

Hollywood in China:
The Chinese Reception of *Titanic* as a Case Study

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ABSTRACT

With China's increasingly globalized economy and Hollywood's notorious role in the global culture industry, scholars are taking particular interest in the effect of transnational commodification on Chinese culture. This paper studies the relationship between Hollywood and the Chinese culture industry, using China's reception of the 1998 film *Titanic* as a case study to explore the complex institutions at play in the production, distribution, consumption and reception of Hollywood films in postsocialist China. In terms of box office revenue, *Titanic* remains one of the most successful films ever released in China. This paper argues that *Titanic* resonated with Chinese audiences not only due to elements of globalization –such as transnational capitalism and Hollywood's hegemony distribution model- but also because the film reflects themes consistent with class consciousness rooted in recent Chinese history as well as individualism in youth culture today. This exploration of the *Titanic* phenomenon in China also highlights the role of transnational commodification in culture-making. Furthermore, this paper explores how commercial successes like *Titanic* in China paved the way for the dominance of co-productions (strategic joint productions between Hollywood and Chinese studios), which now dominate the Chinese film market and blur the lines of cultural origin.

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INTRODUCTION

The film, *Titanic*, directed and written by James Cameron, took the world by storm during its worldwide releases that began in 1997. There was an immediate appeal from audiences everywhere to be a part of what Gaylyn Studlar and Kevin Sandler, in *Titanic: Anatomy of a Blockbuster*, call the biggest, “most expensive, and most technologically advanced movie” of its time, telling the story of “the biggest, most expensive, and most technologically advanced ship” of its time.¹ Beyond the initial interest in *Titanic*’s technological and cinematic impressiveness, audiences worldwide connected with its story of a love that surpassed social classes, gender expectations, and even death. *Titanic* broke box office records in numerous countries, but China was the only country to repeat (and even augment) its enthusiasm with the 2012 re-release, *Titanic 3D*. And by some standards, *Titanic* (Chinese transliteration: *Taitannike*) is arguably the most popular movie to hit Chinese box offices. My goal in studying the reception of *Titanic* in China is to explore whether or not its popularity in China has uniquely Chinese causes and to investigate what those causes might be. Furthermore, with *Titanic* as a case study, I aim to explore the relationship between Hollywood and Chinese culture, specifically the role of Hollywood and its cultural vestiges in China’s culture industry.

Hollywood played a heavy hand in the early development of the Chinese film industry. Hollywood has been a strong commercial and cultural force in many countries and China is no

¹ Kevin S. Sandler and Gaylyn Studlar, *Titanic : Anatomy of a Blockbuster* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999), 1.

exception. The tale of Hollywood's relationship with China is a particularly dynamic one given the dramatic political, economic and cultural changes that have taken place in China in the 20th century. Hollywood was instrumental in developing the Chinese film market during the first leg of the 20th century but communism brought Hollywood's reign over the Chinese film market to an abrupt halt. Under the rule of Chairman Mao Zedong beginning in 1949, Hollywood films were banned for portraying Western bourgeois ideology.² China's production studios struggled to stay afloat without Hollywood's commercial clout. During the Socialist Era (1949 – 1976)³ and in the early years of post-socialist China, the film industry faced a barrage of financial hindrances: few-to-no imported films led to less theater traffic;⁴ since Chinese studios could not partner with Hollywood studios, this meant fewer resources for producing and marketing films;⁵ and for much of the Communist Period, it was mandated that all art (including film) be produced solely as propaganda promoting the socialist ideals of the Chinese Communist Party. Film ceased to function as a profit-making commodity.⁶ By the time Hollywood films returned to China's cinema screens at the end of the 20th century, the Chinese film industry was primed to restore its deeply co-dependent relationship with Hollywood, for better or worse.

² Jonathan Noble, "'Titanic' in China: Transnational Capitalism as Official Ideology?," *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 12, no. 1 (2000): 189.

³ The Socialist Era (1949 – 1976) is also referred to as the Communist Period, the Maoist Phase or the Maoist Era.

⁴ Ting Wang, "Hollywood's Crusade in China prior to China's WTO Accession," *Jump Cut* 49 (2007): 5–7, <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc49.2007/TingWang/>.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 6–8.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

Today, these two institutions (Hollywood and the Chinese film market) are increasingly intertwined. For Hollywood, the Chinese film market presents huge potential for investment growth and Hollywood has the capital to fit the bill. Hollywood is aggressively investing in production companies in China. In addition to being an investment opportunity, working together with Chinese production companies helps Hollywood studios get around many of China's film import regulations.⁷ The number of Chinese films making a market impact has been increasing both in China and internationally but, for the Chinese filmmakers and production companies who rarely see commercial success on the level of Hollywood in China, working with a major Hollywood studio opens up opportunities for profit. As a result, the Chinese film industry is thriving, the number of theaters in China is growing exponentially and most major films released in China are co-productions between Hollywood and Chinese studios that blur the lines of cultural origin.

With China's increasingly globalized economy and Hollywood's notorious role in the global culture industry, scholars are taking particular interest in the effect of these types of transnational commodification on Chinese culture. For instance, in his 1998 article "Globalization of Culture," Weng Naiqun of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences points to *Titanic* as evidence of the globalization of culture taking place in China as a result of the globalization of China's economy: "*Titanic*, which received so much media and popular attention prior to its release, is definitely unprecedented in Chinese history." Weng argues that

⁷ Don Groves, "Film: China Eager to Increase U.S. Imports," *Variety (Archive: 1905-2000)*, July 10, 2000, 8.

this attention is not due simply to *Titanic's* impressive Oscar nominations or its huge Hollywood budget. "...The factor that should not be neglected, is that people's lives in the realm of politics and economics have undergone great changes in recent years. If a person conducted research on the history of imported film in China, the media, and audience response, then he or she would certainly be able to write a history of contemporary China from a unique perspective.... The globalization of culture, along with the globalization of economy, both express a certain order...the old order will definitely be replaced by the new one."⁸

RECEPTION IN CHINA

Titanic's overwhelming adoration in China places it as an important part of popular culture. Regardless of the acclaim or criticism of critics, the wave of craze surrounding *Titanic* is big enough that it should be looked at as a cultural phenomenon to be explored. Countless films -Hollywood and otherwise- use cutting-edge technology, aggressive marketing, award-winning actors, renowned directors, and universally-stirring themes like forbidden romance, gender roles issues and class tensions without creating an impact on cultural history like that of *Titanic*.

In the film, *Titanic*, an elderly woman, Rose DeWitt Bukater, revisits her experience on the RMS Titanic, a cross-national state-of-the-art cruise liner that sank in the Atlantic Ocean in April of 1912. Rose tells the story of a tragic disaster and a forbidden love between Jack Dawson, a penniless artist from the coach class at the bottom of the ship, and herself, an educated young

⁸ As cited in: Noble, "'Titanic' in China," 185.

woman from first class. Both the disaster story of the RMS Titanic and the love story of Jack and Rose traverse all human distinctions, including class, gender, economic status, and morality. Rose is a middle-class girl whose mother is desperately trying to hold onto their foothold in the upper echelon of society. Rose feels tragically confined by her gender and social obligations until she decides to take her own life, a twist of fate in which she meets steerage passenger, Jack Dawson, who rescues her literally and figuratively from her restraints. These two characters are catastrophically separated by Jack's drowning, but not before the pair challenges every established social system they encounter.

Titanic enjoyed record-breaking success in China during its first release in April of 1998 and again during its re-release, *Titanic 3D*, in April of 2012, which marked 100 years since the ship's sinking on the night of April 14, 1912. *Titanic* was the first motion picture to earn \$1 billion worldwide and ended up grossing over \$1.8 billion worldwide with its first release. *Titanic's* impact on the Chinese box office in 1998 was historically unparalleled and *Titanic* was the highest grossing film in China for the next eleven years.⁹ The feature film made \$24.4 million in its first month in China, a phenomenon Chinese media called the *Titanic* "miracle" (*qiji*).¹⁰ *Titanic* was superseded once in 2009 by *Transformers* only to steal back its no. 1 spot with the 2012 re-release of *Titanic 3D*.¹¹ In contrast, *Titanic* broke the Japanese box office

⁹ Sandler and Studlar, *Titanic*, 1.

¹⁰ Noble, "'Titanic' in China," 164.

¹¹ Barbara Klinger, "Contraband Cinema: Piracy, Titanic, and Central Asia," *Cinema Journal* 49, no. 2 (2010): 110.

record as well, but that record was superseded just two short years later, whereas *Titanic* held China's record for over ten years.¹²

In 1998, the year *Titanic* was first released in the PRC, China saw the opening of just 82 feature films and the domestic box office grossed a whopping 1.4 billion RMB. This 1998 annual gross was not topped until 2004 when 212 films were released in Chinese theaters.¹³ This feat is particularly impressive given the fact that holding a box office record for even a year is uncommon in China given the dramatic (and ongoing) industry growth. Since the late 1990's and continuing today, theater chains have been developing new cinema complexes as quickly as money can buy in order to cash in on the untapped markets of China's growing middle-class consumers.¹⁴ Unlike Japan, where the theater industry has long been relatively saturated, China's market still has a lot of room to grow and thus has supported exponential theater development with drastic year-over-year revenue growth.¹⁵ Nonetheless, for six years (from 1998-2004), China's theater industry growth was no match for the *Titanic* "miracle" responsible for 1998's historical revenue level.

Box office statistics can point to meaningful industry impact but of course revenue does not directly indicate cultural significance. The statistics are endless and staggering, but *Titanic*'s

¹² "H'WOOD BURIES OVERSEAS PIX," *Variety*, January 25, 1999, Academic OneFile.

¹³ Darrell William Davis, "Market and Marketization in the China Film business.(IN FOCUS: China's Rise)," *Cinema Journal* 49, no. 3 (2010): 122.

¹⁴ "Research and Markets: China Film Industry Report, 2009-2010," *Business Wire*, October 4, 2010, General OneFile, http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA238572672&v=2.1&u=ksstate_ukans&it=r&p=ITOF&sw=w&asid=016945934fc11533025d442bd6985735.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

shockwave through China is evident through more than just these astonishing statistics. *Titanic* enthusiasm spread quickly through China, even to outlying and distant areas. In “*Titanic* in China”, Jonathan Noble notes: “When visiting Lijiang in June 1997, one of my students asked the Naxi tour guide to sing a Naxi folk song. She agreed to sing, but selected ‘My Heart Will Go On.’ The following year, those selling bamboo flutes from Guizhou to Xinjiang had all apparently adopted the song as their advertising jingle”.¹⁶ In Zhang Yimou’s film, *The Road Home* (1999), two *Titanic* posters bedeck a wall in the home of a village teacher.¹⁷ One state-owned company bought tickets for all of its employees to see *Titanic* after reports emerged that then-party chairman Jiang Zemin was touting character Jack’s role as a working-class hero.¹⁸ All of these examples speak to how quickly and deeply *Titanic* penetrated various levels of Chinese culture. *Titanic*’s absorption into Chinese culture is evident, but China overwhelmingly surpasses the rest of the world in its adulation of the re-release of *Titanic 3D*. While the interest of American audiences waned quickly, the fanaticism of Chinese moviegoers has yet to subside. Chinese theaters demolished the box office sales of all other countries showing *Titanic 3D*.¹⁹ This is due, in part, to China’s large population and increase in theaters, but China also broke its own record for biggest opening at the box office with the \$67 million grossed just from the debut of *Titanic 3D*. The second-biggest opening for *Titanic 3D* was in Russia –another post-socialist country-

¹⁶ Noble, “‘Titanic’ in China,” 165.

¹⁷ Jihong Wan and Richard Kraus, “Hollywood and China as Adversaries and Allies,” *Pacific Affairs* 75, no. 3 (2002): 434, doi:10.2307/4127293.

¹⁸ Sienna, “Class Struggle on a Sinking Ship: *Titanic* in China,” April 18, 2012, <http://www.cityweekend.com.cn/beijing/blog/class-struggle-on-a-sinking-ship-titanic-in-china/>.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

where the film grossed just \$3.2 million compared with China's \$67 million.²⁰ *Titanic 3D* undeniably received its warmest welcome in China.

China echoes its applause for *Titanic* through consumption of the film at all levels. China poured cash into the box offices to see *Titanic* but the market for *Titanic* merchandise continues to thrive. Celine Dion's song "My Heart Will Go On" from the *Titanic* soundtrack earned Celine Dion instant popularity in China. Her celebrity status in China has remained so elevated that "My Heart Will Go On" was featured in the first season China's national singing competition show "The Voice of China" in 2010 (similar to "American Idol") and Celine Dion sang as a guest on the show "Strictly Come Dancing" in 2011 (similar to "Dancing With the Stars").²¹ Even more impressively, Celine Dion was a featured performer singing in Mandarin at the 2013 Chinese New Year Gala and the 2013 Spring Festival Gala.²² Blue Star Lines has taken fanaticism to a new level, venturing to create a life-size replica of the RSS *Titanic* in a Chinese theme park, complete with an iceberg, a crash and a simulation of rushing waves. The theme park in Sichuan Province plans to open this \$165 million replica to visitors in 2016.²³ Mr. Su

²⁰ Andrew Stewart, "Boffo China B.o. Raises 'Titanic'.(FILM)(box Office of 'Titanic' 3D)," *Variety* 426, no. 11 (2012): 18.

²¹ *My Heart Will Go On by Nike- Audition 6 The Voice of China 1, 2012*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eIV8hMdGbRo&feature=youtube_gdata_player; "Celine Sings 'Breakaway' on 'Strictly Come Dancing,'" *The Official Celine Dion Site*, accessed October 23, 2014, <http://www.celinedion.com/ca/news/celine-sings-breakaway-strictly-come-dancing>.

²² "Celine Dion's Chinese New Year Song," *BBC News*, accessed October 23, 2014, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-21401187>; "Celine Dion," *The Official Celine Dion Site*, accessed October 23, 2014, <http://www.celinedion.com>.

²³ David Stout, "Chinese Theme Park Plans Replica *Titanic* (And Yes, It Will Hit an Iceberg)," *Time*, accessed October 23, 2014, <http://world.time.com/2014/01/14/chinese-theme-park-plans-replica-titanic-and-yes-it-will-hit-an-iceberg/>.

Shaojun, CEO of the Seven-Star Energy Investment Group that funded the project, promoted the replica project saying, “The universal love and sense of responsibility shown during the Titanic shipwreck represent spiritual richness of the human civilization so I think it’s necessary for us to do what we do.”²⁴ Blue Star Lines doesn’t just tout the values of the story of the RSS Titanic. The company also draws connections to the film *Titanic*. The spokesman for the project? The company hired actor Bernard Hill who played Captain Edward Smith in *Titanic* to help promote it.²⁵

TRANSNATIONAL CINEMA, TRANSNATIONAL CAPITALISM, AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE *TITANIC* PHENOMENON

This paper is a theoretical essay that endeavors to unravel some of the complexities of the relationship between Hollywood and the Chinese film industry, using reception theory to examine *Titanic* as a case study. In the context of transnational cinema, reception theory is concerned with examining how and what meaning is created through spectators’ experiences of viewing a film and interacting with the text (in this case, the Chinese spectators’ experience of viewing *Titanic*). Such an approach argues that meaning is generated via examination of contextual factors that may influence the spectator’s view.²⁶ These contextual elements include genre, history, politics, globalization, and elements of identity such as ideology. Although this

²⁴ Venus Wu and Joyce Woo, “Titanic Museum, Shipwreck Simulator to Anchor Chinese Theme Park,” *Reuters*, January 13, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/01/13/us-china-titanic-idUSBREA0C06S20140113>.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ “Reception Theory,” *Film Reference*, n.d., <http://www.filmreference.com/encyclopedia/Independent-Film-Road-Movies/Reception-Theory.html>.

approach requires some exploration of the text of *Titanic* –including some technical analysis- the substance of this explanatory model is generated through analysis of *Titanic's* placement in the recently-marketized film industry of postsocialist China.

Scholarly analysis of transnational popular culture unavoidably includes a discussion of globalization and, more specifically, transnational capitalism. Existing scholarship generally agrees that globalization -which includes transnational capitalism- influences national societies and the consciousness of individuals within those societies.²⁷ However, when it comes to scholarly studies of globalization and its cultural forces, any common agreement ends there. Much of the existing scholarship endeavors to explain *how* globalization and transnational capitalism affect culture, attempting to answer questions such as: is transnational capitalism one-directional or multi-directional? Are American cultural products responsible for the erasure of local cultures? Does globalization actually form more distinct divisions between societies? Arjun Appadurai addressed this topic in a six-year study published in his book *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (1996). Appadurai summarizes that the answers to these questions surrounding the effect of globalization on culture generally fall into two categories: 1. Those that argue that culture is homogenizing towards one global culture.²⁸ This includes George Ritzer's (2002) argument that the United States' dominance of the global

²⁷ Lydia H. Liu, "Beijing Sogourners in New York: Postsocialism and the Question of Ideology in Global Media Culture," *Positions* 7, no. 3 (Winter 1999): 766–7.

²⁸ Arjun Appadurai, "Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization" (University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 37.

market is resulting specifically in Americanization or “McDonaldization” of world cultures;²⁹ And, 2. Those that argue against theories of a global culture homogenization.³⁰ These arguments include Mehdi M. Semati and Patty J. Sotirin’s (1999) argument that America’s cultural hegemony increases cultural polarization in societies that resist commodification and mass-media consumerism;³¹ and the argument examined by George Ritzer and Mike Ryan (2003) that products of globalization are uniquely interpreted at the local level, thus making it such that individual localities maintain cultural distinctions.³² As Jonathan Noble points out, examination of these paradoxical theories could not be more relevant than in the example of *Titanic* – a film that disparages the wealthy elite yet, in practice, exemplifies the profit-driven commoditization of transnational cultural products.³³

Using reception theory to explore the case of *Titanic* in China, I also must examine the varying views on the cause of *Titanic*’s success in general and in China specifically. Unarguably, at the surface of *Titanic*’s appeal in China, lie the characteristics that first appealed to much of the world audience, but the vehemence of China’s response to *Titanic* following both releases

²⁹ George Ritzer, author and Professor of Sociology at the University of Maryland, coined the term “McDonaldization” to describe the process by which societies and institutions adopt principles of uniformity, efficiency, and corporatization. I will revisit the McDonaldization theory in subsequent chapters; George Ritzer, *McDonaldization: The Reader* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Pine Forge Press, 2002), 5.

³⁰ Appadurai, “Modernity at Large,” 37.

³¹ M. Mehdi Semati and Patty J. Sotirin, “Perspectives: Hollywood’s Transnational Appeal: Hegemony and Democratic Potential?,” *Journal of Popular Film & Television* 26, no. 4 (Winter 1999): 186–7.

³² George Ritzer and Mike Ryan, “Towards a Richer Understanding of Global Commodification: Glocalization and Globalization,” *The Hedgehog Review* 5, no. 2 (2003): 67–8.

³³ Noble, “‘Titanic’ in China,” 168.

and reverberation of interest in the fourteen years in between them suggests there are deeper, Chinese characteristics at play as well. At the superficial level, most audiences were attracted to first see *Titanic* just to see what the world's most expensive movie would look like.³⁴ In Studlar and Sandler's introduction to *Titanic: Anatomy of a Blockbuster*, they use the words of journalist Michael Klein of *Detroit News* to explain that the public market was buying into a disaster with overwhelming intensity. The film and its resulting markets (i.e. fashion crazes, media trends, etc.) were all capitalizing on a basic human fascination with catastrophe.³⁵ James Cameron creates a "visual history" in which the audience feels it has actually participated in an important historical event.³⁶ Chinese film critic, Xie Xizhang, romantically explains the general infatuation with *Titanic* saying that, although intellectual criticisms may prop up later, during the film, audiences "are probably completely controlled by the film, which causes us to lose our intellects. Our feelings, like a spring tide, overflow our hearts. We are immersed totally in pleasurable emotions, like idiots, happy idiots." However, these are general and superficial attractions to a feature film that do not account for the underlying magneticism of *Titanic*.

Audiences may have first been attracted to the disaster and spectacle of *Titanic*, but different countries and different cultures did not read the film identically. In India, *Titanic* only reached no. 8 at the box office in 1998 and *Titanic* only held the box office record in Korea for one year, indicating that this film did not resonate with *every* country the way it did with China

³⁴ Alexandra Keller, "Size Does Matter: Notes on *Titanic* and James Cameron as Blockbuster Auteur," in *Titanic : Anatomy of a Blockbuster*, ed. Kevin S. Sandler and Gaylyn Studlar (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999), 132.

³⁵ Sandler and Studlar, *Titanic*, 1.

³⁶ Keller, "Size Does Matter," 147.

and others.³⁷ Reports of Japan's response to the film appeared preoccupied with the reactions of certain characters in the face of tragedy while British audiences showed a tendency to read the film as an allegory of class tensions.³⁸ These generalizations are oversimplified, without a doubt, but the fact remains that global popularity does not erase the utility of examining a national response. Scholar, Weng Naiqun, of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences makes the observation that *Titanic's* historically unmatched popular attention in China is influenced by the fact that "people's lives in the realm of politics and economics have undergone great changes in recent years. If a person conducted research on the history of imported film in China, the media, and audience response, then he or she would certainly be able to write a history of contemporary China from a unique perspective." Jonathan Noble adds to Weng's comments, elucidating that audience response analyses are crucial to examining China's contemporary history.³⁹ Xiang Yong, Vice Director of the Institute for Cultural Industries at Beijing University, takes this evaluation of the film industry's role in culture even a step further.⁴⁰ In an interview with *The Guardian*, he is quoted saying, "There's a saying that Hollywood is the real foreign ministry of the United States, which shows the importance of the movie industry.... From a

³⁷ Stanley Rosen, "Hollywood, Globalization and Film Markets in Asia: Lessons for China?," *University of Southern California, Los Angeles*, 2003, 17, http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/docs/icb.topic152447.files/rosen_Hollywood.pdf.

³⁸ Klinger, "Contraband Cinema," 111.

³⁹ Noble, "'Titanic' in China," 185.

⁴⁰ Professor Xiang Yong also holds the positions of Dean Assistant of the Peking University School of Arts and Vice Director of the Cultural Industry Innovation and Development Academy; Faculty Listing (Peking University School of Arts: Peking University, 2008), <http://web5.pku.edu.cn/artpku/Academic/Faculty/6293.htm>.

cultural perspective the promotion of the movie industry is an important way to strengthen the soft power of our country."⁴¹

In my research, I found only one comprehensive piece of research concerning the film *Titanic* and its position in the relationship between China and Hollywood. This is Jonathan Noble's article, "'Titanic' in China: Transnational Capitalism as Official Ideology?" published in the journal *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* in 2000. Noble uses transnational capitalism as his primary category of analysis to examine many of the topics discussed here regarding the economic relationship between Hollywood and China, the role of government policy and government promotion in the reception of *Titanic*, and the function of cultural products in culture formation.⁴² Noble's article provides a thorough analysis of the homogenization of culture vs. heterogeneity of culture argument (the question of whether or not globalization is leading to an erasure of local cultures) by providing a synopsis of the leading theories in this area.⁴³ Noble does not attempt to settle this argument and instead highlights the financial and commercial practices in the Chinese film industry that, he argues, lead to a "transcultural phenomenon termed 'production fetishism' by [Arjun] Appadurai" in his book *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (1996).⁴⁴

⁴¹ Jonathan Watts Beijing, "Chinese Cinema to Challenge Hollywood," *The Guardian*, September 14, 2010, sec. Guardian International Pages, 20, <http://search.proquest.com.www2.lib.ku.edu:2048/docview/750411918>.

⁴² Noble, "'Titanic' in China."

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 167–169.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 170; Appadurai, "Modernity at Large."

Noble's conclusion is that transnational capitalism is a primary driver of culture formation due to the commodification of film and other cultural products. While my research generally agrees with this conclusion, there are several key differences in our approaches and conclusions. Noble examines the intricacies of the marketing techniques used to promote *Titanic* in China in much more detail than is allowed by my broader approach. Noble's research concentrates predominately on the business and political relationship between Hollywood and China. I attempt to provide unique contributions to this topic by examining ideological similarities between Chinese culture and themes of the film *Titanic*, Chinese filmmakers' anxieties surrounding Hollywood dominance and, specifically, an analysis of Zhang Yimou's film *The Road Home* (1999) as a response to *Titanic*. Noble does not address potential ideological factors involved in the reception of *Titanic* addressed here. In fact, Noble identifies egalitarianism as a predominant theme of the film *Titanic*, but he discounts the role of egalitarian sentiment in Chinese culture as potential contributor to *Titanic's* success in China, a notion I will examine further in this article.⁴⁵

I do not endeavor to argue in defense of or against the notion of globalization as a homogenizer of culture, nor do I attempt to exactly postulate all of the forces (political, psychological, or otherwise) at play in the reception of *Titanic* in China. However, by exploring the context of this film as a commoditized cultural product and Hollywood export as it relates to Chinese spectators and consumers, I aim to offer an illustrative model by which to conceptualize the mutual dependence of Hollywood and the Chinese film industry. Mass

⁴⁵ Noble, "Titanic' in China," 168, 190.

consumption of cultural products closely ties capitalism with national and global culture in free markets. The marketization of China's economy has generated a rapidly-growing middle-class eager to indulge in the commoditized film market and the *Titanic* phenomenon in China highlights the role of transnational commodification in culture-making.

China's reception of *Titanic* in 1998 was strong enough to merit investigation; and China's unparalleled response to *Titanic 3D* in 2012 –coupled with the countless examples of how deeply this film has permeated throughout different areas of Chinese culture -almost demands investigation. I argue that *Titanic* resonated with Chinese audiences not only due to elements of globalization –such as transnational capitalism and Hollywood's hegemony marketing and distribution model- but also because the film reflects themes consistent with class consciousness rooted in recent Chinese history as well as individualism and wealth-centered ideologies in youth culture today. Furthermore, I use *Titanic* as a case study to examine China's complex relationship with foreign markets, which includes the role of government and agency policy, the Chinese film industry, Hollywood, and global economic factors in the formation of commoditized culture products.

CHAPTER ONE: MARKET FORCES AND CHINA'S FILM INDUSTRY

GLOBALIZATION & MARKETING

Titanic was promoted as a global film from the beginning, with releases in Tokyo, Japan and London, England before even being released in the United States, a move most Hollywood marketing experts found risky⁴⁶. *Titanic* broke box office records in numerous countries, but China was the only country to repeat (and even augment) its enthusiasm with the 2012 re-release, *Titanic 3D*.

The typical demographic of the *Titanic* audience in China is almost one and the same with the typical demographic of Chinese moviegoers; the National Research Group divides moviegoers into four main quadrants –females under age 25, females over age 25, males under age 25, and males over age 25- and, while most film audiences draw from one or two quadrants, *Titanic* drew strongly from all demographics.⁴⁷ As Lin Hao points out in his 1999 study of China's urban cinema consumption, China's movie-going audience is relatively (and increasingly) diverse with the caveat that this theater-going audience is not economically diverse and affordability stands out as one of the biggest determinants of audience composition.⁴⁸ Going to a movie in China in 1998 was reserved for the well-to-do and not much

⁴⁶ Klinger, "Contraband Cinema," 110.

⁴⁷ Keller, "Size Does Matter," 141; Edward Jay Epstein, "Multiplexities (Annals of Commerce)," *The New Yorker* 74, no. 19 (1998): 34–7.

⁴⁸ Lin Hao, "Tentative Discussion of China's Urban Cinema Consumption," *Chinese Education & Society* 32, no. 2 (1999): 83–85.

has changed in the last 17 years.⁴⁹ In 1998, movie tickets to see *Titanic* averaged \$10 each, a week's pay for the common urbanite in China.⁵⁰ In 2012, a ticket to see *Titanic 3D* ran viewers 150 RMB (\$24) on average⁵¹, roughly one-seventh of the average weekly income for urban residents in China. The statistics on the affordability of these tickets dramatically worsens when adjusted to include the average wages of rural residents. These steep financial limitations greatly narrow the movie-going audience in China but *Titanic* still reaches a wide audience of diverse demographics. It must also be noted that box office and film industry statistics of China are not as accurate as those of most other countries where the reporting systems are more sophisticated (although the reporting systems of all countries are vulnerable to error due to the fact that most rely on word-of-mouth reports).⁵²

Globalization has played an important role in increasing the presence and influence of Hollywood films in China in general. *Titanic* entered the Chinese film market at a time when producers and distributors were just beginning to see film as a profit-making commodity instead of just as a cultural product or as propaganda. However, this new-developing commodification of film had yet to translate into increased earnings. The grand majority of Chinese films were struggling to turn a profit and Chinese film companies were eagerly looking

⁴⁹ Noble, "'Titanic' in China," 189.

⁵⁰ Kevin Platt, "'Titanic' Cultural Invasion Hits China: Beijing Worries That Hollywood Images Will Lure the Young from Communism as They Search for 'New Values and New Heroes,'" *Christian Science Monitor* 90, no. 100 (April 20, 1998): 1.

⁵¹ Chris C. Anderson, "China Censors Kate Winslet's 'Titanic 3D' Breasts," *Huffington Post*, April 11, 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/04/11/china-censors-titanic-3d-boobs_n_1417894.html.

⁵² Yingjin Zhang, "Chinese Cinema in the New Century: Prospects and Problems.(cover Feature: China today)(Industry Overview)," *World Literature Today* 81, no. 4 (2007): 3.

to Hollywood for new strategies. Although globalization alone does not explain why *Titanic* has stood out from other Hollywood films in China, it is still important to understand the role globalization has played in *Titanic's* staggering box office statistics.

In his article, "East Asia and Globalization: Challenges and Responses", Samuel S. Kim attempts to define globalization (a continually debated term) as one of two extremes: a domination of a global economy in which the function of the state disappears or an ineffectual "force" in which the global climate is not actually changed.⁵³ Peter J. Katzenstein, in his article, "East Asia-Beyond Japan", specifies that globalization "results both from generic modernization and from specific adoptions of U.S. products and practices".⁵⁴ While I reject Katzenstein's notion that globalization arises only *from* modernization and Americanization –globalization interacts closely with but is not linearly dependent on modernization- Katzenstein's definition is highly relevant in the Chinese context. Technological and economic modernization have opened the door for China in the way of increasing communications and transnational exchanges (both cultural and economic) and the most prominent materializations of globalization in China do tend to be U.S. products and practices. To view globalization simply as a one-directional transfer of products from the United States is an oversimplification. For the purpose of this analysis we can view globalization as a multi-directional process that yields transnational cultural flows and the homogenization of economies.

⁵³ Samuel S. Kim, *East Asia and Globalization*, Asia in World Politics (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000), 3.

⁵⁴ Peter J. Katzenstein and Takashi Shiraishi, *Beyond Japan : The Dynamics of East Asian Regionalism*, Cornell Studies in Political Economy (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 8.

HOLLYWOOD AND THE CHINESE FILM INDUSTRY: A COMPLICATED HISTORY

China is one of only a few countries introduced to cinematography at its earliest stage, with its first introduction in Shanghai in 1896, just a year after Frenchman Louis Lumière invented cinematography. And Hollywood had a strong influence on the Chinese film industry from its initial development. The first Chinese film review to be published came in 1897 after an American named James Rication showed some short film shots in Shanghai.⁵⁵ The review called the show an “American electrical light shadow play”⁵⁶ and referred to it as “magical and illusionary, all beyond imagination.”⁵⁷ In his article about the multifaceted relationship between Hollywood and China, “Hollywood and the Chinese Other”, Tan Ye, an associate professor of Chinese and Comparative Theater at the University of South Carolina, points out that this first film review stands as evidence that the basic tenets of Hollywood film – “to entertain with novelty and sensuality”- had already materialized in China.⁵⁸

At the beginning of the 20th century, as Hollywood emerged as an institution of the American film industry, Hollywood’s stronghold on the Chinese film industry developed in tandem.⁵⁹ An American merchant named Benjamin Polaski founded the first production

⁵⁵ Tan Ye, “Hollywood and the Chinese Other,” *CineAction*, 2003, 11.

⁵⁶ The Chinese word for “film”, “*dianying*” can be literally translated as “electric shadow”. Tan Ye suspects the Chinese term may have originated from this 1897 film review.

⁵⁷ Ye, “Hollywood and the Chinese Other,” 11.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Michael Baers, “Hollywood,” in *St. James Encyclopedia of Popular Culture*, ed. Thomas Riggs, 2nd ed., vol. 2 (Detroit: St. James Press, 2013), 696, http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CCX2735801286&v=2.1&u=ksstate_ukans&it=r&p=GURL&sw=w&asid=61a022297fae9756400eabb1b9431555.

company in China, The Asian Film Company, in 1909 in Hong Kong. The company subsequently moved to Shanghai where it employed prominent Shanghai writers and performers, but its film production relied on foreign funding and technology. With Hollywood's pioneering technology and trademark appeal of spectacle, films first came to dominate the Chinese film market in the 1920's and 1930's. By 1927, U.S. feature films made up 75% of all motion pictures shown in China. The number of Chinese movie theaters grew from approximately 100 cinemas in 1927 to 250 cinemas nation-wide in 1930. Eager to capitalize on the popularity of Hollywood films, as many as 200 of those theaters showed exclusively imported films, leaving a very small market for Chinese domestic films. By 1936, Hollywood films made up 89% of all films screened in Chinese theaters.⁶⁰

China ceased screening Hollywood films after the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. Under Chairman Mao Zedong's communist reforms, China's market moved towards self-reliance. Furthermore, the government mandated that Chinese cultural products like literature and film were produced solely for the purpose of furthering the ideals of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Hollywood films were not shown again in the PRC until the end of the 1970's when Mao Zedong's successor, Deng Xiaoping, implemented a series of economic and political reforms in an effort to open the Chinese markets.

Deng Xiaoping's efforts towards marketization and globalization -known as the "Reform and Opening Up"- eased the restrictions on international trade and allowed U.S. cultural imports but, even then, the Hollywood feature films released in China were very restricted.

⁶⁰ Wang, "Hollywood's Crusade in China prior to China's WTO Accession."

Foreign films scarcely played at Chinese cinemas. China's exposure to Hollywood classics was constrained to the old Hollywood classics screened on China's Central Television Station.⁶¹

From the mid-1980's to the mid-1990's, the Chinese film industry struggled to stay afloat. Throughout this timeframe, the number of Chinese moviegoers was dramatically declining each year and Chinese production studios were riddled with debt, with an average of only 15% of Chinese films claiming a profit.⁶²

In 1994, in a successful attempt to revive the sinking Chinese film industry, the Ministry of Broadcast, Film, and Television began endorsing (while also regulating) the importation of foreign (primarily Hollywood) films. This was when current U.S. films began to appear in Chinese theaters.⁶³ The struggling production companies and cinemas welcomed the incoming commerce and the box office receipts indicated Chinese audiences welcomed it too. In addition, Chinese film companies began partnering with foreign production companies to create "co-productions". As one of the earliest examples of this co-production strategy, Chinese film companies looked to *Titanic* as a gauge for future production and marketing strategies. *Titanic's* box office success functioned as a strong endorsement for the co-production approach, which has become commonplace for film imports in China. The Chinese film companies, having less capital to invest compared to their Hollywood counterparts, are able to limit their risk exposure with each co-production while the foreign or Hollywood studio is able

⁶¹ Wendy Su, "Resisting Cultural Imperialism, or Welcoming Cultural Globalization? China's Extensive Debate on Hollywood Cinema from 1994 to 2007," *Asian Journal of Communication* 21, no. 2 (2011): 189, doi:10.1080/01292986.2010.539301.

⁶² Ibid., 188; Wang, "Hollywood's Crusade in China prior to China's WTO Accession."

⁶³ Noble, "'Titanic' in China," 164.

to bypass many of the regulations placed on regular foreign productions that don't have local contributors.⁶⁴ It's also worth noting that the *Titanic* director himself, James Cameron, established his own joint venture in China specifically to promote 3D filmmaking.⁶⁵

CHINA AS A CONSUMER OF AMERICAN CULTURAL PRODUCTS

Based on previous (and continuing) trends of China's propensity to consume Hollywood films, it is clear that *Titanic* was never at risk of being entirely rejected by Chinese audiences. From the beginning of filmmaking to today, so long as China's political climate allowed it, Hollywood has dominated Chinese cinemas. This is largely due to its' extensive funding and advanced technology, which lend to Hollywood's consistent global success. However, in considering the possible contributing factors specific to *Titanic's* success in China, we must also explore to what extent American culture may have primed the Chinese market for consumption of Hollywood films. In other words, beyond the spectacle appeal of U.S. blockbusters, had increased globalization caused changes in the Chinese consumer market that paved the way for *Titanic's* reception in China? Very little research exists specific to the effect of Americanization on the international film market, but numerous economists, sociologists and other scholars have hypothesized about the relationship between American cultural exports and foreign cultures.

⁶⁴ Zhang, "Chinese Cinema in the New Century," 1–3.

⁶⁵ Phil Contrino, "China on My Mind," *Boxoffice* 148, no. 10 (October 2012): 16.

Jonathan Noble, in his article, “*Titanic* in China”, explores the effects of McDonaldization on foreign cultures. Author George Ritzer defines McDonaldization as “the process by which the principles of the fast-food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as the rest of the world”.⁶⁶ This is a process in which methods of efficiency, uniformity, and corporatization are applied to various institutions. Noble argues that this process has led to the erasure of local cultures and heterogeneous cultural subjects.

In a 2005 market study at the Stern School of Business at New York University, C. Samuel Craig, together with collaborators William Greene and Susan Douglas, hypothesizes that U.S. films will perform better at foreign box offices in countries where the culture is most similar to that of the United States, basing the degree of cultural similarity on Hofstede’s four “value orientations”.⁶⁷ Along those same lines, Craig, Greene and Douglas’ study also hypothesizes that U.S. films will perform better in cultures that have seen more Americanization.⁶⁸ Craig’s team measures the “degree of Americanization” by comparing the number of McDonald’s restaurants per capita in each country he examined.⁶⁹ I will explore their findings later when I examine the cultural influences on Hollywood film reception in foreign countries, but it is notable in itself that McDonald’s has evolved from an icon of American culture to a standard of measure for Americanization.

⁶⁶ Ritzer, *McDonaldization*, 5.

⁶⁷ Geert Hofstede is a Dutch social psychologist known for his research of cross-cultural groups.

⁶⁸ C. Samuel Craig, William H. Greene, and Susan P. Douglas, “Culture Matters: Consumer Acceptance of U.S. Films in Foreign Markets,” *Journal of International Marketing* 13, no. 4 (January 1, 2005): 85–6.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 92.

The forces of transnational commercial practices, including those associated with Hollywood film exportation, homogenize local cultures, resulting in the ability of these forces to reach wider and wider audiences.⁷⁰ However, some scholars argue that Hollywood is not contributing to this erasure of local cultures at all and that Hollywood films might appear locally “American” but are intentionally aimed at a worldwide audience because “Hollywood movies are seen to operate within the indigenous imagination, constructing identities and desires, which, when related to social practice, result in agential expression and action”.⁷¹ The reality is that there are elements of both of these forces at work. Hollywood films are, in fact, devised to target global audiences but the widespread effects of McDonaldization and Americanization also allow foreign audiences to connect more easily with American products, such as Hollywood feature films.

In early 1998, the Chinese Film Corporation (the only distributor of foreign films in China) met with American companies, producers, and marketing experts to develop marketing strategies specifically for the release of *Titanic*.⁷² The Chinese Film Corporation intentionally waited to release *Titanic* until after the Academy Awards (where *Titanic* received eleven awards). In addition, *Titanic* was only released in 150 theaters, which were chosen intentionally for their potential for profit, all being in urban areas. The film was only released in select theaters initially in order to build up anticipation for the second wave of releases at smaller

⁷⁰ Noble, “‘Titanic’ in China,” 167.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 168.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 172.

Chinese theaters.⁷³ Lastly, the Chinese Film Corporation published promotional materials, critics' reviews of pre-screenings, and introductions to the story of *Titanic* in newspapers, magazines and on TV stations beginning two months before its release and continuing after the film in order to encourage the audience to see *Titanic* more than one time.⁷⁴ *Titanic's* widespread reception in China provided an invaluable pool of data for provincial and municipal film distributors. *Titanic* marketing data provided predictive information about the most successful marketing tactics in a given part of China. For example, box office sales saw shorter peak periods and earlier sales drop-offs in areas where pre-release publicity was limited (although *Titanic* did *not* show a correlation between the amount of publicity and actual box office sales).⁷⁵ This unrelenting approach to marketing was successful and similar strategies were likely replicated for subsequent films, including for *Titanic 3D*.

The effects of globalization and marketing, at the very least, laid a strong foundation from which *Titanic* could launch into China's popular culture both in 1998 and in 2012. Modernization, although a separate force from globalization, has worked alongside globalization to cause the drastic jump in box office sales from 1998 to 2012, especially when taking into consideration that *Titanic* was only released in 150 theaters in 1998 but *Titanic 3D* was released in over 3,500 theaters in 2012. However, *Titanic* remained in Chinese theaters from April to September in 1998, while *Titanic 3D* has already obliterated box office records in

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 174.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 175–176, 181.

⁷⁵ Wenjin He, "Thoughts Elicited by Charts Showing *Titanic* Box-Office Trends," *Chinese Sociology & Anthropology* 32, no. 1 (1999): 53, doi:10.2753/CSA0009-4625320147.

China and worldwide during its mere three weeks at the Chinese theaters. There is likely more at play to explain these astonishing reports than globalization and marketing. Hollywood films are devised to target global audiences, but the widespread effects of homogenization due to globalization also allow foreign audiences to connect more easily with American products. The effects of globalization, at the very least, laid a strong foundation from which *Titanic* could launch into China's popular culture both in 1998 and in 2012.

CHAPTER TWO: CHINESE RESPONSES AND CRITICISMS

FILM COMMODITIZATION PROMOTED AT THE GOVERNMENT LEVEL: JIANG ZEMIN'S ENDORSEMENT OF *TITANIC*

In March of 1998, just before the public release of *Titanic*, Jiang Zemin (General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party and President of the People's Republic of China from 1989 to 2002) attended a pre-screening of the feature film and was quite keen on it. Just after being allowed to see the film, during a meeting with delegates to the Chinese National People's Congress, Jiang Zemin encouraged his politicians to go see *Titanic*, praising that the film encourages good morality. Jiang was sure to establish that he was promoting the film for its educational value and not as an endorsement of capitalism, but he also said that Chinese politicians "must not take it for granted that capitalism is something that lacks ideological didacticism".⁷⁶ While Jiang Zemin was careful not to officially endorse capitalism, he pointed out that commoditized products of America's capitalist economy can carry beneficial ethical or philosophical messages relevant to Chinese consumers. And, by addressing Chinese politicians specifically, Jiang implied that *Titanic's* moral message aligns agreeably with China's official ideology.

This event ended up in all the major Chinese newspapers and quickly spread around China. Jiang Zemin's public endorsement is particularly noteworthy because, not only was it the first time a politician (not to mention the President) encouraged others to see a film, it was a

⁷⁶ Jing Li, *China's America : The Chinese View the United States, 1900-2000*, SUNY Series in Chinese Philosophy and Culture (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011), 1; Noble, "'Titanic' in China," 187.

Hollywood film. The US and China had a tense relationship at this time. In the book *China's America*, author Li Ling explains that, due to United States sanctions placed on China after the 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre and disputes over the status of Taiwan, "the relationship between the two countries [just before the release of *Titanic*] fell to its lowest point since the Mao-Nixon *rapprochement* more than twenty years before".⁷⁷ This unexpected public support of an American product -while The Chinese People's Liberation Army and United States military were both having a stare-down in Taiwan- was enough to make newspaper headlines, but public interest in this story was furthered by President Jiang's casual speech during this political meeting. Chinese politicians usually only used official jargon and traditional speech when making political addresses, but Jiang Zemin used colloquial speech to discuss *Titanic*.⁷⁸ This cocktail of shocking elements caused newspaper stories of Jiang's endorsement to spread even more rapidly, no doubt inspiring curious moviegoers to see the film. A quick internet search of this news article brings up articles and blog posts dated 2012, implying this event could have motivated audiences to see *Titanic 3D* as well.

President Jiang Zemin's promotion of *Titanic* did not just encourage Chinese moviegoers to see the film; it encouraged them to find ideology in the film. In his article, "'Titanic' in China: Transnational Capitalism as Official Ideology?", Jonathan Noble points out that China has a long history of appropriating Western ideas and products for Chinese ideological programs, citing two commonly-used idioms: "Chinese learning for the essence, Western learning for practical

⁷⁷ Li, *China's America*, 2.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.

use' (*Zhongxue wei ti Xixue wei yong*) and 'use the West for China' (*yangwei zhongyong*)."⁷⁹

Noble argues that, in this same vein of appropriating the West for China, Jiang Zemin's remarks form a nationalistic rhetoric surrounding the *Titanic* invasion and that rhetoric "domesticates *Titanic* to China's ideological program."⁸⁰ The article, "Hollywood and China as Adversaries and Allies" by Wan Jihong and Richard Kraus explains that Jiang Zemin's enthusiasm for *Titanic* opened the door for Chinese filmmakers to commercialize propaganda, implying that –whether intentional or not- Jiang Zemin promoted *Titanic* as Chinese propaganda. Wan and Kraus also argue that newly adopted commercial devices, like film, "create better vehicles for state ideology" in that they reach the audience easily.⁸¹

Jiang Zemin's real intention for making these remarks is somewhat debated. Was he simply struck by the film's portrayal of Jack Dawson as a working-class hero? Or did he perhaps have a deeper agenda in promoting *Titanic*? Some scholars argue that, despite Jiang's actual rhetoric -i.e. his statement that he did not intend to promote capitalism- his true motivation for the movie endorsement was in fact for China to profit from this product of transnational capitalism.⁸² According to Noble, when China passed the new film importation measure in 1994, the official report was absent any references to financial motivation yet advocates of the measure frequently stated that allowing imports of *dapian* could reinvigorate the Chinese

⁷⁹ Noble, "'Titanic' in China," 190.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 191.

⁸¹ Wan and Kraus, "Hollywood and China as Adversaries and Allies," 432.

⁸² Noble, "'Titanic' in China," 190–191.

domestic film market.⁸³ Noble argues that Jiang Zemin's agenda may have been similarly market-driven despite his claim that it was not, just as the attitudes surrounding the 1994 film importation measure were geared towards profit maximization and transnational capitalism despite the fact that the official report avoided any claims that the measure was market-driven.⁸⁴ However, regardless of Jiang Zemin's intended significance, his dialogue surrounding *Titanic* created a pathway for Chinese viewers to see the film as an ideological model.

Jiang's remarks were a confirmation that ideological efforts are an overwhelmingly important objective of the culture industry in China. This concept of using popular mediums, like film, to portray ideological work has a strong foothold in China's recent history. During Chairman Mao Zedong's "Talks at Yan'an" he lectured that the first aim of cultural products like literature, film, and other arts should be to promote correct ideology.⁸⁵ As for which ideology viewers found in *Titanic*, they could have found evidence for many of a number of ideologies, depending on their personal view.

CHINESE SCHOLARS AND FILM CRITICS' RESPONSE TO *TITANIC*

From the political arena and academia to the entertainment industry and the masses of consumers, all of China was abuzz about *Titanic*. Jiang Zemin sparked political discourse surrounding the film's release in China; critical essays popped up throughout China's academic

⁸³ As noted on page 171 of Jonathan Noble's article, "'Titanic' in China": "*Dapian*, best translated as 'blockbuster,' is a market concept that clearly signifies a film whose budget and ticket sales are high; it has little do with 'cultural achievements' and 'cinematic art.'"; *ibid.*, 191.

⁸⁴ Noble, "'Titanic' in China," 191.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 187.

journals; and Chinese newspapers circulated *Titanic*-related articles in droves (in April 1998, not one day lapsed without a *Titanic* article in one of Beijing's chief newspapers).⁸⁶ *Titanic* marked an important shift in the commodification of cultural products (especially of film) and, among the commentary from scholars and members of the culture industry in particular, a repeated concern emerged –is Hollywood a predator to the Chinese film industry? The Chinese film industry was no doubt floundering and foreign films had become the official champion for its revival with the emergence of Chinese-Hollywood co-productions and the enthusiastic endorsement from the Chinese government. Official backing only increased as China worked to join the World Trade Organization (WTO) (China formally entered the WTO in 2001)⁸⁷. When *Titanic* was first released in China, the wheels for this industry-wide change were securely (and irreversibly) set in motion but the cost was yet to be determined.

Scholars and filmmakers in particular were distinctly concerned about the ramifications of colluding with Hollywood to resuscitate the Chinese film industry. In 1999, Chen Guoxing, a Fifth Generation film director, openly criticized China's interest in joining the WTO. Commenting on its effect on China's film industry, Chen said, "American flags will probably be blowing in the wind right here at the Beijing Film Studio." Chen later retracted his message.⁸⁸

In a 1996 best-selling book, *China Can Say No*, Zhang Cangcang writes an article called "Incinerate Hollywood" in which he vehemently critiques America's shameless domination of

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 183.

⁸⁷ "WTO | China - Member Information," accessed July 12, 2014, http://www.wto.org/english/thewto_e/countries_e/china_e.htm.

⁸⁸ Noble, "'Titanic' in China," 192.

the global film market. Zhang stops just short of criticizing the government-sanctioned foreign film quota and he charges that, “The most important responsibility of the filmmakers is to promote Chinese culture and resist the strangulation of our culture.”⁸⁹

In China’s *Life Times* (*Shenghuo shibao*), Xie Xizhang criticizes the *Titanic*-viewing experience as devoid of intellectual thought and as an experience that has no effect on the lives of viewers once the reel stops rolling. Xie says, “*Titanic* is a pitcher of pungently intoxicating wine that relaxes the body and massages the soul. We are probably completely controlled by the film...The critical voice of reason emerges from the depths of our hearts when our feelings recede. At this point, we have already left the theater, but we suddenly discover that the eternal love the film constructs is in fact just an illusionary, utopian love.”⁹⁰

Conversely, Zhang Tongdao, in *Life Times* (*Shenghuo shibao*), echoed the sentiments of Jiang Zemin. Zhang argues that *Titanic* (and Hollywood) provides moral didacticism in a fresh and captivating way, as opposed to antiquated methods of moral teachings in China. Zhang says, “The Confrontation of mankind’s feeling [*xingqing*] and integrity [*pinzhi*] with imminent extinction possesses a transcendent image on a metaphysical level that makes people contemplate...[Hollywood] hides morals within the story’s plot.”⁹¹ But this is not the dominant argument among Chinese scholars, writers and film industry persons. The dominant message is criticism –criticism of *Titanic*’s egalitarian message juxtaposed with its role in perpetuating a consumerist mentality; criticism of the film’s mindless seduction; criticism of America’s brazen

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 189.

⁹¹ Ibid.

assault on China's culture industry; and of the official endorsement of co-productions and other economic strategies in place of cultural cultivation.

CHINA'S FILM INDUSTRY IN THE 1990'S AND CHINESE FILMMAKER'S ANXIETY

Throughout the decades of the 20th century, Chinese film developed in phases marked by distinct modes of aestheticism and content. Based on these varied modes of style and their point in history, Chinese filmmakers are generally divided into six generations. Chinese film began with the First Generation of filmmakers and was –like all early film- relatively crude, often using just one straight camera angle.⁹² China's Second Generation filmmakers developed more sophisticated techniques alongside Hollywood's stylistic development, therefore Second Generation films can be characterized as conforming to traditional Western film formulas (i.e. panoramic opening shots, straight angles but with some close-ups, simplistic dialogue, and often fantastical plots that distracted viewers from the realities of economic depression and war).⁹³ Under Communist China, Hollywood's reign over the Chinese film industry fizzled and subsequent generations of Chinese film are distinguished and studied as symptoms of political phases in China's history. Due to strict Communist censorship, Third Generation filmmakers were restricted to propagandist filmmaking.⁹⁴ Under the mandate that all art (including film) had to promote the values of socialism, these films followed the prescription of the officially-

⁹² Ye, "Hollywood and the Chinese Other," 13–4.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 15.

sanctioned aesthetics of “socialist realism” (*xianshizhuyi*).⁹⁵ If cinematic realism functions to represent reality, this propagandist leitmotif of “socialist realism” sponsors a utopian view of the socialist society.⁹⁶

After the Cultural Revolution officially ended in 1976, China’s Fourth Generation filmmakers emerged. Tan Ye describes this as a time of “confusion and hope”, a time when China’s film industry was struggling financially and Hollywood film and the influence of Hollywood’s cinematic technique returned to China.⁹⁷

China’s Fifth Generation filmmakers make up possibly the most distinct and well-known generation of Chinese directors. During the late 1980’s and early 1990’s the legendary Fifth Generation filmmakers dominated art-house screens in China and across the world. These filmmakers were among the first to make movies without the strict constraints of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) and they’re known for transitioning film forward from political narrative to cultural reflection and critique.⁹⁸ Without the overwhelming commercial competition we see in China’s film industry today, these Fifth Generation filmmakers enjoyed the lion’s share of the cinema screens in China. Beginning as early as the late 1980’s, Chinese scholars and moviegoers alike raised concerns that commercialized Hollywood imports would elbow Chinese art films

⁹⁵ Chris Berry, “Getting Real: Chinese Documentary, Chinese Postsocialism,” in *The Urban Generation : Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Zhen Zhang (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 123.

⁹⁶ Yaohua Shi, “Maintaining Law and Order in the City: New Tales of the People’s Police,” in *The Urban Generation : Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Zhen Zhang (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 321.

⁹⁷ Ye, “Hollywood and the Chinese Other,” 16.

⁹⁸ D. C. Gladney, “Tian Zhuangzhuang, the Fifth Generation, and Minorities Film in China,” *Public Culture* 8, no. 1 (October 1, 1995): 161, doi:10.1215/08992363-8-1-161.

out of the industry entirely.⁹⁹ Indeed the commercial success of films like *Titanic* did trigger a major transformation in Chinese filmmaking. Inspired by the profit potential of a commercial film in China's newly-marketized economy, some Chinese filmmakers intentionally began catering to the masses and Chinese studios began mimicking Hollywood production and marketing techniques, which only fed the anxieties surrounding this perception of Hollywood as a threat to Chinese filmmakers. Consequently, independent and auteur filmmakers in China struggle to get screen time in a market saturated by commercial films and their major production studios.

China's Fifth Generation filmmakers had studied Hollywood classics thoroughly and they were well-versed in the techniques of conventional Western film production.¹⁰⁰ Armed with traditional training and comprehensive knowledge of the history of Hollywood's dominance in China, this generation of filmmakers endeavored to resist Hollywood's previous dominance of and to distinguish Chinese film by exploring their Chinese heritage through film.¹⁰¹ With this new cinematic approach, the Fifth Generation filmmakers saw their way to the international film scene, gaining recognition at film festivals around the world.¹⁰²

In his article "Rebel Without a Cause? China's New Urban Generation and Postsocialist Filmmaking", Yingjin Zhang –a leading English-language scholar of Chinese cinema- explains

⁹⁹ Shaoyang Lu, "'Can We Still Make films?' (Hollywood Films and Chinese Domestic Films in China, Part I)," *Chinese Sociology & Anthropology* 32, no. 1 (1999): 23–24; Thomas B. Gold, "Go with Your Feelings: Hong Kong and Taiwan Popular Culture in Greater China," *The China Quarterly*, no. 136 (1993): 908; Platt, "'Titanic' Cultural Invasion Hits China," 1.

¹⁰⁰ Ye, "Hollywood and the Chinese Other," 4.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

that, during the Maoist Era, the dominant mode in Chinese cinema was “socialist realism” and, in response to that dominant mode, the Fifth Generation filmmakers presented audiences with an alternative mode: the postsocialist mode.¹⁰³ Zhang leaves the definition of postsocialist cinema to include any film that poses an alternative to the dominant propagandist leitmotif and he further delineates that this postsocialist cinematic mode is not limited to a particular generation of filmmakers but, generally, postsocialist filmmakers employ themes of alienation, disillusionment, and political anxiety. Their films are often characterized by veneration of traditional culture, rural life and the natural landscape, reflecting on Chinese history and seeking to “redefine their different strategic positions in different social, political, and economic situations”.¹⁰⁴

Just as Chinese scholars expressed concerns about the cultural dominance of Hollywood, so too did the Fifth Generation filmmakers. Tan Ye asserts that China has never had a uniform opinion about Hollywood since the views of officials, artists, masses and individuals vary, but he describes this “invasion-and-resistance” view of Hollywood as being characteristic of scholars, film critics, and filmmakers in the late 1980’s to 1990’s.¹⁰⁵ Tan Ye notes that this attitude is exemplified by the emergence of the term “hollywoodism” (*Haolaiwu zhuyi*), a term that carries a disapproving connotation and is used to delineate any of a number of negative

¹⁰³ Yingjin Zhang, “Rebel Without a Cause? China’s New Urban Generation and Postsocialist Filmmaking,” in *The Urban Generation : Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Zhen Zhang (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 51.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 51–2.

¹⁰⁵ Ye, “Hollywood and the Chinese Other,” 11, 17–9.

qualities of Hollywood cinema (i.e. lack of substance and commercialism).¹⁰⁶ Generally speaking, the Fifth Generation filmmakers shared this negative view but Fifth Generation filmmakers focused more on socialist response and reflection than they did on Hollywood resistance. Although Tan Ye does not refer to the succeeding generation of filmmakers as “Sixth Generation” filmmakers, he explains that, due to the tremendous economic growth in China during the 1990’s, China saw a notable diversification of ideas and attitudes and, thus, Chinese film entered a transition. Tan Ye argues that this new mode of Chinese cinema emerged most distinctly as a response to the social and political anxieties surrounding Western cultural dominance.¹⁰⁷

Similarly, Yingjin Zhang argues that the Sixth Generation of Chinese directors is distinguished best by its experimental techniques and broad range of production styles.¹⁰⁸ In stark contrast to the characteristics of Fifth Generation films, Zhang explains that the Sixth Generation films are notable for their focus on the urban setting, narcissistic trends, documentary styles of film shooting, ideology of entrepreneurship, and individualistic perception.¹⁰⁹ Zhang adds that these styles stand out as particularly divergent for Chinese film in the 1990’s “when the Fifth Generation –many of whom were avant-garde auteurs themselves in the mid- and late 1980’s-had reverted to more traditional genres and styles such as the tear-jerker melodrama and the spectacular historical epic.”¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 18.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 16.

¹⁰⁸ Zhang, “Rebel Without a Cause?,” 53.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

TITANIC AND ZHANG YIMOU'S *THE ROAD HOME*

Zhang Yimou, one of the most internationally-famous directors of the Fifth Generation filmmakers, epitomized this category described by Yingjin Zhang as avant-garde auteurs filming historical epics in the 1990's that were characteristic of Fifth Generation postsocialist films. Technical and textual analysis of any of a number of Zhang Yimou's films would serve well to contextualize the landscape of postsocialist Chinese film. *The Road Home* (2000) doubles as an example of a Chinese filmmaker's direct response to *Titanic*, with explicit references to the film *Titanic* and implicit references to the anxieties pertaining to the cultural invasion of Hollywood.¹¹¹

The Road Home was well received in China, but its box office showing paled in comparison to that of *Titanic*. *Titanic* grossed over \$43 million in ticket sales in China while *The Road Home* only brought in about \$1.8 million.¹¹² Considering the fact that *Titanic* held China's box office sales record for 9 years, it may be tedious to explore this comparison too far. However, Zhang Yimou's *Not One Less* (*Yi ge dou bu neng shao*, 1998) –a better example by which to gauge Chinese ticket sales as it is considered one of Zhang Yimou's box-office hits– grossed over \$3.6 million. That is double the box office sales of *The Road Home*, proving *The*

¹¹¹ Yimou Zhang, *Wo De Fu Qin Mu Qin: The Road Home*, videorecording (Sony Pictures Classics : distributed by Columbia TriStar Home Entertainment, 2001).

¹¹² Rui Zhang, *The Cinema of Feng Xiaogang: Commercialization and Censorship in Chinese Cinema after 1989* (Hong Kong University Press, 2008), 126; This figure is based on the average 1999 exchange rate of 8.2777 RMB to 1 USD found at <http://www.oanda.com/currency/historical-rates/>. BQ Weekly reported *The Road Home* grossed 8 million RMB at the Chinese box offices.

Road Home to be a relatively poor box office performer.¹¹³ Despite its low grossing, *The Road Home* was critically acclaimed, winning 15 different film awards internationally including best film at the Golden Rooster Awards and the Hundred Flowers Awards in China, as well as the Silver Berlin Bear award at the Berlin International Film Festival, and the Audience Award at the Sundance Film Festival (*The Road Home*).

Like *Titanic*, Zhang Yimou's *The Road Home* is a commercially promoted romantic drama that values love at any cost and rejects wealth as a legitimate measurement of worth. And, scholar Aili Mu notes, like *Titanic*, "Zhang Yimou's *The Road Home* was made at a time when the need to negotiate with progress [in China], to argue for the protection of tradition, and to call attention to the peril of the developmental frenzy was on the rise".¹¹⁴ Both *Titanic* and *The Road Home* use the perspective of a first-person narrative to tell the story of a past event; these films are episodic with brief interruptions to return to the present and remind the audience to read the film as a story of the past with implications in the present day and not simply as a mythical and magical story of bygone years.

Bao Shi adapted the screenplay for *The Road Home* from his own novelette, *Remembrance (Jinian)*.¹¹⁵ Set during the era of the "Great Leap Forward" (1958-1965) in rural

¹¹³ Scarlet Cheng, "The Road Home," *Far Eastern Economic Review* 163, no. 14 (April 6, 2000): 53.

¹¹⁴ Aili Mu, "Imaginary Constructs as Instruments of Critical Engagement: *Titanic* Reference in Zhang Yimou's *The Road Home*," *Asian Cinema* 14, no. 2 (September 1, 2003): 39, doi:10.1386/ac.14.2.35_1.

¹¹⁵ Bert Cardullo, "Carry Me Home: On Zhang Yimou's *The Road Home* (2000, China), Kiarostami's *The Wind Will Carry Us* (1999, Iran), and Rossellini's *Europe '51* (1952, Italy)," in *In Search of Cinema: Writings on International Film Art* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004), 115.

northern China, the young male character Yusheng -the present-day narrator of his parents' legendary romance- tells Bao Shi's story through a series of long flashbacks with occasional voice-overs. In *The Road Home*, Zhang Yimou –together with cinematographer Hou Yong- projects present day in bleak, black-and-white images.¹¹⁶ Contrary to the cinematic convention of hazy, muted flashbacks, *The Road Home* presents a nostalgically beautiful image of the past with glowing landscapes, fields reflecting abundant sunshine and striking winter panoramas – even the harsh blizzard in the film is so full of texture and contrast that it is almost inviting.

The audience learns at the beginning of the film that Yusheng's father, Luo Changyu -a village schoolteacher- has died in a blizzard during his treacherous trip to raise money for his school's much-needed renovations. Changyu's wife of four decades, Zhao Di, insists that fellow villagers carry Changyu's body home on foot–this is an old tradition to ensure the deceased's spirit can find its way home. Yusheng returns from the city for his father's funeral in an SUV and he tries to dissuade his mother from requiring such a difficult and antiquated procession until he recalls the now-legendary story of his parents' courtship.¹¹⁷ Yusheng's initial objection to the funeral tradition shows that his time pursuing a career in the city, the site of capitalist economy, has stifled his regard for customs such as this one that contradict capitalistic practices.

Zhang Yimou employs vibrant colors to reminisce about the evocative and traditional setting in which Changyu and Di met. As in *Titanic*, society's rules of propriety impeded a

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 115–117.

¹¹⁷ Zhang, *Wo De Fu Qin Mu Qin: The Road Home*.

romance between the two young, beautiful, and optimistic protagonists. Zhao Di admired Luo Changyu from the moment he arrived in her village to teach, but their different social backgrounds required them to make huge sacrifices for their love. Social convention mandated a matchmaker establish any and all courtships. Di not only disregards this tradition by turning down previous offers, she shamelessly pursues the new village schoolteacher, Luo Changyu, practically stalking him from outside the schoolhouse. Yusheng notes that his mother is still remembered as the first person in the village to love freely.¹¹⁸ In both *Titanic* and *The Road Home*, the romances emerge immediately, before the lovers actually know one another on a personal level, and without any logical progression of a relationship. Their love develops from a pure human instinct, one that is stripped of social or economic rationalization.

The allusions to *Titanic* in *The Road Home* are subtle but they significantly impact one's reading of the film once explored. When Yusheng first arrives home to help his mother with the funeral arrangements, he enters his parent's main room –this room is both a bedroom and a room for receiving guests, making it the most important space in a village home. Yusheng describes his surroundings only so far as to highlight his parents' meager living conditions, noting his high school book bag that his dad has been using for years.¹¹⁹ He doesn't mention any of the wall pieces, but Zhang Yimou uses a wide shot, ensuring that the decoration is noticed. Zhang positions the camera diagonally towards the wall, using the sun's rays through the window to create a glare on every wall piece except one: a *Titanic* poster of Jack holding

¹¹⁸ Cardullo, "Carry Me Home," 118.

¹¹⁹ Mu, "Imaginary Constructs as Instruments of Critical Engagement," 41.

Rose as she spreads her arms wide. In a room of grays, the sharp contrasts of black and white on this poster immediately draw the audience's attention. Later, the walls reveal family photos, a decorative calendar featuring Chairman Mao, and a second *Titanic* promotional poster. All of these items are flush with one another and at the same level on the wall, creating one solid band of postings. Zhang Yimou's placing of these particular wall decorations seems to indicate they are of equal significance to Changyu and Di, suggesting that American popular culture and commodification have acutely infiltrated Chinese mainstream consciousness.

The musical score for *The Road Home* presents another level of *Titanic*'s penetration into Chinese culture. From scholars to general moviegoers, audiences have noted the uncanny resemblance between the soundtracks of *Titanic*, composed by James Horner, and *The Road Home*, composed by San Bao.¹²⁰ Film critic, Stephen Holden of *The New York Times*, is just one of many to disparage the unabashed similarity between the score of *Titanic* and that of *The Road Home*. "The one grating element (of the film) is a redundantly schmaltzy soundtrack by San Bao that shamelessly imitates James Horner's quieter theme music for 'Titanic' and nudges 'The Road Home' toward an emotional grandiosity" (Holden). Both James Horner and San Bao employ the emotive tone of Celtic instruments and melodies. The ironic difference is that San Bao's score is much more heavily orchestrated and dramatic while James Horner's pieces for *Titanic* are more subtle and understated. This theme of overplaying the dramatics in *The Road Home* is not unique to the musical soundtrack and below I will address the possibility that this is to highlight the significance of certain human values in the film.

¹²⁰ Cardullo, "Carry Me Home," 119.

Scholar and film critic, Bert Cardullo, credits the various allusions to *Titanic* found in *The Road Home* to their shared topic of arranged marriage. In fact, Bert Cardullo goes so far as to suppose that Zhang Yimou himself intentionally placed these *Titanic* references in the film in order to remind the audience that the tradition of arranged marriage finds deep roots in Western culture as well as in China.¹²¹ I think this conclusion is too specific and too ambitious. Despite my best efforts, I have found no evidence that Zhang Yimou had any particular agenda for creating these allusions. If there is an intentional connection between these two films, the reason stretches beyond the tradition of arranged marriage specifically and speaks more to a broad social consciousness –one that struggles to weigh the pressures of social conventions and market mentality against personal and spiritual pursuits like love and friendship.

Zhang Yimou's *The Road Home* echoes *Titanic*'s message that money cannot be used to measure true value. In *The Road Home*, young Zhao Di breaks a bowl that had belonged to her crush and future husband, Luo Changyu; Di is devastated. She falls to the ground crying, the camera scales back exposing vast gold fields, and the music slows, creating the sense that this event is profound. Zhao Di's mother goes to some length to have a craftsman repair the bowl. When her mother is willing to pay more than the bowl's worth to fix it, the craftsman immediately understands that there is human, sentimental value in the bowl. Upon a first reading, Zhang Yimou's dramatic treatment of a seemingly trivial event feels overplayed. The ultimate message, however, is that people and relationships matter more than any commodity no matter the market value. In *Titanic*, the consequence for neglecting to respect human value

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 118.

is catastrophic. The quest for technological renown and profit caused the Titanic's designers to put commercial features before adequate lifeboats; and treasure seeker, Brock Lowett, wasted years and money acquiring sophisticated technology in pursuit of "The Heart of the Ocean", an expensive diamond he would never obtain.

After the film completes the nostalgic recollection of Zhao Di and Luo Changyu's convention-defying romance, Zhang Yimou returns to the present day –again black-and-white. Reminiscing about the traditional times of his parents' courtship has softened Yusheng to the idea of rounding up men to carry his father's body home. The new obstacle, however, is the expense. Such a trek will require 36 men who will all need to be paid and fed, meaning Yusheng will have to scrounge up an impossible amount of money for a man from rural China, in addition to recruiting men from neighboring villages. The lack of human resources for this endeavor reminds the audience of a serious consequence of a marketized China: the valuable human capital of the countryside is being rapidly drawn towards more profitable urban cities.

This new complication brought on by Di's demand for a human entourage to transport her husband's body is intended to be dramatic, just as was the broken bowl scene. Aili Mu explains, "By insisting on her own method of bringing her husband home, Zhaodi is asking viewers to revisit the older ways and values. In her request is the desire for re-evaluation of contemporary goals..."¹²² Zhang Yimou's present-day scenes –gloomy and stripped of embellishment- beg the question: how have the economic enticements of the present lured China's villagers away from the magnetizing beauty and traditional *human* values of the

¹²² Mu, "Imaginary Constructs as Instruments of Critical Engagement," 44.

countryside? Zhao Di's insistence on such a burdensome funeral tradition is her reassertion of spiritual values. Not only does Yusheng begin to reflect his mother's call to re-evaluate present-day market consciousness, but the surrounding villagers demonstrate this re-alignment of priorities as well. The men needed to transport Changyu's body not only agree to help Yusheng, but they refuse to accept any payment, proving their respect for Changyu's contribution to the village and their appreciation for this spiritual tradition. Here, Zhang Yimou is highlighting the message that certain human principles simply cannot be measured by the capitalistic standards of efficiency and profitability.

In *The Road Home*, a film about a nearly-impossible journey to help a village school, Zhang Yimou uses the film *Titanic* –a highly capitalized item of consumption portraying a story that denounces wealth and elitism- to speak to the social conditions of rural China where a market product (like a promotional movie poster) effortlessly traverses cities, countries and economic boundaries but searching for adequate school funding can cost a villager's life. Both films make use of the present and of a nostalgic (albeit tragic) review of the past, demarcating the conflicting values that exist in all times: the quest for fame or money and the significance of human life. *Titanic* and *The Road Home* both employ legendary, convention-defying romances as a vehicle through which to view the dehumanizing effects of market mentality pinned against the powerful beauty of human relationships.

CHAPTER THREE: CULTURE, IDEOLOGY AND FILM AS A COMMODITIZED PRODUCT

Many scholars attribute the attraction to *Titanic* in China to the fact that much of China is in a transition process in which Chinese people (especially Chinese youth) are looking for an ideology to which they can adhere, and the story of *Titanic* presents a few strong options. In his article, “‘*Titanic*’ Cultural Invasion Hits China”, Kevin Platt explains that Chinese culture and ideology have been on a “political roller coaster” since the 1949 Communist revolution and that much of China’s youth complains that they are not sure in what they should believe.¹²³ A graduate student at Beijing University, Yu Jie, says, “In China today, many people are disillusioned with the past and are searching for new values and new heroes. The legends of our history are falling like a house of cards”.¹²⁴ However, these general explanations, though common, still fail to explain what specific ideologies found in *Titanic* have attracted Chinese viewers in numbers unmatched by any other film.

When attempting to predict a film’s box office revenue, market research traditionally focuses on a film’s star factor (i.e. presence and popularity of star actors),¹²⁵ various film-specific characteristics (i.e. genre and content), and distribution models.¹²⁶ These findings have helped film producers and distributors develop extremely efficient models for film releases. In

¹²³ Platt, “‘*Titanic*’ Cultural Invasion Hits China,” 1.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Suman Basuroy, Subimal Chatterjee, and S. Abraham Ravid, “How Critical Are Critical Reviews? The Box Office Effects of Film Critics, Star Power, and Budgets,” *Journal of Marketing* 67, no. 4 (October 2003): 103–7.

¹²⁶ Craig, Greene, and Douglas, “Culture Matters,” 84.

order to maximize profits, distributors look to all kinds of revenue predictors from the best day of the week to release a film in a given genre, location, or season to the best lag time to allow between initial marketing, first releases, and general releases (and the list goes on). Given that the Hollywood film industry is backed by huge money, it is no surprise that these distribution models are honed to a meticulous science. However, only a handful of published studies have examined what factors are potentially predictive of American film performance at foreign box offices.¹²⁷

Craig, Greene, and Douglas point out that, prior to 2005, only two major studies attempted to identify predictive factors for Hollywood box office performance in foreign countries: the first (Neelamgan and Chintagunta 1999) constructed a model to predict first week viewership for US films in 14 different foreign markets;¹²⁸ the second (Elberse and Eliashberg 2002) developed a model to predict week-by-week viewership.¹²⁹ Although both found several statistically influential factors (i.e. US box office performance and genre), both studies concluded that the strongest predictor of box office grosses in each foreign market is simply the number of screens on which the U.S. film is played.¹³⁰ However, in the case of *Titanic*, the number of screens on which U.S. films played increased exponentially over the ten

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ramya Neelamegham and Pradeep Chintagunta, "A Bayesian Model to Forecast New Product Performance in Domestic and International Markets," *Marketing Science* 18, no. 2 (January 1, 1999): 115–36.

¹²⁹ Anita Elberse and Jehoshua Eliashberg, "Demand and Supply Dynamics for Sequentially Released Products in International Markets: The Case of Motion Pictures," *Marketing Science* 22, no. 3 (July 1, 2003): 329–54.

¹³⁰ Craig, Greene, and Douglas, "Culture Matters," 84.

years that *Titanic* held the box office record in China. Screen numbers could possibly explain the impressive Chinese box office results for *Titanic 3D*, which was released at a time when China had more theaters playing 3D films than ever before, but screen numbers simply don't explain *Titanic's* performance at Chinese box offices in 1998, when China had comparatively few theaters.

In a 2005 study (mentioned in the previous chapter) conducted by a team of market researchers at New York University's Stern School of Business, C. Samuel Craig, William Greene, and Susan Douglas investigated the factors influencing reception of American films in foreign markets. Noting that the previous two studies failed to examine cultural and ideological factors, the NYU team used eight different foreign markets as case studies to investigate these other possible factors. They used a hierarchical linear random parameters model to measure the influence of each country's culture and degree of Americanization on the box office success of U.S. films.¹³¹ They also considered the influence of U.S. box office performance and film genre. Their research found that U.S. films performed better in countries with more cultural similarities to the U.S. They also found that US box office performance and a film's genre had statistically significant impacts on the box office reception of those films in foreign countries (although neither proved capable of producing box office revenue on their own).¹³² Based on these findings about the importance of cultural similarity in film reception, I will outline

¹³¹ As mentioned previously in chapter 1, the team measured cultural similarity using Geert Hofstede's four "value orientations" and Americanization was measured by the number of McDonald's restaurants per capita in each country.

¹³² Craig, Greene, and Douglas, "Culture Matters," 80–3.

similarities between Chinese ideologies and themes of the film as possible factors contributing to China's enthusiastic reception of *Titanic*.

GLOBALIZATION, McDONALDIZATION & CHINESE CULTURE

In the previous chapter, I examined globalization as an institutional force, particularly one that acts on policy and marketing. There exists an ongoing debate among scholars about the role of globalization in Chinese culture. Some scholars debate whether or not globalization is a cultural homogenizing force to be viewed as a threat to Chinese culture. In his article, "Reflecting on the Paradox of Globalisation: China's Search for Cultural Identity and Coherence," Nick Knight examines this debate. Knight's article is focused largely on whether or not globalizing forces are homogenizing Chinese culture with a world culture. Knight cites Ritzer's "McDonalization" of the Chinese culture as an example of how "distant social influences" penetrate and shape Chinese individuals' self-perceptions and views of the world.¹³³

Knight also presents several counter-arguments to the McDonalization perspective. These include the possibility that globalization will actually result in cultural fragmentation, "hybridised cultures", the renaissance of once-declining cultures and also the argument that cultural resistance will prevail over global cultural homogenization.¹³⁴ For the purposes of this analysis, predicting the future impact of such forces is less important than examining how

¹³³ Nick Knight, "Reflecting on the Paradox of Globalisation: China's Search for Cultural Identity and Coherence," *China: An International Journal* 4, no. 1 (2006): 3, doi:10.1353/chn.2006.0003.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

globalization and McDonalozation have already influenced Chinese culture and the extent to which they may have already homogenized particular aspects of American and Chinese culture with each other. Knight explains that many Chinese theorists consider globalization a threat on the level of a “cultural crisis”. Knight claims that, in contrast to this view, China’s national government does not view globalization as an erosive threat to China’s minority cultures, officially taking the position that globalization is primarily an economic force.¹³⁵ In other words, the national government accepts the idea that globalization increases transnational trade and opens economic avenues for otherwise isolated communities, but China’s government does not officially acknowledge the possibility that, due to globalization, the domination of larger societies (i.e. the United States or the Han Chinese) could supplant the customs and traditions of China’s ethnic minorities. Although this is not officially a concern at the state level, Knight argues that it should be. Knight claims that, since the globalization of China’s economy immediately influences media and consumption, it in turn results in the globalization of culture as well.¹³⁶ Knight concedes that many scholars do not equate globalization with Americanization and/or Westernization. These scholars accept globalization as a fact, but they argue that this does not necessarily predict a more Americanized world culture.¹³⁷

Knight points to the evolution of official party language as evidence that China is transitioning towards a more Americanized version of Chinese culture. In contrast to Jiang Zemin’s actions to open up the film industry to more foreign influence, he also spoke strongly

¹³⁵ Ibid., 5.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 13.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 14–15.

about protecting the integrity of Chinese culture. In 2002, Jiang Zemin said that, due to the Reform and Opening Up, China is confronted with the “interaction of different thoughts and cultures.” He said there are “a few countries that have tried to force their own values, economic regime and social system on other countries by taking advantage of economic globalization...we must take it as a crucial task in our cultural development to carry forward and cultivate the national spirit and incorporate it into our national education and the entire process of building spiritual civilization...”¹³⁸ Similar statements by party leaders can be found throughout the early 2000’s.¹³⁹ More recently, comments from party leaders increasingly encourage market forces to dictate the direction of culture. China’s political leaders see the government as having an important role in controlling certain aspects of culture that are viewed by the party as inappropriate (i.e. pornography and certain political publications) but there seems to be a move towards remaining “hands-off” in the cultural market wherever possible.¹⁴⁰

CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS IN CHINESE SOCIETY AND ANTI-ELITE THEMES IN *TITANIC*

When *Titanic* was released in China in 1998, moviegoers in their 20’s and 30’s made up the primary source of box office revenue.¹⁴¹ *Titanic* speaks to a Chinese audience –specifically to the Chinese generation born during the Maoist Era (1949 – 1976) - through its denunciation

¹³⁸ “Full Text of Jiang Zemin’s Report at 16th Party Congress,” *People’s Daily Online*, December 10, 2002, http://en.people.cn/200211/18/eng20021118_106983.shtml.

¹³⁹ Knight, “Reflecting on the Paradox of Globalisation,” 14–15.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁴¹ Yu Yan, “Classic Movie, New Success,” *Beijing Review* 55, no. 18 (2012): 42.

of wealth and class elitism. *Titanic* tells a story that devalues money and class and director, James Cameron, has even noted of his own film that it nears Marxist doctrine.¹⁴² In the foreword to the 2012 edition of the book *James Cameron's Titanic*, James Cameron cites "The juxtaposition of rich and poor" and the fact that "the gender roles played out unto death (women first)" as two of the reasons why *Titanic* "still captures our imaginations after one hundred years".¹⁴³ And, on the set of the film, when discussing *Titanic's* depiction of the plights of the rich and poor, he stated, "We're holding just short of Marxist dogma."¹⁴⁴ In 1998, the *Beijing Evening News* endorsed the feature film, calling it propaganda to promote Marxism.¹⁴⁵ And in his article, "'Titanic' in China: Transnational Capitalism as Official Ideology?" Jonathan Noble declares that *Titanic* "ostensibly promotes moral values of egalitarianism".¹⁴⁶ The themes of egalitarianism throughout the film would resonate strongly with Chinese viewers who still feel nostalgic about the lost ideals of the Maoist Era in which they were promised a future of equality.

Laurie Ouellette, in "Ship of Dreams," defends that, through the hero of the film, Leonardo DiCaprio's character, Jack Dawson, *Titanic* enforces themes of Marxism by

¹⁴² Laurie Ouellette, "Ship of Dreams: Cross-Class Romance and the Cultural Fantasy of *Titanic*," in *Titanic : Anatomy of a Blockbuster*, ed. Kevin S. Sandler and Gaylyn Studlar (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999), 169.

¹⁴³ James Cameron, "Foreword," in *James Cameron's Titanic*, by Ed W. Marsh, 1st edition (HarperCollins Publisher, 1997), vii.

¹⁴⁴ Ed W. Marsh, *James Cameron's Titanic* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1997), 73.

¹⁴⁵ Platt, "'Titanic' Cultural Invasion Hits China," 1.

¹⁴⁶ Noble, "'Titanic' in China," 168.

demonstrating that social class is both temporary and superficial.¹⁴⁷ Jack is able to communicate comfortably with ship patrons of both lower and higher classes.

Jack epitomizes the ephemeral and superficial qualities of social class most directly when he is invited by Cal to join him at dinner in the first-class dining room. Thanks to the help of character Molly Brown, Jack “shines up like a new penny” in a tuxedo with his hair slicked back. Cal’s intentions are clearly to embarrass the guest from steerage, but Jack consorts with ease and does not exhibit an ounce of trepidation. In this scene, the camera angle often only shows a part of Jack or shows the scene from directly behind him, allowing the audience to view the hobnobbing and dining experience through the eyes of Jack, emphasizing his confidence. As Rose points out and names the various millionaires and aristocrats in the room, the camera only turns back to Jack’s face twice and both times it is to show a confident smirk on his face. This expression shows that Jack is able to immerse himself into the first-class setting comfortably but also shows that he finds the various titles and class distinctions amusing, thereby devaluing the wealth around him and writing off the significance of social classes. In this way, Jack is the manifestation of Marxist idealism. *Titanic* appears to promote the anti-elite, Marxist axiom, pulling on the audience’s egalitarian desires –and, thereby subconsciously connecting with Chinese “Red” nostalgia.

Yu Jie, a Beijing University graduate student at the time she was quoted for Noble’s article, deplored the notion that *Titanic* “cultivates support for egalitarianism” saying, “The story tells us that money is worthless; money can neither buy love nor fight against disasters.

¹⁴⁷ Ouellette, “Ship of Dreams,” 178–185.

However, this film's director is earning [millions]. The audience is 'moved' by the film, but...after they leave the theater, they are confronted by cars shuttling back and forth, bright neon lights, and they cannot help but return to their real lives in which money brings infinite potential and true love is secondary".¹⁴⁸ This scenario is especially true in China, where moviegoers are more than likely leaving the theater to return to a comfortable lifestyle, something afforded to only a small percentage of the Chinese population. Yu insists this is a contradiction of motivations and asks if the film is ridiculing itself or mocking the audience.¹⁴⁹ I argue that the film does neither. Firstly, it is important to note that an audience's dreams and ideals can influence film reception regardless of the true circumstances of the audience's daily lives. Craig, Greene, and Douglas, the market research team from the Stern School of Business mentioned earlier, succinctly describe the cultural significance of film in their article on US film reception at foreign box offices:

In addition to their economic importance, films play an important role in the transmission of culture. They are both culturally rich and culturally complex. They constitute a form of entertainment that reflects both daily life, often emphasizing romantic, humorous, and violent elements as well as the fantasies, dreams and imagination through which individuals escape from the realities of daily existence.¹⁵⁰

Secondly, it is important to note the difference between the nuances of egalitarian-like themes in *Titanic* and strict egalitarian or Marxist philosophies. Scholar Jonathan Noble cites *Titanic* as portraying "moral values of egalitarianism";¹⁵¹ Chinese film critic Ye Kaidi referred to

¹⁴⁸ Noble, "'Titanic' in China," 188.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Craig, Greene, and Douglas, "Culture Matters," 83.

¹⁵¹ Noble, "'Titanic' in China," 168.

the ideology of the film as “social realism” (*xianshizhuyi*), a Marxist artistic censorship doctrine initiated first in the USSR to promote the development of socialism;¹⁵² and Scholar James Kendrick examines the “Marxist overtones” of *Titanic*.¹⁵³ Upon first examination, *Titanic* does appear to promote Marxist-like ideals, pulling on the audience’s egalitarian desires –and, thereby subconsciously connecting with Chinese “Red” nostalgia- but, upon further examination, the film only denounces wealth as an indicator of a person’s value. The true villain of *Titanic* (apart from poor planning and engineering) is an attitude of class elitism. This distinction will be further examined later but suffice it to say that the ideological themes in the film are such that nostalgia may play a role in the film’s reception among the Maoist generation, but the film does not take this ideology so far as to denounce wealth and materialism entirely. In her article, “Size Does Matter: Notes on *Titanic* and James Cameron as Blockbuster Auteur”, Alexandra Keller argues that James Cameron wants to portray the film as anti-elite through Rose’s denouncement of her own elite status but, in fact, the framed pictures intended to fill in the narrative gap between young Rose in the icy water and Rose at the end of her life show a life of privilege and of expensive adventures. Thus, the film is more of a reflexive portrait of an elitist society that concludes by subtly reinforcing class distinctions. The subtlety is such that audiences are nevertheless left with, as Keller describes, “the image of anonymous postrescue Rose, which we connect to the Bohemian image of a much older Rose at the

¹⁵² Xiaoping Lin, “Challenging the Canon,” *Third Text* 21, no. 1 (January 2007): 42, doi:10.1080/09528820601138329; Noble, “‘Titanic’ in China,” 189.

¹⁵³ James Kendrick, “Marxist Overtones in Three Films by James Cameron,” *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 27, no. 3 (1999): 1, doi:10.1080/01956059909602807.

potter's wheel", an image that urges the audience to ignore the class-reinforcements and to bask in the heroism of Jack and Rose as revolutionaries who defy class boundaries.¹⁵⁴

Jonathan Noble acknowledges the presence of egalitarian themes in the film, but he discounts the role this ideology played in the reception of *Titanic* in China. He examines Jiang Zemin's public promotion of the film -which praised the film for its ideological alignment with Chinese cultural policies- arguing that Jiang Zemin's true (and silent) motivation for promoting the film was influenced by "market fetishism, profit maximization, and transnational capitalism."¹⁵⁵ Noble argues that the market frenzy of an event film like *Titanic* presents significant profit potential for the Chinese film industry, and that Jiang Zemin aided in marketing the film in order for China to capitalize on that potential.¹⁵⁶ Noble goes on to point out as additional evidence that egalitarian values did not play a role in the reception of the film that, despite his expectations, in interviews with viewers of the film "very few" commented on the issue of egalitarianism.

In an informal survey of viewer reviews on the Chinese website Baidu.com,¹⁵⁷ I too was surprised I didn't find more comments on the egalitarian themes of *Titanic* but a lack of ideological commentary is not actually significant in assessing reception theory. The fact that

¹⁵⁴ Keller, "Size Does Matter," 146.

¹⁵⁵ Noble, "'Titanic' in China," 190.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ "泰坦尼克号1 英语 1997 (*Taitannikehao 1 Yingyu 1997*)," Viewer Comments, *Baidu*, accessed October 14, 2014, <http://v.baidu.com/movie/24894.htm?q=%E6%B3%B0%E5%9D%A6%E5%B0%BC%E5%85%8B%E5%8F%B7>.

few viewers' responses (both online and in Noble's formal interviews) mentioned egalitarian values does not mean ideology did not play a role in *Titanic's* reception. Outside of academic film reviews, a viewer is more likely to voice ideological commentary only if themes of the film are *not* aligned with the viewer's values (i.e. if an aspect of the film offended their sensibility). Additionally, consider the fact that consumer marketing is a multi-billion dollar industry and companies put out products based on extensive research into what appeals to consumers, but consumers do not necessarily articulate (or even recognize) the appealing factors. If you interviewed a line of people camping for the new iPhone release, it is likely few or none of the people would cite "materialism" as their motivation for waiting in line but they are –just by participating in the consumption of the product- demonstrating the materialistic values of American culture. Film consumption on a mass scale is also significant and can reflect ideologies or aspects of ideologies within a given culture. As explained in Timothy Corrigan's instructional book, *A Short Guide to Writing About Film* (2012), "In critical writing attuned to ideology, any cultural product or creation carries, implicitly or explicitly, ideas about how the world is or should be seen and how men and women should see each other in it: The clothes you wear express social values just as the films you watch communicate social values."¹⁵⁸ To ignore the potential ideological elements at play in the experience (whether conscious or subconscious) of Chinese spectators' film consumption, overlooks a significant contextual component of Chinese audiences' interaction with the text of *Titanic*.

¹⁵⁸ Timothy Corrigan, *A Short Guide to Writing about Film*, 5th ed., Short Guide Series (New York: Pearson/Longman, 2004), 93–94.

INDIVIDUALISM IN CHINA'S YOUTH CULTURE

For the younger generation in China, often referred to as “Generation Y” (born between 1978 and 2000) or the “Millennial Youth” generation (defined more loosely as the children of the Maoist Era generation), which did not experience the Cultural Revolution or indoctrination of socialism under Mao first-hand, themes reflecting aspects of Marxist ideology may not resonate, yet this generation has turned up at the theaters with as much enthusiasm as the previous one did.¹⁵⁹ These moviegoers may not connect with an ideology of outright egalitarianism, but I would argue they can still connect with aspects of the film’s class consciousness. China’s Millennial Youth grew up during the economic Reform and Opening Up in China. Due to increased technology (including the development of and widened access to the internet), increased access to wealth and education, and, according to some scholars, the “One Child Policy”, this generation has developed what scholars are calling a “Me Culture” (“*ziwo wenhua*”), which values individualism significantly more than does the Maoist Era generation in China.¹⁶⁰ In a 2010 study published by Yangzi Sima and Peter Pugsley called “The Rise of a ‘Me Culture’ in Postsocialist China,” Generation Y bloggers exhibited a greater interest in the individual “self” and very little interest in the collective or even in politics at all. In addition to

¹⁵⁹ Y. Sima and P. C. Pugsley, “The Rise of A ‘Me Culture’ in Postsocialist China: Youth, Individualism and Identity Creation in the Blogosphere,” *International Communication Gazette* 72, no. 3 (April 1, 2010): 289, doi:10.1177/1748048509356952.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 287–9; Robert L. Moore, “Generation Ku: Individualism and China’s Millennial Youth,” *Ethnology* 44, no. 4 (October 1, 2005): 357, doi:10.2307/3774095.

examining the blog content of Generation Y “netizens”, Sima and Pugsley also interviewed most of the bloggers to gain further understanding of their shared characteristics.¹⁶¹

Sima and Pugsley fail to concede the obvious bias of this study, which is that people who choose to blog about their lives are likely more individualistic than their peers from the outset. Sima and Pugsley define “Me Culture” as being primarily concerned with self-expression and identity exhibition. And the primary function of blogging is in fact to express one’s own ideas and oftentimes for the purpose of displaying those ideas before an audience so, by definition, bloggers are more likely to fit Sima and Pugsley’s “Me Culture” criteria while their peers who are less interested in self-exhibition are more likely to refrain from blogging. Therefore, this is probably not a representative subset of the Generation Y culture. Nonetheless, the article does present enough relevant information to demonstrate stark contrasts between the “Me Culture” emerging in Postsocialist China and the collectivist ideals of the Maoist generation. As one example, the article cites the advertising slogan of major cell phone provider China Mobile Telecommunication Corporation: “I call the shots in my zone” (*wo de dipan, wo zuozhu*).¹⁶² Scholars have also translated this phrase as: “My turf, I decide.” This catchphrase and variants of the phrase (in the form of “my _____, I decide” have become hugely popular in Chinese youth culture as a slogan for rebellion and individuality.¹⁶³ Sima and Pugsley’s research

¹⁶¹ Sima and Pugsley, “The Rise of A ‘Me Culture’ in Postsocialist China,” 287.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 288.

¹⁶³ Qing Zhang and Chen-chun E, “‘My Turf, I Decide’: Linguistic Circulation in the Emergence of a Chinese Youth Culture,” in *Chinese under Globalization : Emerging Trends in Language Use in China*, ed. Jin Liu and Hongyin Tao (SGP: World Scientific Publishing Co., 2012), 79–103, <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/alltitles/docDetail.action?docID=10563542>.

concluded that Generation Y exhibits a shift from the Maoist axiom of the collective to a larger concern for the “self” and Sima and Pugsley credit much of this shift to a deeply intertwined relationship between individualism and consumerism, which is increasingly prevalent in a marketizing China.¹⁶⁴

As previously mentioned, research surrounding the reception of US films in foreign countries, particularly China, is relatively lacking, but research surrounding the increasing similarities between Chinese culture and American culture is overwhelming. In their article about personal happiness in China, Liza Steele and Scott M. Lynch draw on the findings of several sociological studies measuring the effects of various factors on the “subjective well-being” (a measurement of one’s happiness and life satisfaction) of Chinese people and they come to a similar conclusion to that of Sima and Pugsley. Steele and Lynch found that individualist factors were the most effective predictors of subjective well-being, stating that “Chinese are increasingly prioritizing individualistic factors in assessments of their own happiness and life satisfaction thus substantiating descriptions of their society as increasingly individualistic.”¹⁶⁵ They further hypothesized that individualist factors will continue to play an increasingly important role in the individual’s subjective well-being as the Chinese economy becomes increasingly marketized.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁴ Sima and Pugsley, “The Rise of A ‘Me Culture’ in Postsocialist China,” 301.

¹⁶⁵ Liza G. Steele and Scott M. Lynch, “The Pursuit of Happiness in China: Individualism, Collectivism, and Subjective Well-Being During China’s Economic and Social Transformation,” *Social Indicators Research* 114, no. 2 (November 2013): 450, doi:10.1007/s11205-012-0154-1.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 444.

Steele and Lynch further cite several reputable research findings to corroborate their argument: Hofstede (1980) found that economic development fosters individualism; Moore (2005) concluded that increasing freedoms in China (starting in the 1980's) have led to a sentiment of individualism that strictly contradicts the "collectivist spirit" of the Cultural Revolution; Wang (2002) argues that post-Mao China allows and encourages the pursuit of individual interests, which requires the official endorsement of "some form of individualism" by the Chinese Communist Party;¹⁶⁷ and Yan Yunxiang's research published in *The British Journal of Sociology* found that marketization of China's economy has already broken down collectivist ideology so thoroughly that even those in underprivileged economic and social echelons exhibit a sense of personal responsibility for their achievements and their failures.¹⁶⁸

Generation Y grew up as China began to marketize its economy, spurring increasingly prevalent capitalist characteristics in Chinese popular culture. *Titanic* echoes this capitalist ideology, which promotes the pursuit of personal interests. Under the endorsement of official party policy, both of these generations in China have maintained a goal of entering and participating in the modernized world. Both the S.S. Titanic, the actual ship that is the subject of the film, and *Titanic*, the film, promulgate society's desire for modernity and forward progress. Additionally, *Titanic* appeals to the growing capitalist (and consumerist) sentiment among China's youth. In many ways, Jack represents "The American Dream," a largely capitalist attitude in which wealth and success is the option and responsibility of the individual. Jack is

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 442.

¹⁶⁸ Yunxiang Yan, "The Chinese Path to Individualization," *The British Journal of Sociology* 61, no. 3 (September 14, 2010): 504, doi:10.1111/j.1468-4446.2010.01323.x.

American (from Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin). Despite being an orphan, despite his humble upbringing (and despite the fact that he only made 10 cents per drawing) he works his way across the United States and, by the age of 20, he has already managed to study art in Paris, France –an idyllic example of “pulling yourself up by your bootstraps”. Then Jack capitalizes on a tiny stroke of luck -winning a ticket to sail back to America on Titanic. Throughout the film, Jack talks about his dreams for his life in America. After all, the Titanic was called “The Ship of Dreams” (at least according to James Cameron).

In their article, “Diamonds and Democratic Desire in *Titanic*,” Adrienne Munich and Maura Spiegel akin the capitalist theme in the film to a “democratic desire” and take the concept a step further saying that *Titanic* “gratifies a magnetic attraction to wealth while appealing to higher American values” implying that the film appeals to a desire for an equal chance to acquire wealth while defining a person’s worth through more intrinsic values, like personal character.¹⁶⁹ When discussing Chinese culture, using a term like “democratic desire” can be quite misleading –implying a desire for political reform- but Munich and Spiegel do not discuss the “democratic desire” in the context of political reform. The ideal of the “democratic desire” Munich and Spiegel identify in *Titanic* is one in which class is irrelevant, people are judged by their character, integrity, and work ethic, and there exists the opportunity to pursue and achieve one’s personal desires, namely desires for wealth and love.

¹⁶⁹ Adrienne Munich and Maura Spiegel, “Heart of the Ocean: Diamonds and Democratic Desire in *Titanic*,” in *Titanic : Anatomy of a Blockbuster*, ed. Kevin S. Sandler and Gaylyn Studlar (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999), 156.

Beginning with Deng Xiaoping's Reform and Opening Up, the possibility of economic advancement has, arguably, increased in China. Similar to the promises of social mobility via "The American Dream", new generations in China are also enticed by the new prospect of acquiring wealth brought about by an increasingly capitalistic market. For this assessment of film reception, it is not necessary to define to what degree social and economic mobility is (or is not) a possibility for Chinese or U.S. citizens. "The American Dream" represents an ideal of the capitalist psyche in America. Similarly, post-socialist China is developing its own capitalist mentality that increasingly encourages individualistic pursuits and ideals.

Munich and Spiegel explain that *Titanic's* promotion of a classless society "that believe[s] in the attainability of its desire" is an underlying appeal to the American audience, contributing to the *Titanic* "craze", but –for the same reasons this concept appeals to an American audience- this model also reverberates through the intrinsic desires of China's younger generations.¹⁷⁰

The blue diamond necklace, the "Heart of the Ocean", symbolizes the ideal of social and economic mobility in its ability to traverse classes and genders throughout the film.¹⁷¹ The necklace began as a possession of French Royalty then landed in the hands of an aristocrat, Cal, then hung around the neck of a middle-class girl, Rose, and later sat in the pocket of a working-class man, Jack. The necklace is an object of consumption that, in turn, objectifies Rose, making her an object of consumption for Cal. Rose notes that the necklace was "a dreadfully heavy

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 155–6.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 156.

thing”, conveying that she is emotionally and physically restrained by her gendered position as an object for male consumption and by her social requirements to obey Cal.¹⁷² In his article “Women First: ‘Titanic’ (1997), Action-Adventure Films and Hollywood’s Female Audience,” Peter Krämer argues that “Behind the romantic dream of an adolescent girl lurks the nightmare of suppressed female rage. Rose’s story is also a cautionary tale about the destructive power women may unleash on an oppressive patriarchal order.”¹⁷³ Rose tells her story from this perspective –her angry perspective towards the patriarchal order but also her prideful self-view. Her audience within the film, treasure hunter Brock Lovett and his all-male crew, are not interested in her particularly female perspective because they are focused on locating the diamond necklace, forcing Rose to assert herself in order to maintain the right to tell the story as she wants it to be told.¹⁷⁴

In the scene where Jack draws Rose nude, Rose turns the necklace into a link to her sexual agency.¹⁷⁵ Rose rebels against her gender and class expectations, appealing to an audience’s desire to defy their gender and social limitations. An aged Rose drops the “Heart of the Ocean” into the ocean, leaving possibility for anyone to find it. This act symbolizes the full

¹⁷² Ibid., 160–1.

¹⁷³ Peter Krämer, “Women First: ‘Titanic’ (1997), Action-Adventure Films and Hollywood’s Female Audience,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 18, no. 4 (October 1998): 609, doi:10.1080/01439689800260421.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Adrienne Munich and Maura Spiegel, “Heart of the Ocean: Diamonds and Democratic Desire in *Titanic*,” in *Titanic : Anatomy of a Blockbuster*, ed. Kevin S. Sandler and Gaylyn Studlar (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999), 160–1; Some scholars argue that this is not an act of agency, but instead a display of male wish-fulfillment. I will present this argument in the next section, “Gender & Romance Visualized by the Film Industry.”

transformation of the blue diamond necklace from a symbol of capitalist patriarchy to a “glittering souvenir of Rose’s erotic awakening” and, finally, to a suggestive symbol of the possibility for anyone to realize their desire for wealth.

Margaret “Molly” Brown is one of the non-fictional characters in the film *Titanic*.¹⁷⁶ Molly is wealthy woman in her own right, but does not come from an aristocrat family; she does not bow to the patriarchy of the first-class, nor does she partake in the pretentious attitude displayed by the rest of the first-class patrons.¹⁷⁷ Molly Brown serves as an example of the manifestation of this desire to break down the restraints of capitalist patriarchy. The character, Molly Brown, gains the respect of the audience through her warm personal character, allowing the audience to feel gratified in its desire for wealth. When the ship is sinking and it is known there aren’t enough boats to save everyone, Molly is overwhelmingly alone in her concern for the hopelessly fated masses.¹⁷⁸ Posthumously, the real Molly Brown gained the nickname, “The Unsinkable Molly Brown” because she insisted that her lifeboat return to look for survivors.¹⁷⁹ In stark contrast, Cal, a fictitious villain of the film represents themes of capitalistic patriarchy. As the ship is sinking, Cal selfishly swipes a stranger’s daughter and passes her as his own in order to get on a boat and save himself.¹⁸⁰ Villainizing Cal, a representative of the patriarchy and snobbery of the first-class, while making heroes of Jack

¹⁷⁶ Martin H. Levinson, “A General Semantics Analysis of the RMS Titanic Disaster,” *ETC.: A Review of General Semantics* 69, no. 2 (2012): 150.

¹⁷⁷ James Cameron, *Titanic*, videorecording (Paramount Home Entertainment, 2007).

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁹ Levinson, “A General Semantics Analysis,” 150.

¹⁸⁰ Cameron, *Titanic*.

and Molly, both characters of good morality with poor backgrounds, feeds a viewer's desire to condemn class. These examples demonstrate *Titanic's* appeal to China's younger generation, which is enticed by the illusory possibility for a class-blind society with unlimited economic opportunities. *Titanic* appeals to a wide audience in its denouncement of class elitism, gender repression, and oppressive patriarchy.

GENDER & ROMANCE VISUALIZED BY THE FILM INDUSTRY

Prior to creating *Titanic*, James Cameron had already established his reputation as a spectacle filmmaker with his films *Aliens* (1986), *Terminator 2* (1991), and *True Lies* (1994), receiving critical acclaim for his work in special effects.¹⁸¹ However, in an interview for the Academy of Achievement in 1999, writer and director James Cameron acknowledged that *Titanic* was first and foremost a love story. "*Titanic* was conceived as a love story, and if I could have done it without one visual effect I would have been more than happy to do that."¹⁸² As Peter Krämer points out in his article, "Women First: '*Titanic*' (1997), action-adventure films and Hollywood's female audience", despite the film's name, images of the main actors Kate Winslet and Leonardo DiCaprio dwarfed the ship in the film's marketing advertisements. In one of the more popular film posters, Leonardo DiCaprio stands with his arms around Kate Winslet as they both gaze beyond the bow of the ship, which is only visible by the blurry steel pipes of

¹⁸¹ Krämer, "Women First," 601.

¹⁸² James Cameron was inducted into the Academy of Achievement as a Master Filmmaker in 1998; James Cameron, "James Cameron Interview," *Academy of Achievement*, June 18, 1999, <http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/cam0int-1>.

the ship's deck in the background.¹⁸³ As James Cameron put it himself, the spectacle of the film "got people's attention, got them to the theaters, and then the emotional, cathartic experience of watching the film is what made the film work."¹⁸⁴

James Cameron's earlier films (*Aliens*, *Terminator 2*, *True Lies*) were at the forefront of a new production trend: action-adventure films centered around female characters. Starting in the 1970's (after the success of *Jaws* [1975] and *Rocky* [1976]) Hollywood marginalized female-centric genres, reserving the biggest budgets for action films, which have traditionally attracted more male viewers. Film reception research confirms action films' concentrated appeal to males (particularly young males) while female audiences favor films focused on character stories and emotions.¹⁸⁵ Recognizing the untapped revenue potential in the female audience, Hollywood began incorporating more romantic or family-oriented sub-plots into action-adventure films. Peter Krämer points to *Star Wars* (1977) as one of the first action films to reach a broad audience by incorporating family-oriented themes. These films are part of a sub-genre known as "family-adventure" films and they have successfully attracted more female viewership, but these films are still majorly male-oriented films.¹⁸⁶

Krämer contends that James Cameron initiated a new cinematic trend of female-oriented action-adventure films with *Aliens* and *Terminator 2* because both of these films were high-tech, expensive productions that centered on the active participation of a strong female

¹⁸³ Krämer, "Women First," 699–700.

¹⁸⁴ Cameron, "James Cameron Interview."

¹⁸⁵ Krämer, "Women First," 601.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 602.

character and both, of course, were box office successes, confirming that this new trend was commercially effective. The box office success of subsequent films like *Speed* (1994), *Twister* (1996), and *Contact* (1997) further confirmed the broad appeal of this new female-centric sub-genre.¹⁸⁷ Krämer explains that these films “...do not simply move a woman to the centre of their narrative, they also deal with what are traditionally perceived as female issues (childbirth and mother love) and they explicitly set up the world and action of the film as an extension of the female protagonist’s subjectivity.”¹⁸⁸

Krämer argues that this focus shift in Hollywood’s action-adventure films of the 1980’s and 1990’s strengthened the female role in popular film and paved a foundation for *Titanic*’s enormously widespread viewership, but he also acknowledges that many qualities of the subjugated female role remained. As with the aforementioned predecessor films, the female protagonist of *Titanic*, Rose DeWitt Bukater, is a symbol of agency at the surface level –her character voices her rebellious objection to the oppressive demands of a patriarchal society– yet she still fulfills the fantasy of the erotic object of the male gaze.¹⁸⁹ As Kramer clearly describes it, “...Rose fully participates in the physical action, shedding clothes to be able to use (and also to display) her body to greater effect, skillfully employing an axe, even hitting people and running, wading and swimming in a most unlady-like fashion.”¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 603.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in *Critical Visions in Film Theory: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, ed. Timothy Corrigan, Patricia White, and Meta Mazaj (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2011), 715–7.

¹⁹⁰ Krämer, “Women First,” 605.

Furthermore, the topic of the male gaze cannot pass without mentioning Rose's nude scene. In this scene, at Rose's request, Jack draws Rose sprawled on a loveseat wearing nothing but the Heart of the Ocean necklace. Although some scholars arguably credit this as an act of sexual agency,¹⁹¹ this scene can also be characterized as the ultimate example of the male gaze convention. The camera takes the point-of-view angle, showing Jack's first-person perspective of Rose's exposed body and of his own hand sketching her, creating two levels of gaze –that of Jack's character and that of the audience.¹⁹²

Scholars debate to what degree Rose fulfills and/or to what degree she signifies an alternative to the traditional film convention of the fetishistic female image. Peter Krämer argues that Rose does both and Alexandra Keller agrees.¹⁹³ In her essay, "Size Does Matter," Keller points out that Rose, along with all of Cameron's lead female characters, challenges gender norms of the patriarchal order but, in the end, settles comfortably and quietly back into the service of patriarchy "and the owning classes she appears to spurn in favor of Jack and all he represents".¹⁹⁴ Keller explains that Rose is an idiosyncratically appealing character in that she is independent, smart and powerful yet rebellious and eccentrically beautiful (and, I would add, that her rebelliousness and loogey-hocking also makes her all the more accessible to the non-elite audience). But Rose ultimately does not reject her class as James Cameron would

¹⁹¹ Munich and Spiegel, "Heart of the Ocean," 160–1.

¹⁹² Cameron, *Titanic*.

¹⁹³ Krämer, "Women First," 604–6.

¹⁹⁴ Keller, "Size Does Matter," 146.

have you think.¹⁹⁵ Alexandra Keller eloquently sums up her argument in the following quotation:

...Cameron's fierce women are always pressed back into the service of patriarchy, pleasantly reaffirming the way things are in a manner equally palatable to both women and men. Cameron's big fake-out, his ability to make these women do something on par with a gender striptease, is that, time after time, his heroines use their spunk and force to maintain the status quo...In the end, Rose the adventuress has led a life both like Jack's and like the one he wanted her to lead. But it is the rich version of that life. By leaving us with the image of an anonymous postrescue Rose, which we connect to the Bohemian image of a much older Rose at the potter's wheel, Cameron urges us to believe that Rose has really renounced her class. But she has not rejected her class at all, only its most obviously repugnant values...(boorishness, materialism, a tendency to treat people, especially women, like objects)...As the pictures she has brought to her stateroom on the present-day ship narrate...Rose has led an adventurous but *expensive* life. Paralleling the Picassos, Degases, and Monets she brought into her stateroom earlier in the film, these are pictures of a life only slightly less privileged than the one she gave up.¹⁹⁶

Rose's break from the traditional female-object role of mainstream film (whether the break be whole or intermittent) positions her as a sound piece for women's agency. Furthermore, gender equality is a concept that fits hand-in-hand with the socialist ideas of the Cultural Revolution and with post-Mao modernism in Chinese culture. Traditionally, China had an arranged marriage system in which marriages were decided by family negotiations. In the early 1900's women (mostly educated elite –not unlike Rose's character) began opposing such strict family directives.¹⁹⁷ Under Chairman Mao, women gained more independence via new political policies on Marriage and an increase in female employment. In a study of modern

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 145–6.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Ellen Efron Pimentel, "Just How Do I Love Thee?: Marital Relations in Urban China," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 62, no. 1 (2000): 33, doi:10.1111/j.1741-3737.2000.00032.x.

marriages in urban China, Ellen Efron Pimentel found that Chinese urbanites (both men and women) are statistically happier in marriages with an “egalitarian outlook” (i.e. shared responsibilities and decision-making) than in arranged marriages or marriages with a more traditional (patriarchal) outlook. Furthermore, parental approval was found to have a significant impact on the quality of marriages.¹⁹⁸ Therefore, although China has transitioned to a new phase in which the norm is to choose one’s partner, marriage culture in China still maintains some of the more traditional Chinese characteristics, like family influence –a theme quite central to the love triangle between Cal Hockley, Rose DeWitt Bukater, and Jack Dawson in *Titanic*.

Rose DeWitt Bukater, represents (at least to some extent) modernity and forward-thinking. She outwardly protests her arranged marriage to Cal Hockley; she enters the realm of androgyny by spitting “loogeys”, drinking beer, and swinging an axe;¹⁹⁹ and, in the end, “in a final move combining intelligence, determination, and courage, dives back into the water” to get a whistle to call over the final lifeboat and ultimately save herself.²⁰⁰ The debate over where Rose’s character falls on the spectrum of gender politics is a universal question of interest to all cultures. And, given China’s position in a dramatic shift away from traditional gender roles and love politics similar to those depicted in *Titanic*, it is possible China’s urbanites find particular interest in Rose’s struggle to determine her role.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 44–6.

¹⁹⁹ Cameron, *Titanic*.

²⁰⁰ Krämer, “Women First,” 605.

When Rose tosses the Heart of the Ocean diamond necklace into the water at the end of the film, Keller argues this allows the audience to feel that Rose (and the audience members themselves) has the moral high ground of the steerage class, but in reality the audience has taken part in a reflexive portrait of capital –an expensive spectacle film that functions as a signifier of capitalist mechanisms and that ultimately reinforces the class lines drawn at the beginning of the film.²⁰¹ Nonetheless, by ostracizing herself from her mother, refusing to marry her well-positioned fiancé, and exchanging her evening gowns for a more avant-garde (though still rather luxurious) style, Rose appears to have eschewed some of the expectations of a high-society woman in the early 20th Century, which allows room for the audience to ignore the film’s signifiers of class-reinforcement and leaves the average spectator free to depart the cinema with the sense that they have shared in the glory of Jack and Rose’s anti-elite, rebellious spirit.

²⁰¹ Keller, “Size Does Matter,” 145–6.

CONCLUSION

Both *Titanic* and *Titanic 3D* were met with great enthusiasm from Chinese audiences – an enthusiasm that overshadowed all predecessor films released in China and dwarfed all other responses of the global market. The connection between the Chinese movie-going audience and this film go beyond the usual explanations for the success of Hollywood films such as globalization and marketing. *Titanic's* success in China is also a consequence of the film's position in a noteworthy time in the evolution of Chinese popular culture. After the Reform and Opening Up of China's economy, film began its transition from officially-sanctioned and government-funded propaganda to a marketed, profitable cultural product for consumption. This turning point in Chinese culture fostered the right conditions for *Titanic's* reception and, reciprocally, the commercial success of Hollywood films like *Titanic* triggered a shift in the attitudes of many Chinese filmmakers and production studios as they saw the profit potential in commercial film. And, regardless of the concerns surrounding the threat of Hollywood as a culturally homogenizing force, the struggling Chinese film market began its transition towards an intricately inter-dependent relationship with Hollywood. This reformation of the bond between Hollywood and the Chinese film industry ironically reflects the origins of Chinese film, which began in the early 1900's with the import of American studios, films and theater investment.

Since China's dramatic political shift after the Cultural Revolution, China is both actively and passively receiving new cultural influences. The unavoidable connection between capital

and culture in China's marketizing economy has situated Hollywood as an inescapable player in these shifts in Chinese culture. Film reflects people's desires, fears, and fetishes and China's audience, being in a time of cultural transition, is impressionable as China seeks new ideologies and new heroes on the silver screen. In the case of *Titanic*, part of its extreme popularity in China can be credited to the film's ability to reach China in this time of transition. *Titanic* speaks to China's memory of the relatively recent Cultural Revolution and its lingering egalitarian ideology while also reflecting a newly-formed sentiment of individualism and the current desire for China's own version of the "American Dream" in which classes are irrelevant and the possibility to attain economic desires exists for all.

Titanic penetrated Chinese culture to an extreme. Regardless of the potential long-term culturally homogenizing forces at play in China, *Titanic* was consumed and fetishized at the local level.²⁰² China's audience was eagerly swept up in the *Titanic* phenomenon. From *Titanic* references in a Zhang Yimou film to Celine Dion singing "My Heart Will Go On" to the Chinese company Blue Star Lines' replica of the RSS Titanic, the *Titanic* phenomenon was not just a spectacle film – it was a spectacle of American marketing practices and a spectacle of transnational commodification and cultural consumption.

The growing middle-class in China creates the optimal environment for investors looking for maximum profit potential. And, in the film industry where theater and complex development, film production, marketing and distribution, require big money investment in order to capitalize on China's market potential, deep Hollywood pockets zealously fit the

²⁰² Noble, "Titanic' in China," 170.

growing bill. In order to advance continued economic growth –and, at times, in order to acquiesce to pressure from the World Trade Organization- China’s government has opened the door further and further for these investors through Hollywood-Chinese joint ventures, resulting in a unique integration of American and Chinese film products and practices. Given the financial and market momentum of co-productions in China, the resulting American-Chinese business and cultural intertwining is not likely to unravel in the foreseeable future.

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