Globalization and film locations: Runaway productions in Hong Kong

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"Nobody cares about Hong Kong film." I was on the set of a Hong Kong film shoot in October 2021, and a film director[1] that I have known since I started research on film/TV production here in 2005 uttered this to me, as he had many times over recent years. The director's remark referred to his perception of a lack of interest on the part of young people to pursue a career in the Hong Kong film industry, making feature (narrative, non-fiction) films geared to theatrical release. While there remains a stream of Hong Kong storytellers, some of whom are working toward a less commercial capacity, other interlocutors had over the years also commented that working within the Hong Kong film industry is not generally regarded in Hong Kong society as a worthy profession to aspire to, years even before the territory's National Security Law's[2] film censorship measures started to take hold.

The director had invited me to visit a nighttime film shoot in Sai Wan on Hong Kong Island. It was 9 p.m. and the film crew had begun setting up along a narrow street near a subway station exit. The sequence involved a man chasing a racing car down the street, which entailed the involvement of a car stunt team. "Hopefully we'll finish before the sun comes up," the director commented. As the crew set up the shot in the heat and humidity of the evening, all of them wearing masks, pedestrians streamed past us: backpack-wearing university students, residents walking dogs, shoppers ducking in and out of small businesses lining the sidewalk. A shirtless man pushed a metal cart piled high with rubbish past us, near the lighting equipment, and a couple of young men who had just bought cold drinks from the nearby 7-11 stood drinking and talking in an alley off the street. Meanwhile, three elderly men strolling past the crew paused to gather around a nearby parked car that had been ticketed, exclaiming over the price of the fine. The passersby barely looked at the crew, and the director and I chuckled over the three men showing more interest in the parking fine than in the car stunt being set up. Once filming started, crew members were stationed at the street corners to temporarily re-route oncoming traffic and halt pedestrian activity. In Hong Kong, location filming by local crews is not an uncommon sight. Between takes, activity resumed with minimal disruptions, the local filming absorbed into the rhythm of the urban environment.

In this paper, I take up the director's observation to examine some of the challenges of working in the Hong Kong film industry, as they demonstrate, I contend, some of the complexities of media labor amid globalizing processes. The instability and uncertainty of media labor has been documented in media industries around the world, what media scholars Michael Curtin and Kevin Sanson refer to as "precarious creativity" (2016). The precariousness is a major deterrent, especially in a city that has in the past twenty years increasingly seen its industry overshadowed by mainland China's growing film industry and market, as well as Hollywood's influx of blockbusters into its local theaters and, as I illustrate here, onto its streets for location filming. This paper draws on multi-sited anthropological research I conducted in the Hollywood and Hong Kong film industries between 2003 and 2007, and in 2011, that compared how media professionals addressed risks of media production in a globalizing world (Martin 2017). The two industries are renowned for producing commercially oriented

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film, and also share a nearly century-long history of flows of labor, ideas, and cinematic genres, their convergences forming, I argued, transnational media assemblages. Ethnographic fieldwork included observing location filming in Hong Kong and an internship at a Hollywood production company at a Los Angeles studio and working as an "extra" on Hollywood film/TV sets.[3] Exemplifying the transnational, and transpacific, nature of filmmaking, I occasionally met with research participants from Hong Kong in Los Angeles, and numerous Hollywood-based filmmakers and film executives in Hong Kong. While there were clear contrasts between the Hollywood and Hong Kong film industries, there were also striking commonalities between them, including a sense of unease among production workers about their future, as production was becoming unmoored from each industry's historic geographic base: Hollywood's experiencing an increase in partially outsourced "runaway productions" out-of-state and overseas, and Hong Kong's with production jobs moving to the mainland amid a growth in Hong Kong-China co-productions. Globalization – entangled in localized neoliberal imperatives and broader geopolitical concerns – may hold varying *specific* consequences for both production centers, yet salient similarities nevertheless existed between them.

Extending from the film shoot described above, I focus on location filming in Hong Kong as part of Hollywood's globalizing processes and de-centralization of production through what industry scholars refer to as "runaway productions." I demonstrate that the reception of Hollywood runaway productions in Hong Kong reveals that the postcolonial Hong Kong SAR government privileges facilitating foreign filmmaking in the territory over local Hong Kong filmmaking as part of a broader cultural logic in Hong Kong that has historically favored expatriates and business elites. Location filming, I contend, not only contributes to cinematic storytelling but constitutes a narrative in its own right, a public performance that conveys to onlookers the Hong Kong government's valorization of foreign (and particularly Hollywood) media production as part of what David Harvey refers to as urban entrepreneurialism, despite disruptions those productions may cause and the needs of local storytellers that remain overlooked. These events illustrate the complex cultural dynamics at play within globalization.

Overview

To briefly contextualize, the Hollywood and Hong Kong film industries are both commercially oriented, yet they are situated quite differently. Hollywood, established in approximately 1915, is located in a state mythologized for its strong frontier ideology (Messeri 2016, 47), within a nation-state many consider an imperial power (McGranahan and Collins 2018). Hong Kong's film industry is based in a territory colonized by the British starting in 1841, prized for its harbor. Hong Kong was occupied by the Japanese military during the second Sino-Japanese War, and post-war, in the resumption of British administration, the film industry was not immune from Cold War tensions (Fu and Yip 2019). After the 1997 handover, Hong Kong became a Special Administrative Region of China as part of "one country, two systems" governance.

Hollywood's domination of film markets around the world, especially after World War II, is due in part not only to extensive global distribution networks facilitated by US multinational media corporations but to American "exertion of political pressures on other countries to open their markets to freer trade … Indeed, Hollywood has always received abundant help from the U.S. State Department, the Commerce Department, and other agencies of federal government," (Scott 2005, 153). From the 1910s, Hollywood was, and remains, a vehicle to communicate US cultural values and advertise US commodities for audiences both domestic and international. In contrast, Hong Kong's film industry was offered little support by first the British colonial and, post-1997, the SAR governments (Chan, Fung, and Ng 2013). Yet for many decades, Hong Kong's film market influenced regional and international audiences, and was designated a "Hollywood of the East" by film scholars for its high output in the 1970s-80s (Fu and Desser 2002; Stokes and Hoover 1999). By the early 1990s, locally based film productions started to decline (Szeto and Chen 2013), and the city's current theatrical output would increasingly emerge through co-productions with China, particularly after the implementation of the 2003 trade agreement, the Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement. Hong Kong's film industry and financial services are seen by Western and especially American film companies as a stepping-stone for entering mainland China's market, and in subsequent years, Hollywood, like Hong Kong, has forged closer ties to mainland China for its promise of profits. Local Hong Kong productions currently play to more niche audiences locally and internationally, while also obtaining distribution on the globally streaming platform Netflix.

As various scholars of Hong Kong film have asserted, the Hong Kong government, especially under the British colonial administration, did not provide support for sustainability as a viable commercial market (Chan, Fung, and Ng 2010; Szeto and Chen 2013). Joseph Chan, Anthony Fung, and Chun Hung Ng

argued, "it is simply not fair to leave the Hong Kong film industry to struggle on alone in light of the fact that it has only a small domestic market to start with" (2010, 82). In the past eighteen years, Hollywood films have generally dominated the top ten grossing films of the Hong Kong box office, with the number one grossing film from 2006 to 2020 a Hollywood production (Box Office Mojo 2021). Throughout my research, industry members complained of a lack of interest and support from the government. Despite the glamour often associated with celebrity, some research participants' family members discouraged them from a career lacking what is considered the respectability of white-collar professions in legal, medical, or academic fields. These young people (many from a middle-class background) have also been strongly encouraged to pursue stable and secure professions, which working in the precarious film industry is not, even prior to the increasing scrutiny that the territory's industry is undergoing with recent amendments to its Film Censorship Ordinance. Even in the past several years, university students and young professionals, especially young women, have described family expectations to pursue more "respectable" and practical jobs than those in film. Reports of Triad involvement in filmmaking have also been a hindrance to the film industry's respectability (see Curtin 2007; Martin 2012). The next section examines how these aspects of Hong Kong's film industry intersect with globalizing media production processes.

Runaway productions

"Runaway production" is a term that refers to the de-centralization of Hollywood's Los Angeles base, with productions filmed overseas or outside of southern California. In what media scholar Daniel Steinhart identifies as the beginning of Hollywood's globalization of production processes, the aftermath of World War II saw an uptake in Hollywood productions filming overseas in diverse international locations resulting from a new emphasis on realism and a push for Hollywood studios to hire cheaper labor overseas, combined with the lure of foreign subsidies and tax incentives (2019, 5–6). Runaway productions were (and remain) pursued for two main motivations: economic (including using stand-in locations) and creative, in the quest for locales considered "authentic" to the story. Both kinds include combining key Hollywood crew members with local, on-site labor. According to Steinhart, the term "runaway" was adopted by Hollywood unions in the late 1940s to designate those productions that sought to avoid paying American union rates (2019, 26). Media scholars have been largely critical of contemporary runaway film and television production for its association with outsourcing to cheap(er) labor, weakening of union oversight, loose environmental protections, and reliance on foreign tax subsidies and domestic tax credits which they refer to as a form of "welfare for the wealthy" for Hollywood studios (Mayer 2017, 2; Miller et al. 2005). The globally fragmented labor process of media production enforces what Toby Miller et al. refer to as "contingent labor as a way of life" (2005, 123), and based on the New International Division of Labor, they conceptualized this fragmentation as the New International Division of Cultural Labor, which relies in part on "the role national governments play in collusion with MNCs [multinational corporations]" (2005, 120).

"Authentic" narratives on location

"Creative" runaway productions – those that seek authenticity – while perhaps a more legitimate endeavor than a purely economic one, can nevertheless be a fraught transcultural undertaking, especially considering historical interactions between film industries and the broader geopolitics surrounding them. A runaway production that filmed in Hong Kong for creative reasons, with its "authentic" locale matched to the source material, recently made international headlines, in August 2021.[4] The star and executive producer of US-based Amazon Prime Video's upcoming series *Expats*, Australian-American Nicole Kidman, flew into Hong Kong on a private jet on August 12 to film her scenes. Kidman was vaccinated but granted an exemption by the Hong Kong government from the mandatory seven-day designated hotel quarantine for other Australians. The exemption was criticized as she flew in from Sydney, Australia, which was experiencing a surge of the highly contagious Delta variant of Covid at the time such that the quarantine for arrivals from Australia was extended to fourteen days from August 20 onwards. The reason given for Kidman's exemption by Hong Kong SAR's Commercial and Economic Development Bureau was "for the purpose of performing designated professional work, taking into account that it is conducive to maintaining the necessary operation and development of Hong Kong's economy" (CEDB 2021). Select bankers and diplomats also enjoyed this privilege. Kidman reportedly resided on the island's Peak, an exclusive area historically restricted to non-Chinese by the British colonial government. Meanwhile, the Asian American director of *Expats*, Lulu Wang, was not allowed to forego two different rounds of the mandatory twenty-one-day quarantine for travelers from the US, according to her Instagram

account. Kidman was also seen shortly after her arrival shopping in Central Business District; it was not clear if she had deviated from her government-approved itinerary, but the Secretary for Commerce and Economic Development claimed that Kidman's outing may have been for a costume fitting. In English-language news outlets and on social media, people expressed indignation that Kidman was granted an exemption, but it was defended by the government.

The filming of *Expats* struck a sour note with local journalists and commentators (see Hui and Li 2021). *Expats*, based on an English-language novel by Janice Y. K. Lee, is about the lives of three American expatriate women in Hong Kong. Journalists pointed out the juxtaposition of the HKSAR government facilitating an Amazon production filming on the city's streets while at the same time unprecedented film censorship was being proposed in the city for local productions and local stories. It is also important to note here that Kidman's government exemption could have resulted in a public health crisis for Hong Kong, which the government claims to be avoiding at all costs in its Zero Covid policy, especially as Kidman filmed in some of the densest areas of the city, such as Mongkok and Central Business District. The "authenticity" that this runaway production provided for Amazon conveyed another stark truth, already familiar to Hong Kong people, of the city's privileging of business elites, especially western ones. Further, as I show below, the government's approval for a foreign production that would showcase the city's gleaming landscape and private lives of expats who interact minimally with local individuals and issues drew on the territory's consistent tactic of attracting and associating with transnational capital by advertising its high-end global brand.

The disparities in potential harms and privilege for local conditions that come with runaway productions echoed an earlier Hollywood-Hong Kong encounter. In November 2007, Warner Bros.' blockbuster *Batman: The Dark Knight* filmed in Hong Kong, the director, Christopher Nolan, seeking to feature the city's famous skyline. At a press conference for the eight-day production, the Chairman of the Hong Kong Film Development Council, Jack So, announced, "I am sure Batman will further raise Hong Kong's profile and attract more tourists to come here" (Press Release 2007). Given the dominance of US blockbusters in international markets, which beckon global audiences to imagine themselves amongst cultural landmarks and national treasures (Appadurai 1996), it was not surprising that a government media authority sought inclusion of the city in this Hollywood spectacle. Domestically, the filming drew crowds as well; in contrast to the nighttime film shoot described earlier and most other local filming I observed, people flocked to watch *Batman* filming, which a Hong Kong newspaper reported as an exciting event for "cooperative" onlookers, quoting a local newspaper vendor who apparently claimed that "20% of his newspapers were unsold but it was a 'worthy sacrifice to have such a big movie shoot here'" (Crawford and Chan 2007). The *Batman* production even received permission from the government to close down some local businesses surrounding the escalator in the busy financial and tourist center of Hong Kong Island. Yet while the government welcomed the film shoot, criticism came from other quarters. In response to the production's request for businesses to keep the city lights on throughout the night for filming, environmentalists such as Gabrielle Ho, from conservation group Green Sense, balked, telling US media, "We welcome the filming of 'Batman' in Hong Kong, but why do we need to keep the lights on to make the backdrop? It seems like filmmaking is coming before environmental protection," (CBS/AP 2007). Media scholar Vicki Mayer points out the "imperial" quality of Hollywood runaways with their capacity for "occupation" of other places (2017, 46) bringing, in these cases, disruptions with implications for local public health and light pollution concerns.

The HKSAR government's accommodation of *Batman* also drew criticism from the local film community. The production was supplied police officers to manage bystanders while filming outdoors, leading Hong Kong film director Johnnie To Kei-fung to complain that the government "can offer 100% support for them, but they can't even offer 1% to us locals. It's discrimination, because we Chinese are not worth as much cash to them (Ho 2007)." Runaway productions thus represent not only the global coordinates of filmmaking, but iterations of Hong Kong's colonial and racial hierarchies. As historian Poshek Fu chronicles in the first half of the twentieth century:

> Racism was rampant in the colony, where both everyday life and social life was racially segregated. For example not only were the natives not allowed to live in certain residential neighborhoods, such as the Peak, which were marked out for the ruling elite … but they were paid less than whites were for the same work (2002, 66).

Local filmmakers discern the disparities in access to various locations and forms of assistance, which also publicly demonstrate to Hong Kong people that western productions, especially Hollywood ones typically fronted by white foreigners, receive preferential terms. Throughout my research in Hong Kong, complaints from film producers about the lack of assistance from the government's media authorities often arose (Mar-

tin 2017). A film producer criticized the double standards:

> I would tell the police that my films were promoting Hong Kong, making it look good, but they didn't care. We'd get into huge shouting matches in the street and they'd waste my time. But when foreigners film a Coke commercial here, that's a different matter. Everything is available to them. (p. 117)

Stories of police harassing film crews on location while demanding to see location permits, instead of protecting the crews, were also recounted to me. According to a member of the Hong Kong Stunt Man Association, for several decades colonial and postcolonial government authorities had not adequately protected crews filming outdoors when threatened with theft and extortion by local gangs. A film director pointed out that outdoor filming comprises up to two-thirds of a lot of Hong Kong films, and so operating without the government's assistance and the free or low-cost protection of law enforcement for crowd control is challenging. Producers complained that they were forced to pay police offers to work as private security in their off-duty hours, without their police uniforms to scare gangsters off. As far back as 1992, film workers (including Jackie Chan) staged a public protest against Triad violence in filmmaking, which included disruptions on location (Passmore 2006). Meanwhile, the disruptions that runaway productions bring are dismissed by governments colonial and postcolonial. Together, this communicates to local onlookers, who include young people and "influencers" savvily photographing the city for their social media accounts, that local productions do not command the respect and institutional support that foreign, and especially Hollywood, ones do.

The Hong Kong government appears to host Hollywood runaway productions as a way to broadcast the city's lifestyle and leverage its soft power. This tactic invokes David Harvey's notion of urban entrepreneurialism, of which, Harvey notes, "the selling of the city as a location for activity depends heavily on the creation of an attractive urban imagery" (1989, 13). City governance entices consumption by "appear[ing] as an innovative, exciting, creative and *safe* place to live or to visit, to play and consume in" (9, italics added). Hong Kong politician Regina Ip recently asserted that despite political and pandemic troubles, "Brand Hong Kong" remains viable and compelling for Amazon and Kidman, stating "the film producer's choice of Hong Kong for location shooting, despite competition from other Asian cities, gives a big boost to its reputation as a *safe* and hospitable city" (Ip 2021, italics added). Meanwhile, another Hong Kong-based, expatriate-centered novel, *Exciting Times*, currently being adapted by Amazon Studios, may also film in the city. Although Harvey does not cite hosting Hollywood runaway productions as a tactic of urban entrepreneurialism, I contend that extending his concept to runaway productions in Hong Kong highlights the government's desire to sell the city's urban imagery as a means for it to further associate with transnational capital and tourism. Yet Hong Kong develops and displays an "image of prosperity" to hook Hollywood runaways even as the postcolonial urban governance continues to overlook the needs of local filmmakers (Harvey 1989, 14). Hong Kong researchers Chan, Fung, and Ng recommended the importance of the HKSAR government promoting a "*local* film culture" (2010, 5); however, the government prioritizes advertising its sights and offering its support services over nurturing its homegrown, and home-based, film talents – a Hong Kong boosterism achieved through Hollywood blockbusters, the government tethering itself to a US soft power resource in the hopes of touting its own.

Steinhart does point out that in the post–World War era, "[European] industries welcomed Hollywood production and financing at the same time that they resisted it (2019, 13–14). Regarding the *Batman* production, the HK Film Development Council chairman remarked that overseas film productions in Hong Kong could bring new technology and facilitate exchanges and employment opportunities, benefiting the local film industry. Numerous research participants spoke of gaining experience on runaway productions in Hong Kong; a production manager for instance cited the technical skills he and his peers gained by working on a blockbuster of this scale that they used on jobs elsewhere. Praise for the local film industry was also voiced by the Film Development Council, its chairman noting that "the *Batman* team would gain first-hand experience of the local crew's efficiency and professionalism" (news.gov.hk 2007). Yet when the chairman remarked that "Films for international release will also help showcase Hong Kong to an international audience," the government's stakes in accommodating overseas filmmaking in the territory became clear. Showcasing Hong Kong through global Hollywood is a coup for the city, less so its film industry.

Conclusion

Returning to the film director's comment that "Nobody cares about Hong Kong film," it is understandable that members of the local film industry feel that their efforts are marginalized given the lack of support from both the British colonial and the postcolonial

SAR governments. They see a discrepancy in their treatment compared to Hollywood runaway productions, which I suggest reveals the government's preferentialism toward foreign/Hollywood productions as a dimension of urban entrepreneurialism. These discrepancies are also discernible to residents of the city, including potential filmmakers, reinforcing a cultural hierarchy in global filmmaking.

Endnotes

1 To protect privacy, I do not use individuals' real names, unless they are mentioned in media reports, and obscure production details as needed.

2 The National Security Law was implemented in Hong Kong on June 30, 2020, after the 2019 protests to prevent and impose punishment for offences of secession, subversion, organization and perpetration of terrorist activities, and collusion with a foreign country (e-legislation.gov.hk).

3 To overcome challenges to "studying up," I also analyzed industry records (where available) and entertainment news.

4 Hong Kong does not offer tax credits or rebates for overseas productions; however, film crews that enter Hong Kong are not subject to customs duties on the importation of equipment (HK Film Services Office).

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