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Article

Censorship, Pandemic, and the Field of Power: The Death and Revival of a Chinese War Epic

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Abstract: This case study examines the dramatic change of fortune of the Chinese war epic “The Eight Hundred”. The movie was censored in 2019 during China’s celebration of the country’s 70th anniversary but became the market-saving hero in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Through the lens of Bourdieu’s theory of the field of cultural production, this study argues that the movie’s changing fate is essentially the change of its political, symbolic and economic capitals, under different field conditions. The subfield of commercial films in China is subject to the control of political and economic forces in the field of power, but is also becoming an economic power itself.

Keywords: Bourdieu; case study; Chinese movie industry; COVID-19; field of cultural production; pop culture

In the summer of 2019, the movie “The Eight Hundred” (八佰) (hereafter “800”) generated quite some buzz. As a big-budget, domestically made war epic set to rival Hollywood blockbusters, the movie excited both the audience and the movie industry. It was slated to be the opening movie of the Shanghai International Film Festival but withdrew from the festival. It was set for theatrical release on 5 July but the release was canceled. Summer movie season went on without “800”. A few months later, COVID-19 hit. The pandemic saved the movie. Amid desperate need for big box office earners in the effort to revive the movie industry, “800” became the hero and biggest box office earner in 2020.

The movie’s premature death and miraculous revival did not just happen by chance but can be explained through the lens of field theory developed by Pierre Bourdieu. This case study of “800” demonstrates how commercial films in China, as a subfield of its own, operate within the field of power, which in turn is subject to conditions in the broader field of social historical environment. This study intends to explain the fate of the movie by examining the change of its political, economic, and symbolic capitals, in conjunction with the habitus of key players in the subfield of commercial films and the field of power. It then situates these fields in the broader field of social historical context to explore the interrelations among these three levels of field.

1. Background: The Death and Revival of “800”

Directed by renowned director Guan Hu and mainly funded by the Huayi Brothers studio, “800” was the first movie in China filmed entirely using IMAX cameras (Gao 2020; Myers 2019). It cost CNY 550 million (about USD 83 million) and took 10 years to prepare and produce (Brzeski 2020a; Feng et al. 2020; Gao 2020). Based on real historical events, the movie is set in October 1937, when Japanese forces invaded coastal China and were about to take over Shanghai. Chiang Kai-shek, the then ruler of China, and his Kuomintang forces lost their defense line and had to withdraw from Shanghai. However, Chiang left one regiment, about 450 soldiers, to defend a warehouse in Shanghai, staging a heroic defense in order to put pressure on the international community to sanction Japan, an attempt largely failed. The commander of the regiment boasted he had 800 soldiers. The movie depicts what happened at the warehouse.

One day before the opening of the Shanghai International Film Festival on 15 June 2019, “800” announced on its Weibo account that, “due to technical reasons”, it would no



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longer be shown as the opening movie (Zhang 2019). The term, “technical reasons”, is widely understood as a euphemism for censorship (Mao 2019; Myers 2019).

Stunned by the sudden move, the internet and social media in China started to speculate what went wrong with the movie. One article circulating on WeChat, China’s prominent social media platform, pointed out that on 9 June, China Red Culture Research Group, an ultra-left think tank under the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, held a forum and decided that it was inappropriate to release “800” during a year commemorating the 70th anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) (BBC China 2019; Mao 2019). In 1949, the army led by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) defeated the Kuomintang forces after three years of civil war and established the PRC, replacing the Kuomintang-ruled Republic of China.

Wang Lihua, a former military officer, said at the forum, “the movie severely violated the historical facts in its glorifying of Kuomintang’s anti-Japanese efforts”. Critic Sima Nan said it was “shocking” that the movie “so heavily promotes the blue-sky-white-sun flag”, which is the flag of the Kuomintang. The blue-sky-white-sun (青天白日) image is also featured on the flag of the Republic of China. Movie critic Guo Songmin commented: “It is inappropriate to portray the solemnity and sacredness of the Kuomintang flag”, because doing so “will hurt the feelings of those who fought for the founding of the PRC with their life and amounts to an insult to the PRC” (Mao 2019). Instead, to celebrate the country’s 70th anniversary, movies should champion the five-star-red-flag (China’s national flag) and Communist heroes, the forum attendees declared (BBC China 2019).

Just days after the festival withdrawal, on June 25, it was announced that the theatrical release of the movie, set for July 5 for the lucrative summer season, was canceled. No clear reason was ever provided. There was only speculation that perhaps the movie made the authorities uneasy, due to its focus on the Kuomintang army, including the frequent display of the Republic of China flag and Kuomintang flag, in a year marking the 70th anniversary of the PRC (Lin 2020; Myers 2019).

China’s movie theaters had a strong summer season without “800”. Then came the pandemic. Movie theaters in the entire country shut down for about six months, including canceling the highly profitable Lunar New Year releases. With the pandemic mostly under control, China allowed movie theaters to reopen at limited capacities on 20 July 2020 (China Net 2020).

On 2 August 2020, Huayi Brothers announced that “800” would be released in movie theaters on August 21 (see Figure 1 below). Chinese media called the movie “the first big-budget Chinese production” released after the reopening (“The Eight Hundred Announces” 2020). All eyes were now on “800” to revive a nearly dead movie market. It didn’t disappoint, garnering more than CNY 130 million (USD 21 million) on its opening day and over CNY 500 million on its opening weekend (Gao 2020; Lu 2020). It went on to earn CNY 3.1 billion (USD 477 million) at the box office, becoming China’s highest-grossing movie in 2020 (Maoyan Entertainment 2021).

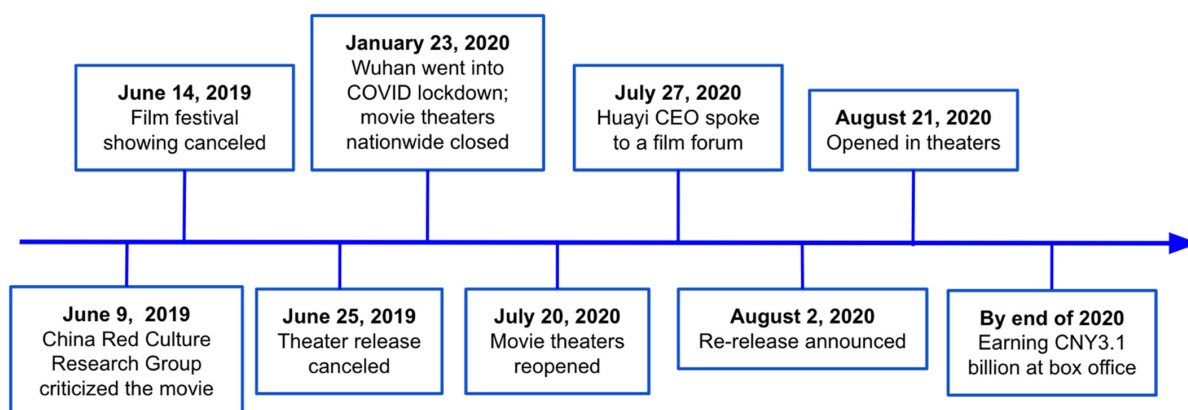


Figure 1. Timeline of key events of “800”.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Foundation

This study mainly relies on Pierre Bourdieu's theory of the field of cultural production and related concepts: field, habitus, and capital, discussed in more detail below.

2.1.1. Field and Field of Cultural Production

A field is a social space in which social interactions occur (Thomson 2014). Bourdieu defines a field as "a separate social universe having its own laws of functioning independent of those of politics and the economy" (Bourdieu 1993, p. 162). It needs to be pointed out that such an independence is relative rather than absolute, as Bourdieu often discusses how different social fields can influence each other (Grenfell 2014; Johnson 1993; Thomson 2014). Fields consist of different forces competing with each other for dominance and control (Thomson 2014).

In Bourdieu's theoretical model, the field of cultural production (or the literary field) is situated within the field of power, which in turn is situated within the field of class relations, which is equivalent to the broader historical and social context (Bourdieu 1993, p. 38). This study considers the movie industry as one subfield within the field of cultural production. The field of power consists of the set of dominant power relations in society (Johnson 1993, p. 14), or the fundamental political and economic powers, such as the government and banks (Bourdieu 1993; Grenfell 2014).

The field of cultural production, like many other specific social spaces, "is an independent social universe with its own laws of functioning, its specific relations of force, its dominants and its dominated, and so forth" (Bourdieu 1993, p. 163). It occupies a dominated position in the field of power, and the field of power is situated at the dominant pole of the field of class relations (i.e., the broader social historical environment) (Bourdieu 1993). Those who enter the field of cultural production participate in domination, but as *dominated* agents, Bourdieu (1993) maintains. "They occupy a dominated position in the dominant class, they are owners of a dominated form of power at the interior of the sphere of power" (p. 164). This is because the field of cultural production is rich in symbolic capital but not always rich in economic and political capital (Johnson 1993).

The field of cultural production is governed by a "double hierarchy" (Bourdieu 1993, p. 38): the heteronomous principle of hierarchization, or success measured by economic and political profits (book sales, box office, or awards), and the autonomous principle of hierarchization, or literary or artistic prestige (Bourdieu 1993, p. 38). These two principles also mark the main difference between the field of restricted production and the field of large-scale production. The former produces cultural goods intended for other artists and producers, and is more autonomous from the field of power than the latter. The field of mass production produces cultural goods for the public at large and "submits to the laws of competition for the conquest of the largest possible market" (Bourdieu 1993, p. 115). It also submits to other external demands, including those from the field of power and the broader field of social historical context. The movie industry, especially commercial movies, belongs in the field of large-scale production.

The explanation of what happened to "800" cannot be found in the text itself, nor in a determinant social structure. Rather, this study aims to explain the movie's experience by analyzing interactions among multiple components in the fields, as well as different levels of field. Such an analysis requires "a radical contextualization" (Johnson 1993, p. 9). In this case study about "800", radical contextualization means taking into account the movie itself, the production and exhibition of the movie, commercial movies' position within the field of power, as well as the interrelations among the commercial movie field, the field of power, and the field of broader social historical context in China.

2.1.2. Habitus and Capital

Bourdieu defines habitus as a property of actors, which can be individuals, groups or institutions (Maton 2014). Habitus is a structured structure, formed by various historical

and social conditions, including past experiences and historically established habits. It is also a structuring structure, comprising dispositions that generate and organize practices and representations (Maton 2014). Habitus can be understood as “a way of being, a habitual state and in particular, a predisposition, tendency, propensity or inclination” (Maton 2014, p. 50).

Additionally, habitus is durable but mutable (Maton 2014). When field conditions change, there could be a disruption between habitus and the field structures, which Bourdieu calls hysteresis. When hysteresis happens, habitus needs to change (Hardy 2014). When the society is relatively stable, field conditions and habitus can change gradually (Hardy 2014). In cases of abrupt changes, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, habitus might have to respond to the new conditions without gradually evolving.

Capitals are essentially things that people value (Crossley 2014), or assets that bring social, economic and cultural advantages or disadvantages (Moore 2014). Bourdieu extends the term “capital” to go beyond its narrow economic sense and be applicable in a wider system of exchanges “whereby assets of different kinds are transformed and exchanged within complex networks or circuits within and across different fields” (Moore 2014, p. 99). This study focuses on economic, political and symbolic capitals.

Bourdieu discusses four types of capital: “economic (money and assets); cultural (e.g., forms of knowledge; taste, aesthetic and cultural preferences; language, narrative and voice); social (e.g., affiliations and networks; family, religious and cultural heritage) and symbolic (things which stand for all of the other forms of capital and can be ‘exchanged’ in other fields, e.g., credentials)” (Thomson 2014, p. 67). Social and cultural capitals “can be seen as ‘transubstantiated’ forms of economic capital” (Moore 2014, p. 99), in that, under certain conditions, these non-economic capitals can provide economic benefits (Bourdieu 1993). Political capital is not singled out here, but is worth a spotlight in this study due to the paramount influence of political power in China.

Habitus and capital do not act alone but function in a particular field, subject to the influence of circumstances at a particular historical moment (Johnson 1993; Maton 2014). The field, capital and habitus form an interdependent trio, “and the three were tangled together in a Gordian knot which could only be understood through case-by-case deconstructions” (Thomson 2014, p. 67). The current study intends to do just that: deconstruct the case of “800” to untangle the interrelations involving the field, capital and habitus, at two distinct historical moments (the 70th anniversary of PRC and the COVID-19 pandemic).

2.2. Field Theory and Commercial Films in China

Very few studies have used Bourdieu’s theory to critically analyze pop culture in China. Nakajima’s study of the contemporary Chinese cinematic field (Nakajima 2016) is the most relevant to the current study. Bourdieu (1993) maintains that a principle of differentiation within the field of cultural production lies in the different relationships with economic or political power. Based on this principle, Nakajima (2016) divides China’s cinematic field into four subfields: main melody films, commercial films, international Chinese films, and independent films.

Main melody films are essentially political propaganda, promoting party ideologies and policy initiatives, glorifying party history, and legitimizing the party-state. In recent years, to meet the movie market demands, main melody films also started trying to be entertaining, giving rise to “new main melody films” (Nakajima 2016, p. 98). This subfield mostly yields to political powers—following guidance, receiving funding, and serving the needs of the ruling party—and has little autonomy in terms of filmmaking (Nakajima 2016).

International Chinese films are those art films aiming for big prizes at international film festivals. This subfield has more independence from the mass market and direct political control, but yields to international powers as they have to be judged by an international audience. The subfield of independent films is the most autonomous among the four, in terms of creative freedom. They often challenge the political boundaries and have a distinct artistic pursuit, or are very idiosyncratic. The price they pay for such autonomy is little po-

litical capital and low box office revenue, or none if the film is banned by the authorities (Nakajima 2016).

The commercial film subfield, of which “800” is a product, serves the market with the main pursuit of box office revenue. The key logic of this subfield is the market logic, all about earning big at the box office (Nakajima 2016). This subfield positions itself at the heteronomous pole influenced by economic and political forces in the field of power, as indicated by the case of “800”.

The commercial film subfield in China started to gain ground in the 1980s, the era of economic reform and opening up, when China’s cultural industry started to take shape (Wang 2001a), both to provide leisure and economic gain. Prior to that, China’s movie industry had been under total state control (Rao 2001; Zhu 2002). In 1984, the CCP central committee announced that cinema should be treated as an integral part of the cultural industry rather than a political propaganda institution. However, the state is reluctant to completely unleash the film industry and still imposes some level of control (Kuoshu 2011).

Below are some key figures of China’s commercial cinema development:

- In the 1980s, China maintained an annual production of around 100 feature films (Nakajima 2016). Between 2010 and 2020, China produced an average of 763 features per year, with 2018 setting the record of 902 (Zhang 2021).
- In 2009, China had 4723 cinema screens. The number increased to 41,056 in 2016 (Yue 2020), and 75,581 in 2020 (Zhang 2021).
- In 2010, China had 250 million moviegoers. In 2019, the number increased to 1.7 billion (iiMedia Cultural Industry Research Center 2020).
- Before the pandemic, China was the second largest movie market in the world, right after the United States (Brzeski 2020b; Thomala 2021). In 2019, Chinese movie theaters grossed USD 9.2 billion, compared with USD 11.4 billion in the United States (Brzeski 2020b). In 2020, the Chinese box office (USD 3.13 billion/CNY 20.4 billion) surpassed the United States’ (USD 2.28 billion) to become the No. 1 in the world (Davis 2021; Maoyan Entertainment 2021).

The movie “800” was produced and distributed against this industrial backdrop. Without these developments, a big-budget war epic such as “800” is hard to imagine. The key players in the subfield of commercial cinema, thus in the case of “800”, include production companies, movie exhibitors (movie theaters), investors, and government regulators. Each has their own habitus and capital pursuit.

As a result of the cultural industry reform, movie studios could no longer rely on government funding and had to make their own profit to survive, but enjoyed a greater degree of creative autonomy (Nakajima 2016; Zhu 2002). Their habitus prioritized seeking capital investment and pursuing commercial success. Today, as a multibillion-dollar industry, commercial film-making has become the most important form of film-making in China (Gong 2009). Economic capital is the primary goal of production companies. At the same time, movie studios cannot completely ignore political capital. As Nakajima points out, “Political criteria, though often vague and at times negotiable, still exert considerable force on the contemporary Chinese cinematic field” (Nakajima 2016, p. 102). In the case of “800”, the Republic of China flag is blurred and shown only in the distance throughout the movie.

In terms of exhibition, China has more than 70,000 screens and around 50 theater chains. Many of the large theater chains, such as Wanda, are privately owned (Yue 2020; Zhang 2021). The habitus of movie theaters is rather simple: showing movies, maximizing ticket and concession sales, and making a profit. To that end, movie theaters set their own ticket prices and screen allocations based on market demand (Yue 2020). They, too, primarily pursue economic capital.

Making movies and building theaters requires big investment. In recent years, capital, in its basic sense of money and assets, has played a significant role in China’s movie industry. Between 2014 and 2016, investment in the film sector totaled CNY1.28 billion (USD 197 million). For example, Wanda Group, one of China’s biggest private real estate

developers, has built its own theater chains. Alibaba, China's biggest online retailer, also invested in movie production (Hou and Zhong 2016). Both Wanda and Alibaba are traded on the stock market, as are numerous other investors and companies in the movie industry, including Huayi Brothers. Their habitus is primarily concerned with accumulation of economic capital, or return on their investment.

The aforementioned players are all monitored by another key player, the government regulators. China's film industry used to be overseen by the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT). The agency reviewed and approved movie scripts before productions could begin, issued mandatory guidelines for film content, and reviewed and approved all theatrical releases in China (Yue 2020). SARFT was a government agency under the oversight of China's State Council. In 2018, SARFT was disbanded and its function of overseeing the movie industry was taken over by the Central Propaganda Department (CPD) of the CCP, the top propaganda authority in China (De Burgh 2017; Myers 2019; Xinhua News Agency 2018). Before this change, China's movie industry operated under the guidance, rather than direct management, of the CPD. Now, the CPD cut the middle man and took the movie industry under its direct oversight, which meant tightened state control.

"In order to better realize the movie sector's special important function in propagating ideas and providing cultural entertainment, . . . the CPD will be responsible for managing the operation of the movie sector, directing and supervising production, distribution, and exhibition of movies, organizing inspection of movie content", among other things (Xinhua News Agency 2018). This official statement of the CPD's role indicates its habitus: sweeping control of the movie sector, from production to exhibition to censorship, based on propaganda (political), as well as entertainment (economic) needs. One key disposition of the CPD is to police political appropriateness of movie content, to ensure that it does not cross the line set by the Party (De Burgh 2017). As such, the CPD prioritizes political capital.

These players are not confined to the subfield of commercial films. The movie production companies and theaters, as part of a multibillion-dollar industry, are also players in the field of power as an economic force. So are the investors and the financial market. The CPD is obviously a political force in the field of power. As Bourdieu has maintained, the field of cultural production (of which the commercial film is a subfield), the field of power, and the field of broader social historical environment are interrelated and influence each other (Grenfell 2014; Johnson 1993; Thomson 2014). "800" is caught in such interrelations at two particular historical moments: the 70th anniversary of the PRC, and the COVID-19 pandemic. How did the movie's political, economic, and symbolic capitals change at these two historical moments? What does the case reveal about the interrelations among the subfield of commercial films, the field of power, and the field of broader social historical context in today's China? These are the research questions this study intends to answer.

3. Methods

This study is a case study: an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context (Yin 2003, p. 13). The current study investigates a contemporary phenomenon: the change of fate of the movie, within its real-life context, before and after the outbreak of the COVID pandemic. A researcher uses a case study because they "deliberately want to cover contextual conditions—believing that they might be highly pertinent to your phenomenon of study" (Yin 2003, p. 13). This is exactly the intention of this researcher. Case studies produce context-dependent knowledge that is close to real-life situations, with a wealth of details. Such knowledge provides a nuanced understanding of reality to reveal the "rich ambiguity" of human conditions (Flyvbjerg 2006). This study intends to explore the rich ambiguity of China's movie industry in relation to various fields.

The current study is a single case study: it only examines one case. There are two rationales for conducting such a single case study. First, "800" is an extreme and unique

case. The movie was highly anticipated, and its fate full of twists and turns. The 70th anniversary and the pandemic were both unusual conditions. Such a unique case justifies a single case study because it reveals more insights, as more actors and mechanisms are involved in such unique cases (Flyvbjerg 2006; Yin 2003). Second, the case is a longitudinal case: “studying the same single case at two or more different points in time” (Yin 2003, p. 42). This study compares the situation of the movie at two historical moments.

Case studies rely on multiple sources of evidence (Wimmer and Dominick 2003; Yin 2003). Being a scholar on Chinese pop culture, the researcher had followed events related to the movie ever since June 2019, when the movie first generated quite some excitement among the researcher’s Chinese friend circle. Over more than a year, the researcher followed the events as they unfolded and gathered information through news coverage, social media commentaries, and box office data. More than 40 news stories and commentaries were collected from various websites and social media platforms. These documents were read carefully and triangulated to identify the key facts of the case. For example, the cancellation of the movie’s theater release was corroborated with news stories and Weibo posting of the movie’s official Weibo account. Box office data from 21 August to 10 September 2021 were collected from Maoyan Entertainment, an online platform that compiles cinema, online streaming, and TV viewing data in China (<https://piaofang.maoyan.com/dashboard>, accessed on 26 April 2021). The data were analyzed to reveal box office trends, including ticket sales and screen allocations of “800” and two other movies released during that time. The researcher also watched the movie carefully and took notes on the plot, characters, and appearances of the Republic of China flag.

As with other case studies, this analysis has four characteristics. First, it is particular, focusing on one particular situation. Second, it is descriptive and its final product is a detailed description of the case. Third, it is heuristic, aiming to provide better understanding and insights of the case at hand. And fourth, it is inductive, attempting to discover relationships rather than testing hypotheses (Wimmer and Dominick 2003). This study does not intend to generalize, but nonetheless provides insights that contribute to a better understanding of the field of cultural production and its relations with the field of power within the specific social historical context of China.

4. Findings and Analysis

4.1. Changes of Capitals of “800” at Two Historical Moments

This section examines the economic, political and symbolic capitals of “800” before and after the pandemic to answer RQ1: *How did the movie’s political, economic and symbolic capitals change at these two historical moments?*

4.1.1. Political Capital

In the year of celebrating the founding of the nation, the entire field of cultural production was supposed to commemorate the victory of the Communist-led revolution. Celebrating the Kuomintang army, the old rival of the ruling CCP military, is obviously inappropriate in that political moment. When the left-wing group raised questions regarding the political correctness of paying tribute to the Kuomintang soldiers in the midst of celebrating the Communist Party’s accomplishments, the movie’s political capital plummeted, leading to its political demise.

The field conditions changed dramatically in the moment of the pandemic. The CPD greenlighted “800” in spite of the movie still being a heart-wrenching and largely positive portrayal of the Kuomintang soldiers, and still featuring scenes of these soldiers dying one after another to keep the Republic of China flag flying, although a close-up of the flag was carefully (even awkwardly) avoided. These portrayals were no longer politically problematic because, in the moment of the pandemic, the political task was no longer celebrating the founding of the PRC, but to save the country’s economy and maintain political and social stability. Under such circumstances, keeping a much-anticipated blockbuster from the struggling movie theaters was not only economically damaging, but also politically de-

structive. The movie gained political capital through its economic and symbolic capitals, which are discussed in more detail in the following sections.

4.1.2. Economic Capital

The main producer and financier of “800” is Huayi Brothers Media, founded in 1994 by brothers Wang Zhongjun and Wang Zhonglei. It is “one of China’s oldest and most influential private film studios” (Brzeski 2020a). Listed in 2009, Huayi was one of the first movie studios to trade on the stock market (Dandan 2020). Today, the movie industry has deeply integrated into China’s capital market, with many movie production companies and theaters listed. Meanwhile, investors, from big companies, such as Wanda Group, to private citizens, all have a stake in the movie industry.

Investors had been watching the movie market nervously in 2019 and 2020, as an “industry monitoring environment”, referring to tightened censorship, and the pandemic dampened industry earnings (“The Eight Hundred Announces” 2020). And as it happened with “800”, “even the war against Japan . . . is not immune from the sensitivities of today’s political climate” (Myers 2019). When the original release of “800” was canceled, the loss of its political capital resulted in an even bigger loss in economic capital, as Huayi’s very survival was on the line.

The company lost USD 155 million in 2018 and USD 565 million in 2019 (Brzeski 2020a). Its shares continued to drop, to a point where the company was facing the pressure to withdraw from the stock market (Feng et al. 2020). The cancellation of the theatrical release of “800” was devastating to the company (Brzeski 2020a). In order for the movie to be approved by the regulators, the studio cut scenes highlighting the Republic of China flag and the Kuomintang flag, and made other modifications (Brzeski 2020a; Falanxi 2020). Huayi was counting on “800” to gain much needed economic capital. According to its financial report released on 26 August 2020, Huayi lost CNY 231 million in profit in the first half of 2020, but its expected profit from “800” can offset that loss (Dandan 2020; Feng et al. 2020; Tai 2020).

The exhibition of “800” provided much needed financial support to Huayi as well as confidence for the investors (Feng et al. 2020). The day before the movie’s re-release in August 2020, shares of movie industry stocks rose substantially. Huayi’s shares increased 10% compared with its closing price the day before. Between July 20 and August 20, Huayi shares increased by 40%. “800” was seen by investors as leading the increase in movie and entertainment shares (Stock Times 2020). Analysts described “800” as “no doubt a dose of cardiac stimulant for the movie/TV stocks, which is likely to become a new hot spot on the market” (“Theatrical Release” 2020).

The pandemic also hit movie theaters hard. They were shut down for 178 days before reopening on July 20 (China Net 2020). Meng Li, a movie theater manager, told China Central Television (CCTV) that, during the 178 days, her staff had nothing to do and no income. To survive, they turned the lobby of the movie theater into a snack bar (Focus 2020).

In the first month (20 July–20 August 2020) after the reopening, movie theaters were not doing very well. During the first three weeks of reopening, the box office revenue was only 8% of that of the same time the year before (Stock Times 2020). The theaters were in great need of a big-budget production to generate the buzz and the desire to go to the movies. “800” couldn’t have come at a better time. “We really don’t have any movies to show right now. This is the first blockbuster, one that can really save the market”, the owner of a movie theater told the media (Feng et al. 2020). He said that, before the release of “800”, his theater saw less than 100 movie-goers daily. With “800” showing, he had hundreds of movie-goers every day.

The theaters’ habitus inclines them to allocate more screen time to popular movies. Movie theaters nationwide allocated significant screen time to “800”. Based on the box office data collected, during the first week of the movie’s release (21–27 August), the average screen time allocated to “800” was 50%. In comparison, another new release, the roman-

tic drama “Love You Forever”, had an average of 27% screen time during its first week (25–31 August), and the Hollywood production “Tenet” 30% (4–10 September).

During the first week of its run, “800” contributed an average of 76% of the daily box office revenue, compared with 19% of “Love You Forever” and 41% of “Tenet”, according to Maoyan data. In the first 100 days of the reopening (20 July through 27 October 2020), Chinese movie theaters generated a box office revenue of CNY 12 billion (USD 1.86 billion), with “800” alone contributing CNY 3.1 billion (USD 480 million), more than 25%. It was the first movie in China to reach the CNY 100 million milestone since the onset of the pandemic (China Net 2020). In short, the movie, once released, gained enormous economic capital that benefited its production studio, movie exhibitors, and investors.

4.1.3. Symbolic Capital

Symbolic capitals are non-material properties that carry meaning, which can be deciphered by social agents (Bourdieu 2013). The movie had little symbolic capital during the 70th anniversary celebrations. In fact, the symbolic meaning of celebrating the Kuomintang soldiers caused it to lose political capital and consequently, economic capital.

The pandemic was an abrupt change of the field conditions. A strict lockdown brought China’s economy to a standstill and movie theaters went dark for months. Just when movie theaters reopened and desperately needed a market-reviving movie, on 27 July 2020, Huayi CEO Wang Zhonglei told a film forum in Shanghai that big movie studios such as Huayi had the responsibility to “present higher quality and more appealing content to attract audiences back to the theaters” (Jie 2020). “800” provided such content and attracted people to the theaters. He made these comments one week after theaters reopened at limited capacities, but before the official announcement of the release of “800”. His comments articulated the symbolic capital of the movie: the market-reviving hero.

A revived movie industry has additional symbolic meaning: a sense of life returning to normalcy and hope for overall economic recovery. “The pandemic has impacted everybody. People need emotional therapy post pandemic. Movies can precisely comfort one’s heart. Good movies can touch people’s hearts, can warm people”, says Yu Dong, chairman of China’s Bona Film Group (Focus 2020). The economic and symbolic capitals of the movie can be converted into political capital, as economic and social stability ensure continuing political stability.

It is therefore not surprising that China Central Television, which is under CPD’s direct supervision, featured “800” as the market-reviving hero on one of its most popular news shows, “The Focus” (Focus 2020). It mentions that movie makers are abuzz about the release of “800”, calls it the “first blockbuster” after movie theaters reopened, and marvels at its fast-growing box office income (Focus 2020). Such positive coverage from China’s most prominent television broadcaster further strengthened the movie’s symbolic capital.

The previous analysis demonstrates that the political, economic and symbolic capitals of the movie changed dramatically as conditions in the broader context changed. It also reveals that the political, economic and symbolic capitals of the movie are interconnected properties, rather than isolated, stand-alone assets.

4.2. Interrelations among the Fields

This section answers RQ2: What does the case reveal about the interrelations among the subfield of commercial films, the field of power, and the field of broader social historical context in today’s China?

Bourdieu maintains that “all subfields of the cultural field were dominated by the economic field” (Thomson 2014, p. 71). This is especially true for the commercial film subfield in China. As demonstrated in the case of “800”, China’s commercial filmmaking is deeply intertwined with the economic forces in the field of power. At the same time, political forces in the field of power exert tremendous influence on the subfield of commercial films. Furthermore, the case study reveals the dynamic configuration of various forces in the field of power and its impact on the subfield of commercial films, depending on conditions in

the even broader field of social historical context. Sometimes, the political forces wield more power, such as in the hyper-political atmosphere during the 70th anniversary, and sometimes the economic forces take an upper hand, such as during the pandemic. Either way, the commercial film field appears to submit to one kind of domination or another.

However, the case study does not conclude that China’s commercial film subfield is simply situated in a dominated position in the field of power. As seen in the case of “800”, Chinese commercial films’ sheer economic contribution and deep involvement with the capital market is offering the subfield more economic power, pulling it closer to the dominant position in the field of power. In the case of “800”, a movie deemed politically problematic by the CPD and shelved indefinitely, which obtained release permission during the pandemic when movie theaters were desperate for an exciting blockbuster and movie sector shares were in decline, the economic capital of the movie compensated for its lack of political capital. The same dynamic could happen to other politically sensitive films. An expected big box office earner may overcome political concerns when the conditions are right. It can be argued that commercial filmmaking in China is not just a survival strategy amid tight political control (Gong 2009), but a proactive pursuit of economic capital that may result in a stronger position in the field of power.

Overall, the interrelations of these fields can be summarized as such. The subfield of commercial films is situated within the field of power, subject to the influence of political or economic forces. The field of power, in turn, is situated within the broader social historical context, which constitutes an even bigger field. The subfield of commercial films is therefore under the double dominance of the field of power and the field of social historical environment, which leaves it little autonomy. However, as demonstrated through the case of “800”, being an integral part of the cultural industry, the financial market, and thus the economy at large, the subfield of commercial films has some leverage. While conventionally the field of cultural production is seen as rich in symbolic capital but poor in economic and political capital (Johnson 1993), the case of “800” indicates that the subfield of commercial films is actually quite rich in economic capital, which can be converted into political and symbolic capitals under certain conditions. After all, in today’s China, like in other countries, economic growth and prosperity is still the No. 1 politics (see Figure 2).

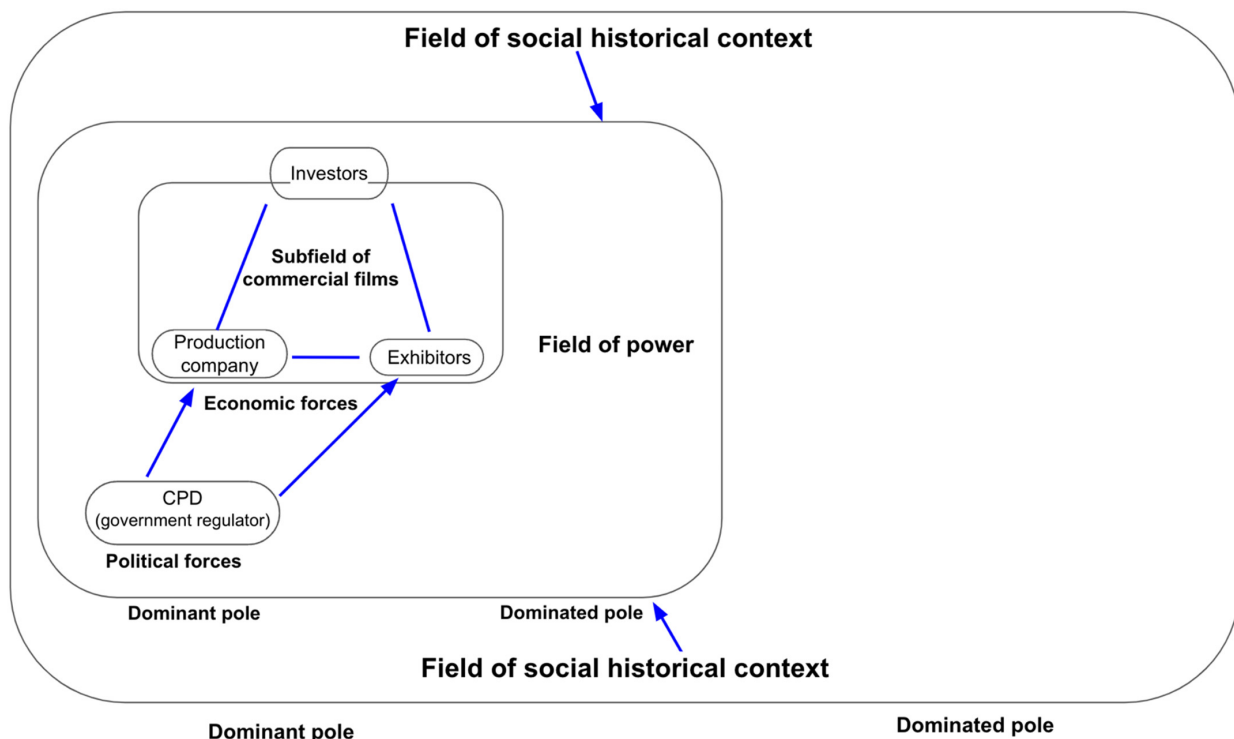


Figure 2. Interrelations among the fields as shown in the case of “800”.

Herein lies the rich ambiguity of China's commercial film subfield: it is caught in the configuration of art, politics, and capital (Gong 2009), pulled by different forces, and struggling to maintain its position in the field of power, all the while becoming an economic force in its own right (see Figure 2).

5. Conclusions

The fate of "800" turning from a politically disgraced movie to a market-reviving hero, seen through Bourdieu's lens, is the change of the movie's political, symbolic and economic capitals under different field conditions, which reveals the intricate interrelations among the subfield of commercial films, the field of power, and the field of social historical context. The movie's political capital plummeted during the 70th anniversary, which consequently undermined its economic capital. In the wake of the pandemic, the movie's economic and symbolic capitals skyrocketed. As the market revival hero, and through its potential contribution to the overall economic recovery, the movie also gained political capital.

The key players in these fields, namely, the movie production company, movie theaters, investors, and the regulator, each have their habitus and prioritize certain types of capital. The movie production company and movie theaters are predisposed to make a profit in the movie market, and are thus mostly concerned with accumulating economic capital. The investors, too, pursue economic capital and always try to maximize the return on their investment. In contrast, the top regulator, the CPD, is mostly concerned with political capital, with a disposition toward policing content for political appropriateness and minimizing political risks.

These players' various ways of dealing with the movie under different field conditions were by and large in line with their habitus. In the subfield of commercial films, Huayi lay low when the movie's political capital was low, quietly making changes to the movie. However, the Huayi CEO branded the movie a market saver when the conditions were right, all the while earning big at the box office. Movie theaters could not do anything when the initial theater release was canceled, but once the movie was officially released, they gave "800" an exceptionally high amount of the screen time, trying to capitalize as much as possible on the movie's box office potential.

In the field of power, the main regulator's (political power) disposition is always toward political policing, which was tightened during the 70th anniversary of the PRC. So much so that even a movie championing patriotism was censored. This kind of hyper-political habitus became unfit in the moment of the pandemic. The CPD had to alter its propensity to give some consideration to economic capital, precisely because economic recovery in the wake of the pandemic carried high political stakes. This indicates that private capital and the Communist Party-led state can be compatible (Wang 2001b). The economic power, mainly the investors and the stock market, put less money in the movie sector when tightened censorship and the pandemic affected box office performances, and invested more when "800" revitalized the movie market.

As such, the saga of "800" vividly illustrates how the commercial film subfield, the field of power, and the field of broader historical social context connect and interact with each other in dynamic ways. China's commercial film subfield "exists at the crossroads between politics, economy and culture" (Nakajima 2016, p. 86). It is subject to the control of forces in the field of power and the broader historical context, all the while possessing its own power as a multibillion-dollar industry, a significant economic force. That is the rich ambiguity of China's movie industry.

This study makes theoretical contributions in two ways. First, it extends Bourdieu's theory by revealing that capitals (political, economic or symbolic) possessed by a particular cultural artifact are not stable and fixed, but fluid, changing along with field conditions. The capitals of the same cultural artifact have to be contextualized and examined under specific historical, cultural, social and political conditions. Second, the study unpacks the Gordian knot of the capital, habitus and field, and finds that the habitus of major players largely follows the pattern of seeking benefits while avoiding harm. The key players

in the case of “800” tried to maximize gains from the movie’s political, economic or symbolic capitals but avoided the movie when it lacked those capitals, depending on specific field conditions. As such, this study constructs dynamic interconnections among the capital, habitus and field, demonstrating a field of cultural production that is not static but dynamic, not isolated but contextualized, not always predictable but full of uncertainties and possibilities.

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