Flying swords on dragon gate	Tsui Hark	2011	China	
	Lost in Thailand	Xu Zheng	2012	China	
	Mark of Youth	Siu Hung Cheung, Zhong Shao Xiong	2013	China	
	Red obsession	David Roach, Warwick Ross	2013	Australia/ China/ UK, France/ Hong Kong	
	The bullet vanishes	Lo Chi-Leung	2012	China / Hong Kong	
	The monkey king	Tang Cheng, Wan Laiming	2012	China	
	The rice paddy (France)	Zhu Xiaoling	2012	China/ France	
	The Grandmaster	Wong Kar Wai	2013	Hong Kong/ China	

**Table A8. Valdivia International Film Festival (2013)**

Source: www.ficvaldivia.cl/ (last revised on July 25, 2014)

<b>Festival edition</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Director</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Country of production</b>	<b>Award</b>
2001	In the mood for love	Wong Kar-wai	2000	Hong Kong/ China/ France	Best feature film
2007	Still Life	Jia Zhangke	2006	Hong Kong/China	Best feature film / Best actor
2013	Stray Dogs	Tsai Ming-liang	2013	Taiwan/ France	

**Table A9. Santiago International Film Festival (2005-2013)**

Source: www.sanfic.com/ (last revised on July 25, 2014)

<b>Festival edition</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Director</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Country of production</b>	<b>Award</b>
2005	Kung fu Hustle	Stephen Chow	2004	China/ Hong Kong	
	House of Flying Daggers	Zhang Yimou	2004	China/ Hong Kong	
	2046	Wong Kar-wai	2004	Hong Kong/ China/ France/ Italy/ Germany	
2006	Dumplings	Fruit Chan	2005	Hong Kong	
2007	I don't want to sleep alone	Tsai Ming-liang	2006	Malasya/ China/ Taiwan/ France/ Austria	
	Midafternoon barks	Zhang Yuedong	2007	China	
	I want to dance	Hu Shu	2006	China	
2008	Fujian blue	Robin Weng	2007	China	
	Lust, Caution	Ang Lee	2007	China/ Taiwan/ U.S.	
	My blueberry nights	Wong Kar-wai	2007	Hong Kong/ China/ France	

2009	I can't live without you	Leon Dai	2009	Taiwan	Special mention
2010	One Day	Hou Chi-Jan	2010	Taiwan	
	Visage	Tsai Ming-liang	2009	France/ Taiwan/ Belgium / Neatherlands	
2012	Egg and Stone	Huang Ji	2012	China	
2013	The Grandmaster	Wong Kar Wai	2012	Hong Kong/ China	

**Table A10. Lima Film Festival (2009-2014)**

Source: [www.festivaldelima.com/2014/](http://www.festivaldelima.com/2014/) (last revised on July 25, 2014)

Festival edition	Title	Director	Year	Country of production	Award
2011	Sauna on Moon	Zou Peng	2011	China	
2014	Journey to the West	Tsai Ming Liang	2014	Taiwan/France	

**Table A11. Lima Independent Film Festival (2012-2013)**

Source: [www.limaindependiente.com.pe/web/](http://www.limaindependiente.com.pe/web/) (last revised on July 25, 2014)

Festival edition	Title	Director	Year	Country of production	Award
2012	People's Park	Libbie Dina Cohn, J.P. Sniadecki	2012	U.S./China	Guerrilla filmmaking
2013	Walker	Tsai Ming-liang	2012	China/Hong Kong	