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Min Xu

Stijn Reijnders

Sangkyun Kim
Edith Cowan University

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Inside the movie roadshow: a critical approach to media events in China

Min Xu^{a*}, Stijn Reijnders^a and Sangkyun Kim^b 

^a*Department of Arts and Culture Studies, Erasmus University Rotterdam, Rotterdam, Netherlands;* ^b*School of Business and Law, Edith Cowan University, Joondalup, Australia*

Although face-to-face events starring film professionals have become increasingly popular, they have rarely been studied, especially from the perspective of production. Focusing on the phenomenon of Chinese movie roadshows, this study explores the motivations and techniques used to produce popular media events in the Chinese film industry. Based on expert interviews with 15 media practitioners, the results showed that roadshows are staged as ritualized events that are centered on the performance of a symbolic boundary between “inside” and “outside” the media. Film industry professionals embrace face-to-face communication with audiences and use such events to display sincerity, producing them as a seemingly “unmediated” peek behind the veil of an otherwise hidden world. Moreover, communication on social media is another form of ritualized practice. We conclude that, by thus mediating the “unmediated,” movie roadshows offer an insightful perspective on the machinery of media power in China.

Keywords: movie roadshow; China’s film industry; media ritual; face-to-face event; symbolic boundary; celebrity

Introduction

In the auditorium at the Beijing Institute of Visual Arts, one thousand people are eagerly expecting the appearance of core members of the film production team. The director and other key players have not told the local organizer on campus when they will arrive or through which door. The starting time of the event has already passed. A group of people finally enter; they are all wearing masks, so no one knows their identities. The celebrities hurry onto the stage and enthusiastically greet the audience, making them feel that they are “up-close and personal.” The fans are cheering and screaming.

To date, little attention has been paid by Western academics to popular media events in non-Western contexts. Such events, which involve face-to-face contact with film professionals, are not unusual in East Asian countries, however. For example, in South Korea and Japan, fans are often given opportunities to meet their favorite actors and actresses, and in China, similar events are regularly included as part of the strategies to promote mainstream films prior to their release. These so-called “roadshows,” which consist of the screening of the

*Corresponding author. Email: xu@eshcc.eur.nl

promoted film and a question-and-answer (Q&A) session with core members of the production team and cast, are usually held in cinemas and large university auditoriums a few weeks before the official premiere.

In many high-budget productions, roadshows are included in the publicity strategies with the intention of generating free publicity by promoting audience excitement and word-of-mouth recommendations. Roadshows start with an introduction to the film. The key actors then go onstage and talk about the characters they play, and short videos of their performances are shown to the audience. After the screening of the promoted film, a Q&A session is held, in which the key players and the audience interact. Activities, such as games relating to the theme of the film or lucky draws, are sometimes included. Compared with premieres, which are held only in the largest cities, press conferences, and TV interviews where there is only a studio audience, roadshows are accessible to audiences across China. The scale and popularity of such roadshows have grown exponentially in terms of the number of films participating, the frequency of these events, and the number of participating cinemas and audiences. It is now commonplace for the core members of a production team to visit more than 30 cities and present more than two hundred roadshows. This growth parallels the rapid expansion of China's movie market. Many small-budget Chinese documentaries and arthouse films have also used strategies similar to that of roadshows and organized Q&As after screenings, although on a much smaller scale.

The ritualized characteristics and “centering performances” of roadshows in the genre of popular media events make them ripe for analysis through the lens of media rituals (Couldry, 2003). Centering performances are “types of communicative action focused on a thematic core that attempt to articulate a relation to a social ‘center’ reached through media” (Couldry, 2012, p. 79). Such performances emphasize the intention to reproduce media institutions as the privileged access point to a social “center,” thereby reconfirming the special status of media institutions in society. According to Couldry (2003, p. 29), media rituals are “formalized actions organized around key media-related categories and boundaries,” the performance frames of which are based on media-related values. Among his examples are “performances by media people that acknowledge their own specialness before a crowd of non-media people” (Couldry, 2003, p. 52). In such situations, people exhibit categorical differences that are formalized enough to be considered media rituals. Previous studies showed that media rituals are conducted in China, such as at the Opening Ceremony of the Beijing Olympics (Cui, 2013), the Spring Festival Gala (Feng, 2016; Lu, 2009; Yuan, 2017), and on reality TV (Cui & Lee, 2010). Moreover, the growing independence of the Chinese media from the state has stimulated academic discussions about whether contemporary Chinese media emphasize business interests, serve audiences, reinforce their power (Cui & Lee, 2010), or are part of a state-media-market-society negotiation model, in which each party, to varying degrees, takes other players' interests into consideration (Huang, 2007, p. 405; Yu, 2011).

The study presented in this article was aimed to investigate the role of roadshows in the Chinese film industry and contemporary popular culture from the perspective of production. The following questions are considered: (1) Why do Chinese media professionals organize roadshows? (2) In what ways are roadshows performed as media rituals? (3) What are the implications of roadshows for media rituals in the era of digital media?

The findings of this study invite the theoretical re-evaluation of the future of media events and media rituals (Katz & Dayan, 2018). Couldry (2012) noted that

in media rituals, the media's privileged status is not unchallenged. In fact, the media and related institutions increasingly face challenges in sustaining attention and legitimacy in the digital media age, which creates "the demand, on the production side, for new forms of media ritual" (Couldry, 2012, p. 69). In other words, when the privileged status and continued economic viability of media institutions are at stake (Couldry, 2012), media rituals persist. This situation raises the intriguing question of how media rituals in both new or evolved forms are performed in the current era of digital media.

The incorporation of a Chinese case study into the academic discussion adds empirical value by addressing the question of whether media's event-based centering power in contemporary China differs from that in Western contexts. In particular, this research seeks to understand the prevalence of popular media events today and to shed light on centering performances and techniques (e.g. Dekavalla, 2012) in contemporary China.

Popular media events as media rituals

In its analysis of the centering performances and techniques used to produce popular media events, this study adopts Couldry's (2003, 2012) media ritual theory. It first traces the concept of popular media events before applying media ritual theory to investigate the ritualized characteristics and the centering power of popular media events.

Roadshows are examples of popular media events (Hepp, 2003; Hepp & Couldry, 2010). First, popular media events are part of popular culture and everyday routines. Second, most popular media events are organized by the media themselves. They are typically pre-planned, commercialized, and announced in advance. Political communication, therefore, is not typically integrated directly into popular media events, which are media spectacles that are promoted and produced for a commercial purpose (Lichtenstein, 2016). Third, popular media events are pleasure-oriented and aimed to provide viewers with temporary entertainment. Lastly, popular media events monopolize only a certain segment of media coverage. Hence, they are meaningful only within specific cultural environments (Hepp, 2003).

Although roadshows have most of the characteristics of popular media events, one distinctive feature is that they are live and entail face-to-face interactions, whereas popular media events are not viewed in person. Some notable examples of contemporary popular media events include the TV events *Big Brother*, *Pop Idol*, the *Eurovision Song Contest* as well as film events (Hepp & Couldry, 2010). Here, we argue that it is necessary to expand the scope of popular media events to include live events. Most scholarly discussions about media events have focused on the live broadcasting of real events and therefore the experience of "not being there." However, the phenomenon of "being there" needs to be included and studied critically not only because of its prevalence, but also because encounters are an inherent dimension of popular media events. Furthermore, if the live audience were not there, many popular media events would not have the influence that they currently have.

Although they are produced for commercial purposes, popular media events can be considered media rituals because of their ritualized characteristics and centering power. According to Couldry (2003, p. 2), media rituals include a whole

range of situations that reproduce the “myth” of the media as points of privileged access to the assumed center of the social world; that is, “the myth of the mediated center.” Categories are divided by the symbolic boundary between inside and outside the media and between media people and non-media people (i.e. “ordinary people”) based on the assumption that the status of the “media world” is higher than that of the “ordinary world” (2003, p. 27).

In light of the centering performances of popular media events, many questions have yet to be explored because there are few studies on popular media events. Such questions may include whether there are further outcomes beyond the commercial benefit, whether popular events are always under the complete control of the media, and, more importantly, the kinds of mediated centers that are created through these performances. To investigate how media rituals are performed when the privileged status of media institutions is at stake (Couldry, 2012), a starting point is to consider how the ritual power of popular media events is actualized on site.

Moreover, it is not yet clear how popular media events are organized and experienced in the current era of social media. So far, the research on personal fan–celebrity encounters has been focused on either encounters only through social media (e.g. Bennett, 2014; Click, Lee, & Holladay, 2013) or in face-to-face settings (e.g. Lam, 2018; Reijnders, Spijkers, Roeland, & Boross, 2014). In these previous studies, the social media aspect was sometimes briefly mentioned (e.g. Raphael & Lam, 2018). However, the ways in which face-to-face elements and social media are interrelated remains understudied.

Because roadshows take place on site, further research is needed about the main actors in these popular media events. A nuanced perspective on the main actors could further incorporate the performers or those in the spotlight as well as live audiences, the digital platforms through which the event is mediated by both the organizer and the live audience, and the various platforms through which viewers participate in the event. In other words, it is necessary to address the complexity of popular media events as they occur on site at the time of mediatization.

Popular media events in China

Much of the previous research on media events in China has been focused on official narratives (e.g. Cui, 2013; Feng, 2016; Lu, 2009; Yuan, 2017), and popular media events have been understudied (Cui & Lee, 2010; Jiang, 2018).

Moreover, little is known about film events in China, despite its booming film industry and avid audiences. China’s film industry, like other fast-growing non-Western film industries, has unique characteristics, tensions, and drives that are “distinct from the Hollywood model,” even though the industry adapts to the “globalized film practice driven by commercial imperatives” and has become closer to resembling “a Western-style industrial structure, management model and market mechanism” (Zhu & Nakajima, 2010, p. 18; Zhu & Rosen, 2010, p. 8).

Chinese film roadshows appear to be crucial in generating the popularity of films. Moreover, they are the only opportunities for many audiences to encounter film professionals face-to-face. In Western countries, face-to-face events with film-makers and the core cast before the film’s release are rare, and they are organized

only to promote low-budget indie films (Knight & Thomas, 2011). However, in China, it is commonplace for the core members of a production team to visit more than 30 cities in roadshows. For example, the production team for the movie *Jian Bing Man* held 211 roadshows in 188 cinemas in 31 cities in a single month in 2015, and this record has continued to be broken (ChinaIRN, 2015). In 2017, two production teams (*City of Rock* and *Never Say Die*) visited 50 cities to promote their films, competing for the holiday box office turnout (Liu, 2017). In second-tier cities (3–15 million people), it is possible for a cinema-goer to attend the roadshows of three different movies in 10 days, paying for tickets at the regular price.

Guided by the research questions posed in the previous section, this study on Chinese movie roadshows will investigate how roadshows actualize centering performances and whether they exist exclusively for commercial purposes, and whether are they under the complete control of the media.

Research methods

The respondents that took part in our expert interviews included five female professionals and 10 male professionals (Table 1). They were recruited first through personal networks, followed by snowball sampling based on recommendations by the participants. The snowball sampling technique made it possible to contact respondents with whom a certain degree of trust was required in order to initiate contact, which is common in the media industry (Atkinson & Flint, 2001). Although the resulting gender ratio is aligned with a global trend in which filmmakers – film directors in particular – are usually male (“48 Trends Reshaping the Film Industry,” [Stephen Follows data 2018]), it cannot be assumed to represent the status quo in the Chinese film industry.

However, we ensured that our sample included a diverse representation of media practitioners in various roles in roadshows. To qualify, each participant needed to have several years of experience working in the Chinese film industry, as well as first-hand experience in organizing or participating in roadshows. The resulting pool of respondents included event planners, organizers, the marketing managers of production companies, production teams participating in roadshows (e.g. directors and producers), and those responsible for the final practical phase of the roadshow (e.g. event organizers, operational managers in cinemas, and local on-site organizers).

Before conducting the semi-structured expert interviews, a list of questions was prepared to guarantee the comparability and focus of the data collection (Meuser & Nagel, 2009, p. 35). Additional questions were developed during the interviews to understand the specific ideas and scenarios discussed. Data saturation was verified when the last two interviews yielded few new data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). The interviews lasted an average of 30 minutes, and they were recorded. All audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, coded, and analyzed thematically (Bryman, 2012). When the interviews were transcribed, the data were open coded by reading each transcript and summarizing the responses of the respondents. During the thematic analysis, themes and categories that emerged from the data were identified. We then integrated overlapping categories. The categories were further refined and grouped based on analytical and theoretical ideas. The names of the respondents

Table 1. Overview of respondents.

Name	Age	Gender	Profession	Organization	Location of the organization
Yan	29	Male	Event planner and organizer	Film production company	Shanghai
Sheng	31	Male	Director	Film industry	Nationwide
Zhen	30	Male	Local organizer	University	Shanghai
Jin	39	Male	Marketing manager	Film production company	Shanghai
Zou	27	Male	Event planner and organizer	Film production company	Shanghai
Ding	40	Male	Film producer	Film production company	Beijing
Cheng	36	Female	Operations manager	Cinema	Shanghai
Wan	37	Male	Local organizer	University	Shanghai
Xia	50	Male	Filmmaker	Film industry	Nationwide
Su	34	Male	Film distributor	Distribution company	Nationwide
Huan	30	Female	Event organizer	Cinema	Shanghai
Qin	32	Female	Event organizer	Film museum	Shanghai
Guan	39	Female	Independent organizer	Film screening and discussion club	Shanghai
Tan	35	Male	Event planner and organizer	Film production company	Beijing
Ting	33	Female	Manager of star agent	Entertainment company	Beijing

Note: All names of respondents and universities have been replaced by pseudonyms to preserve anonymity.

and some of their affiliated universities were replaced by pseudonyms to preserve their anonymity.

To complement the information gathered in the interviews, we attended four roadshows in Shanghai in 2017 and 2018 to obtain covert participant observations. The roadshow movies were *Miracles of the Namiya General Store* (Chinese adaptation); *Hello Life*; *The Pluto Moment*; *My Neighbor Totoro*. Our criteria for selecting the roadshows were film genre (i.e. mainstream commercial film, documentary film, arthouse film, and animation film) with presumably different promotional styles and the potential to attract diverse audiences.

In addition, we observed how the practitioners used multiple media platforms to promote information about the roadshows. For example, microblogs and WeChat newsletters were among the most frequently used platforms. Some posts explicitly stated that recommending the roadshow information to friends on social media would mean they were entered into a lucky draw to win a ticket to the roadshow. These approaches allowed the fans of celebrity actors and actresses and movie fans in general to be the target audiences.

Centering performances with sincerity

Like several respondents in this study, Jin, a marketing manager, acknowledged that roadshows were organized to satisfy audiences and to “meet audience’s demand for seeing celebrities.” Moreover, these respondents were clear about their commercial aims and how audiences could help them by boosting the efficiency of promotions and the creditability of a good film. Much like business executives who use statistics to prove that they “give the public what the public wants” (Caldwell, 2008, p. 273), by acknowledging the wishes of audiences, the managers interviewed in this study expressed that roadshows were essential branding events.

Despite their commercial purpose, centering performances were described as essential in roadshows, including the planning process. The respondents expressed that each promotional plan was different, and it was hard to summarize or describe a standard procedure:

We identify all the advantages that the film has, in terms of first, the genre of the film; second, the leading creators, etc., and create a plan accordingly ... There are certain routines, but the rest depends on the advantages that emerge from a project. (Yan, event planner and organizer of a film production company)

In roadshows, which are structured to some extent, the planning process includes the specific attention to detail. For example, an important task is to design questions for the host to ensure that the film remains the focus of the Q&A session. According to Yan, Ding, and Zou, who were employed in production companies, by designing the questions in advance, they could “manage the focus of communication.” They also ensured that the “core messages of the promotion” were delivered appropriately and that the members of the production team on stage responded appropriately if off-topic questions were asked during the Q&A sessions, such those regarding the celebrities’ personal lives.

The core messages of the promotion described by our respondents were central to the event’s narrative, and they represented the thematic core of the popular

media event. The practitioners had specific ideas about how Q&A sessions should be managed. On one hand, they attempt to avoid clichés, while on the other hand, their arrangement of the thematic core was the foundation for the centering performances of the roadshows.

In centering performances, attention is often paid to the visible aspects of an event, such as posters and short videos, the questions asked by the host, and the appropriate answers given by the professionals on stage. Another visible aspect is the audience in the auditorium. Staging a popular media event means not only structuring the performance on stage but also managing the atmosphere in that space, which could be problematic when the practitioners had to deal with an audience that was deemed too small:

If there were not enough audience members at a roadshow, we would have to deal with it because we need to take pictures at the end of the roadshow. We would consider moving to a smaller screening room ... It is also true that sometimes we borrow some people from another screening room. I have done this, too. (Zou, event planner and organizer of a film production company)

Zou recalled how he made the impression of a full house possible. He said that it was common to make such adjustments, such as using a smaller screening room or borrowing people from another room. When a roadshow did not reach the degree of popularity expected by the practitioners, they attempted to give the impression that the film was extremely popular. By borrowing audience members from another screening room or changing the spatial dimensions, the sense of the performance was increased.

More importantly, the responses revealed that centering performances were actualized in a particular manner, which indicated the motivation for organizing roadshows. The respondents stated that being face-to-face was an effective and interactive way of bringing audiences and film professionals closer together. Why did proximity matter? Sheng's answer was representative:

If a film features movie stars, and you don't organize face-to-face events, fans may not embrace the film. Fans want to see stars in real life ... While it's possible to see celebrities via live entertainment streams on the Internet, it is much less interactive than a face-to-face event. (Sheng, director)

Sheng's response implied that film professionals fear losing the audience's attention. A solution is to be personal and interactive. The face-to-face element of a roadshow differentiates the event from other types of promotion (e.g. subway station posters, introducing a forthcoming movie on social media through a microblog or WeChat newsletter, or having cast members interviewed on TV). A live event is singular, while a copy is indefinitely repeatable, and this ontological difference makes "being there" and witnessing an irreplaceable privilege (Peters, 2009). A few of the respondents spontaneously switched to the audience's point of view and expressed that communication through mediated content and words was not comparable to interactions with "a flesh and blood person in real life." On other occasions, such as communication online or on television, media practitioners can control, ignore, filter, and edit the content. During a face-to-face event, however, an egalitarian relationship is deliberately created. This attitude was evident in Xia's response:

Roadshows can reflect [the fact] that the production company takes audiences very seriously. It is what we call sincerity (*Chengyi*) ... There isn't a screen in-between. Only air is there. We are in the same space. Communication via media can be edited or withdrawn. But what happens on site will be remembered by the audience ... As audiences tend to be more enthusiastic than media reporters, film professionals react to audiences with more ease and a sense of authenticity. (Xia, filmmaker)

Unlike the claim of satisfying audiences, Xia expressed a modest attitude toward meeting audiences from a filmmaker's perspective. According to Xia, roadshows are opportunities for core members of a production team to "show their sincerity (*Chengyi*) ... in the same space." "Being there" to witness an event suggests presence in both time and space (Peters, 2009). Being there with an audience also requires presence in both time and space. This sincerity is associated not only with the significant efforts made to tour the whole country but also with the characteristics of face-to-face interactions. What happens on site is considered authentic because the interactions are natural and cannot be modified, even though our respondents acknowledged that the events were staged and controlled by the organizers. For audiences, media profiles who appear on their screens "cannot be 100% authentic" because "television or computer screens separate us from the real," and audiences therefore tend to appreciate seeing film professionals in real life (Xu & Reijnders, 2018).

As we observed at the roadshows, sincerity was often conveyed through film professionals' friendliness and willingness to connect with the audience. For example, an actress related to the audience by mentioning that she took the metro to the cinema as did most of the audience. Actors and actresses do not simply answer questions during Q&A sessions but also sometimes ask the audience a question to inspire a short conversation. Therefore, the sincerity of media people appears to be an important factor in creating mediated centers and a socially constructed "sacred" reality at Chinese movie roadshows.

Tensions in control

Although practitioners like to interact with audiences, they still prefer to be in control. Such pre-arranged scenarios were summarized by Huan and Yan:

Roadshows with interactive games are planned as shows that will often be broadcast later on television. You can almost recognize the participants who will be selected from among the audience. Their clothing is usually pre-arranged. Before a roadshow starts, they sit among the audience. When it's time to play a game with the film professionals, they are invited to go on stage. By doing this, we can avoid uncontrollable circumstances. (Huan, event organizer of a cinema)

A lot of people think that the fans asking questions are our confederates. But I think fans now are not only familiar with films, but also very active. Many questions are indeed what audiences care about. Of course, sometimes having some confederates ask questions is necessary to enliven the atmosphere. (Yan, event planner and organizer of a film production company)

Like Huan and Yan, several respondents mentioned similar practices of constructing interactive sessions and arranging some audience members beforehand, especially to answer the first Q&A question and participate in most of the interactive

games. In addition, “sessions for giving autographs and taking photos are usually organized. So it will be orderly” (Sheng). During the interviews, very few respondents could recall occasions in which the audience misbehaved. Huan, who co-organizes and witnesses many roadshows in the cinema, expressed that most audience members “take many pictures.” Nonetheless, media practitioners feel the need to make prearrangements to “avoid uncontrollable circumstances” or to “enliven the atmosphere.”

As Hepp and Couldry (2010, p. 8) pointed out, popular media events often occur “in a continuous development” and are “mostly organized by the media themselves.” According to the respondents employed in production companies, when they plan or begin a new project, film marketing and distribution companies are already involved, which is long before the filming work is finished. In many cases, film marketing and distribution companies also invest in the project, and they are paid for their promotion and marketing services. In other words, as investors in the project, they ensure that the marketing campaigns are effective in order to increase the return on their investment in terms of their share of the box office takings.

In reality, the collective effort in organizing a popular media event can be complicated. The respondents expressed that several trivial matters should be addressed by the different parties during the collaboration. The description of a roadshow provided at the beginning of this article is an example in which the celebrity appeared with his own team and with little or no detailed information.

In addition, it is possible that the organizers think differently from the production team. Xia reflected on a roadshow he participated in as a member of the production team:

An audience member ran onto the stage. He got everyone’s attention. People on site thought it was real, and they were quite nervous. But for those of us who participated in the event, or for those who knew much about the film industry, we instinctively felt this was planned because this happens a lot. But it might be the first time for an audience to have such an experience. (Xia, filmmaker)

Xia added that the pre-scripted incident of a person in the audience running onto the stage was not unethical. However, he thought that this method was unnecessary. Organizers are keen to make popular media events as eye-catching as possible. As we observed at the roadshows, cinema staff usually place stanchions inside the auditorium when the movie ends and before the host enters the stage. The organizers are aware of the conventionally fixed, separate positions of the audience and the media people on stage. To create a spectacle and attract everyone’s attention, the organizers arrange for someone to cross the visible yet symbolic boundary and enter the “center of the stage as well as the center of a certain social entity” (Hepp & Couldry, 2010, p. 12). The centering performance during a roadshow reconfirms the presence of the symbolic boundary (Couldry, 2003).

In addition to the complexities caused by the sometimes-competing priorities of the production team and the organizers, the relationship between media practitioners and the audience can also become convoluted. Previous studies have discussed unscripted occurrences as aspects of live events (Peters, 2009). Incidents that are off-script are key elements of media events. In Chinese movie roadshows,

although many of the interactive sessions are pre-staged, unpredictable scenarios still occur. Zhen recalled that a prescribed interactive game got out of control:

The celebrity actress had taken a pair of sunglasses from her bag and said, “Whoever asks a question, I will give the sunglasses to him or her.” Everyone was enthusiastic and wanted to give it a go. We selected the student that we had prepared for the session. When that student went onto the stage and got the sunglasses, he became overexcited and suddenly hugged the actress. The other key players were frightened. I’m sure the celebrity actress was also frightened, but she conducted herself with ease and grace. Then the audience laughed. The atmosphere suddenly got out of control. (Zhen, local organizer at a university)

As in the previous staged incident, someone went on the stage as pre-arranged. However, the organizer did not expect that the participant would approach the admired celebrity. However, unscripted occurrences seem to add a spontaneous element to the roadshow, creating a dimension that the audience could not experience in watching television. What may have felt to the organizer as chaotic at that moment could have been entertaining and enjoyable from the audience’s perspective. Event organizers are expected to meet the audience’s demands to see celebrities. Allowing the audience to experience unscripted situations and to witness the celebrities’ spontaneous reactions can be a part of fulfilling this expectation. In this study, the organizers with film promotion experience were undoubtedly aware of the possibility of unscripted occurrences taking place, but the benefits of face-to-face interactions outweighed any potential negative outcomes or challenges. These moments added a sense of authenticity and pleasure to a seemingly repeated and structured performance.

The pre-staged crossing of the symbolic boundary stimulates the audience member to make it a real crossing. Thus, the impact of constructing the symbolic boundary provides evidence of its existence. When proof is provided, the continuous manifestation becomes possible. Zhen expressed that the incident was reported the next day in the celebrity news media as an entertaining occurrence. Whether it was a pre-arranged or accidental crossing of the symbolic boundary or a combination, the incident was newsworthy. The message that the media world is special could then be disseminated, which could arouse the curiosity of those not in the media world.

The pre-staging of incidents may be surprising. However, similar practices occur in different cultural contexts: some public relations writers “plant” fake articles in video production trade journals; company press releases are re-authored to be published as trade articles; producers generate faux amateur content; assistants are paid to pose as fans on fan sites to generate a buzz (Caldwell, 2009).

A limitation of the theoretical emphasis on centering performances is that it attributes too much agency to the media and its control over the construction of the mediated center. As discussed in the previous section, the extraordinary moment and the special social center are not easily constructed. Instead, they are actualized in intentional performances with the sincerity of film professionals. Furthermore, the analysis revealed the presence of tension in the practitioners’ attempts to maintain control over the narratives of roadshows. Therefore, the complete control of the media is problematized.

On one hand, maintaining control over a ritualized event requires strategies of ritualization that differentiate between different ways of acting. A controlled way of acting is perceived to be privileged, more important, and powerful (Bell, 1992;

Coman, 2005). On the other hand, allowing for flexibility and spontaneity, or even conflict, during a ritualized event is a way of being strategically situational or “a practical way of dealing with some specific circumstances” (Bell, 1992, p. 92). Although this flexibility seemingly undermines the centering power of popular media events, it is also part of strategies of ritualization. According to Bell (1992, p. 93), “the degree of difference” from other forms of practice is strategic, ensuring “the logic and efficacy of the act.” In the case of roadshows, practitioners are aware of the degree of control, which legitimizes the ritualization and actualizes its efficacy.

Maintaining the media’s privileged status in the digital age

Media practitioners are concerned about the overall effectiveness and benefits of roadshows. For them, certain commonalities exist between roadshows and other types of on-site cultural events:

On-site events are more direct. The benefits come faster. It’s similar to a book signing event. Signing one thousand books on site means having sold one thousand books. Even though a roadshow seems to reach a [small] scale audience, it eventually has a huge impact. It will be broadcast and circulated online. (Xia, filmmaker)

Noticeably, the two major effects described by Xia were also frequently discussed by the other respondents. First, the commercial benefit of roadshows is visible, immediate, and direct. Xia’s response indicated what a production company now expects from the director and main cast of a film. Xia regarded it as “a responsibility.” Directors and other key players need to “meet their obligations.” Although being part of promotional events is not compulsory, it is mentioned in the contract. Without a doubt, many film practices are primarily driven by commercial imperatives. These professionals become commodities in a demanding film industry before they have the agency to be creative and “show their sincerity” in face-to-face events.

Second, like Xia, many respondents stressed the effectiveness and effects of roadshows. At first sight, roadshows seem to reach a smaller percentage of audiences compared with other means of promotion (e.g. introducing a forthcoming movie on social media, such as a microblog or WeChat newsletter, or having a celebrity cast member interviewed on TV). However, roadshows can generate a great deal of attention among many viewers, and further circulation is actualized by media coverage and live audiences:

The pivotal role of an on-site event is not about the event itself but the consequent promotion. If there is no on-site event, and you just publish a trailer on the Internet, what would the media use to promote the film? If there is no event offline, entertainment news programs will not be able to report the film. (Sheng, film director)

On a practical level, as Sheng remarked, the key aim is to expand the influence of roadshows. Without a physical face-to-face event in the unmediated world, entertainment news TV programs, for example, would have no news to broadcast. Entertainment news, like other types of news, directly represents reality by broadcasting real events in the social world. The characteristics of roadshows, such as

physicality and the inclusion of the public, cannot be achieved by a movie trailer or an advertisement.

Unmediated face-to-face events are an essential factor in a mediated society (e.g. Couldry, 2002; Reijnders et al., 2014). The communication process after roadshow events was also discussed by many of the respondents, including Sheng. This follow-up process was mediated. The respondents expressed, “live audiences will recommend the film to others.” Hence, the practice of roadshows is similar to Caldwell’s observations (2008, p. 61 and 306) that media conglomerates manage how and when to leak proprietary information through publications, and they ensure that the systematic “leaking” of information is premature. Caldwell concluded, “the boundaries and borders between production and consumption are blurring, problematic, and constantly negotiated by industry in public” (2008, p. 306). The same effect seems to occur in roadshows. Media practitioners in the industry negotiate and make use of this trend. Roadshow organizers expect audiences to create user-generated content and spread information on their social media platforms. If negative feedback appears, directors often find a way to respond either on their microblogs or through media interviews.

The respondents expected and valued unmediated events being mediated:

Events for mainstream commercial films are for commercial promotion. A promotion method should have two goals. One is the reachability of the method (the extent to which the promotion will be received by viewers). The other is to increase the exposure of the film. Now traffic is the most important thing, isn’t it? CTR (click-through ratio) per day on the Internet is calculated as traffic. Ranking is available. Will it rank in the top 10 microblog hot search? This relies on the promotion efforts. (Yan, event planner and organizer of a film production company)

Photos taken at roadshows will be uploaded to microblogs. A typical roadshow photo features the key player surrounded by a group of audience members posing with a unique gesture and holding something related to the film. In half an hour, fans who have attended the previous roadshow can find themselves (in the photo) online. It’s very interactive. (Zou, event planner and organizer of a film production company)

Yan described the concrete result of the circulation that practitioners aim to achieve: the number of people the information potentially reaches by using the measurement of online traffic and clicks. It is clear that the interaction does not stop when an event ends but continues because it has been mediated.

In the digital age, ritualized roadshows combine physical events and social media posts. Photos for entertainment news and social media posts are deliberately chosen for dissemination on the Internet. Organizers like Zou ensure that photos of roadshows are lively and interesting and that they gain attention when circulated online. The circulation of roadshow messages online is another form of the ritual practices that construct the mediated center, extend ritual spaces, and maintain the media’s privileged status in the digital age.

Conclusion

This study investigated Chinese media professionals’ motivations for organizing roadshows and their activities in creating centering performances. The analyses of

the data collected in expert interviews with 15 media practitioners and in participant observations at four roadshow events led to the following conclusions.

First, in addition to seeking to expand the audience base and maintain audience engagement, media practitioners aim to show their sincerity in an apparently “unmediated” space. In completely commercialized popular media events, such as roadshows, centering performances may be about not only constructing a “mediated center” (Couldry, 2003, 2012) but also (seemingly) valuing the audience as the “center.”

In the preparation stage, the centering performance begins with the choice of venue, a decision on how to present core messages and “act” on stage, and the intention to stage and perform a popular roadshow. During roadshows, there are occasions when the symbolic boundary is unexpectedly crossed by the audience, after which the setting is quickly normalized by the organizers. Nonetheless, unscripted interactions are likely to add degrees of authenticity and pleasure to the experience. After the ritualized roadshow, photos are deliberately chosen to be mediated in entertainment news and social media posts circulated online, thus expanding the impact of the centering performance.

Based on these findings, we conclude that although practitioners follow blueprints in organizing events and adhere to basic structures, in practice, popular media events are not overly structured or completely controlled by the media. First, the extraordinary moment and the special social center are not easily constructed but instead are actualized by intentional performances and the sincerity of film professionals. Second, these events are flexible and open to input from participants. Hence, tension can arise when practitioners attempt to maintain control over the narratives of roadshows. Thus, the findings of our study problematize the assumption that the media are in complete control of such events. In exploring practitioners’ acceptance of unscripted occurrences, our study revealed insights into the complexity of the “continuous development” of “completely commercialized” popular media events and the nature of “pleasure-oriented” popular media events (Hepp & Couldry, 2010, p. 8).

The findings showed the importance of participants’ input, which reflects the ways in which today’s media events have changed from those practiced during the pre-New Media period. Chinese media practitioners organize roadshows to attract audiences who are interested in “unmediated” experiences on site. However, digital media are deployed to spread information about roadshows, targeting specific audiences and fan groups both before and after the event. This online circulation is another form of ritual practice that constructs the mediated center, and helps maintain the media’s privileged status in the digital age.

Despite the symbolic boundary, media events in different contexts are not treated in the same fashion. Bridging the distance between media professionals and audience members during roadshows is unlikely to have adverse effects on stardom and symbolic media power, unlike the boundary-breaks implemented in Chinese talent shows (Cui, 2017). In fact, many actors believe that their stardom and symbolic media power may benefit from close, sincere contact with audiences.

The implications of roadshows for the state–media–market–society negotiation model in China are three-fold. Regarding extensively commercialized film promotional events, such as roadshows, the role of the state is, most obviously, at the policy level, such as limiting the promotional sessions of imported films before the film’s release, to ensure that domestic films are prioritized. The media in general and the film industry in particular consider the market essential to their growth.

Media practitioners attempt to involve the public, especially celebrity fans and cinephiles, in this process of growth. Cinephiles are interested in opportunities to engage in the media world (e.g. Xu & Reijnders, 2018). Consequently, a prosperous market attracts more people to engage with the film industry. Therefore, although negotiation is highlighted in the state–media–market–society negotiation model (Huang, 2007, p. 405), in which each party must consider other players' interests and possible reactions, some nuances exist in the popular culture. In popular film events, the element of negotiation seems less evident than the elements of cooperation and reciprocity, although tensions sometimes emerge.

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ORCID

Sangkyun Kim  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2746-9952>

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