2010

The Political Economy of Avatar’s Chinese Adventure

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There’s been a lot of discussion of the political meanings that can be read into *Avatar* and how this might relate to it being pulled from or simply ending its run in some Chinese theaters. As a political scientist with a long-term interest in the Chinese film industry, and the fate of Hollywood movies in China, and someone who is interested in the working of SARFT (the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television), here are four things worth keeping in mind when considering the situation:

First, Tong Gang (the Director of the Film Bureau under SARFT) and Zhang Hongsen (The Deputy Head of the Film Bureau) have felt the need to clear up a variety of “rumors” relating to the replacement of *Avatar* with *Confucius* and other issues. In part, this is in response to the rapid spread of information that cannot easily be controlled. For example, the word on the removal of *Avatar* from film screens began with the southern media, but reports from Chengdu, Shenyang, Ningbo and other places on the removal of the film were quickly spread by “word of mouth” and QQ messaging. No one waited for a formal announcement, which contributed to SARFT feeling the necessity to get out in front of the story.

Second, the Film Bureau under Tong and Zhang held a seminar on January 19 for those who work on film on the lessons of *Avatar* for the Chinese film industry. Much of what Tong and Zhang said was in praise of *Avatar*, particularly its artistic and technical achievements, and they pointed out the weaknesses of the Chinese film industry. It should also be mentioned that on January 8, in his annual report on the achievements of the Chinese film industry over the past year, Tong at several points brought up the threat from Hollywood films, with language that suggested that a long-term war was being fought, despite the fact that domestic films made up 56.6% of the market in 2009 (but Hollywood films finished first and second and are also now first, second and third all-time).

Third, as has been pointed out by others, it’s very clear that Chinese audiences, particularly the youth who make up the bulk of the film audience, want to see *Avatar* in 3-D and are willing to wait on long lines to do so. It’s quite common for those I know to say that the only way they’ll spend money to see the film in an age of downloading will be in the 3-D format. There’s also peer pressure. I don’t think anyone would want to admit that they saw this film in a theater in 2-D.

Fourth, *Avatar* is already revolutionary, and not just because it’s now the biggest grossing film in Chinese history. My friends in the film industry cannot think of a major foreign “tentpole” film released around the period of New Year’s Day and Chinese New Year’s Day. For the so-called “New Year Films” (*hesuipian*, 贺岁片), it’s always been only Chinese films. This suggests that there was no great desire to limit the success of this film, particularly since it appears that the 3-D version will continue. One could perhaps argue that *Avatar* is being shown to stimulate creativity in the Chinese film industry which, as Tong has noted in his comments, has been largely concerned only with making commercial films with little art and even less creativity.

Without going into even more detail, I would just note that at the leading theater chain in Beijing, according to the manager, the showings in 3-D and IMAX make up more than 90% of the box office receipts and that IMAX showings are already advance booked through February 5. Of course there are only about 700 3-D screens in China out of 4,600+, so some people will lose out and not see the film theatrically, but *Confucius* was originally scheduled to open on January 28 on 2-D screens, so it’s basically been moved up only a week.

Of course rumors persist on why the decision was taken — many people are skeptical that it was ONLY because of the release of *Confucius* — and even some of the best-placed film people in China have their theories. These spin off in all different directions, sometimes dovetailing with and sometimes diverging from speculation outside of China.
Stanley Rosen is a Professor of Political Science and the Director of the East Asian Studies Center at the University of Southern California, and his most recent book, co-edited with Peter Gries, is *Chinese Politics: State, Society and the Market*, which is being published this month by Routledge.