

Opinion
Hu Chao

What Hong Kong cinema can take away from a popular Chinese war film

If productions need not be set in China to be seen as Chinese, why must Hong Kong films rely on language or place as proof of identity?

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Hu Chao
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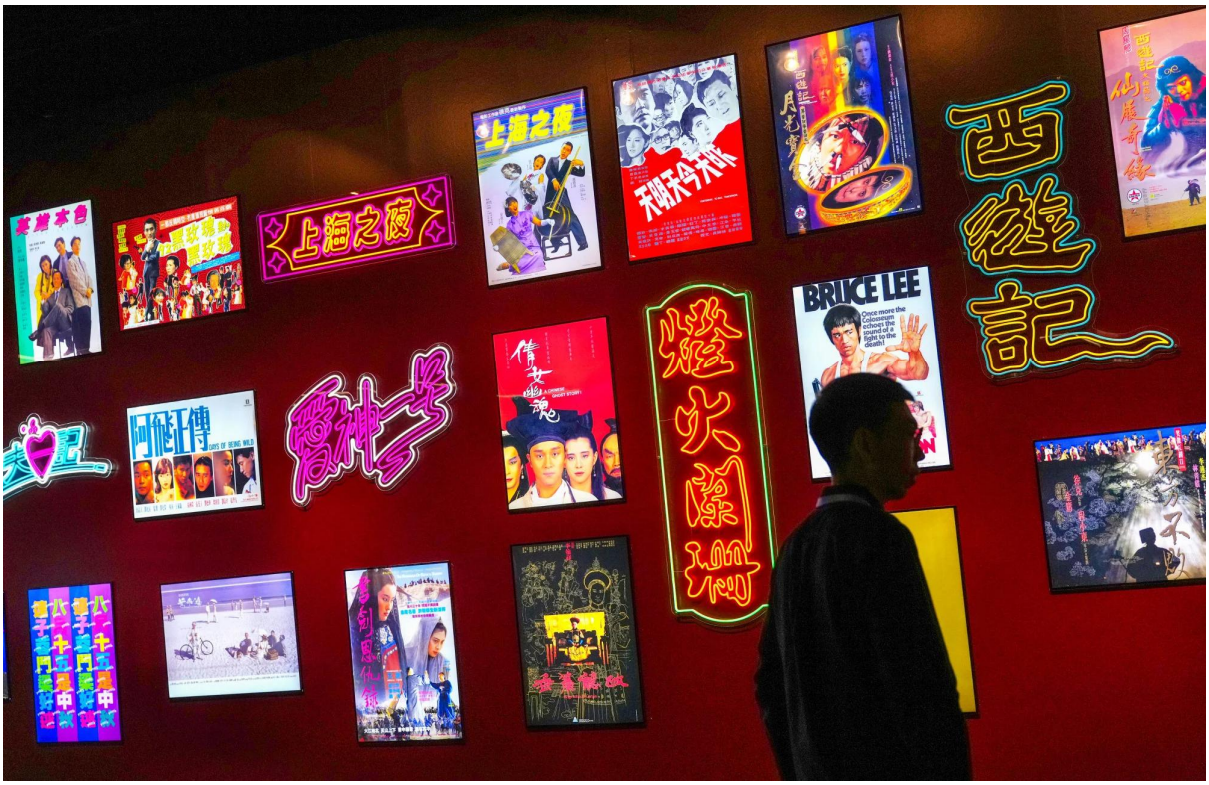
In late August, I took my parents to see in their small-town cinema on the mainland. Built around an unnamed conflict widely understood to be the US-led Iraq war, the film has become the kind of phenomenon no marketing budget could buy, projected to reach 2.5 billion yuan (US$372.5 million) largely through word of mouth.

Its Hong Kong and overseas release will revive geopolitical arguments over a Chinese commercial film entering a narrative world long associated with American power and war. My parents offered another kind of review, which was neither about geopolitics nor historical responsibility. Their take was simply that any war brings immense suffering to ordinary people.

For 50 years, the Middle East had reached my parents largely as television news. The film gave those distant wars ordinary faces. They said little else on the drive home. I kept returning to a question from my research: why do some films travel across borders while others remain trapped by the expectations attached to where they were made?

I have heard the standard diagnosis of the decline of Hong Kong cinema: co-productions corroded the craft; filmmakers chased mainland money; the cure is to become more authentically Hong Kong, more local, more unmistakably ours. It all has the comfort of a familiar hymn.

Those complaints might explain what went wrong with some films. They don't explain what happened to the market.



An exhibition marking the 25th anniversary of the Hong Kong Film Archive opened at the Hong Kong Heritage Museum on June 3, showcasing nearly 1,000 items from its collection, including film artefacts, costumes, trailers and oral history materials. Photo: Karma Lo

There is nothing wrong with wanting Hong Kong cinema to look and sound like Hong Kong, but local identity is not an industrial policy. Treating it as one mistakes an industry problem for an identity problem.

The old Southeast Asian Chinese-language market was not merely an export destination for Hong Kong cinema. In the 1950s and 1960s, Singapore-based studios such as Shaw Brothers helped finance films made in Hong Kong, then distributed and exhibited them through cinema networks across the region.

Migration and language networks held this system together. From the late 1950s onwards, Cold War-era nation-building drew new cultural borders across the region: Indonesia closed Chinese-language schools and newspapers; Malaysia withdrew funding from Chinese-medium secondary schools; Singapore pushed dialects aside in favour of Mandarin.

When the Teochew-dialect film *Dear You* reached Singapore this summer, some pressed for more screenings in Teochew, despite the fact that in 2025, 58.1 per cent of Singapore residents aged five and over spoke English most often at home. Chinese-language audiences remain, but the regional film market that once linked them has fractured.

How a Chinese indie film conquered the box office



Dear You: how a low-budget Teochew film conquered the box office

Making films more recognisably Hong Kong cannot put that market back together. Hong Kong films can no longer assume that language or location will carry them across the region; their stories must work beyond both.

Mainland cinema offers a counterpoint. It serves a larger domestic market, faces stronger pressure to affirm national identity and operates under tighter content controls. Even so, some recent commercial hits have set their stories beyond China without losing mass audiences at home. Viewers followed the story without needing to recognise the place.

Some of this flexibility began under pressure. Crime, corruption and other sensitive subjects are easier to depict when shifted from recognisable Chinese locations to invented foreign settings, but the workaround has matured into a commercial language. The formula did more than evade censorship: it loosened the assumption that a Chinese film must look geographically Chinese.

Sheep Without a Shepherd was one such hit, grossing about US$191 million in China. It was adapted from *Drishyam*, a Malayalam thriller remade in several Indian languages. Malaysian-born director Sam Quah shot it in Thailand with mainland Chinese backing for China's domestic market. The production map is remarkable, but Chinese audiences did not need to read it; on screen, a father is trying to save his family.

Once Upon a Time in the Middle East is the latest proof. Much of its setting was built on sound stages and backlots in Qingdao. My parents did not care where the desert really was; they cared what happened to the people in it.



A miniature street set for the film "Once Upon a Time in the Middle East" in Qingdao, east China's Shandong province, in this photo taken on August 24. Photo: Xinhua

Hong Kong cinema should recognise the pattern: it helped write the textbook. Bruce Lee needed no subtitles. Jackie Chan carried his comedy into Hollywood . Chow Yun-fat's gunmen travelled far beyond Hong Kong streets. *A Better*

Tomorrow is unmistakably a Hong Kong film, but the city was the setting, never the entrance fee.

Hong Kong was the workshop. Its filmmakers turned migration, crowded cities, ambition and desire into action, comedy and melodrama that audiences everywhere recognised.

As *Once Upon a Time in the Middle East* opens in Hong Kong, its mainland success raises a question. If a mainland Chinese film need not take place in China to be recognised as Chinese, why must a Hong Kong film turn local landmarks and language into proof of its identity? Hongkongness can shape a film without becoming a test viewers must pass before the story begins.

People sometimes forget that cinema is an art of illusion. Shaw Brothers built some of the cinematic worlds now regarded as quintessentially Hong Kong on backlots and sound stages. They were artifice, and no less Hong Kong for it. The least authentic thing Hong Kong cinema can do now is demand authenticity.

That identity was never simply about soil. It was shaped by filmmakers drawing on Cantonese and English, tapping Shanghainese capital and talent as well as Southeast Asian audiences. The mixture produced films strangers wanted to watch. That is the habit worth recovering. Enough borders stand in the way of Hong Kong cinema. A self-made barrier is the last thing the industry needs.

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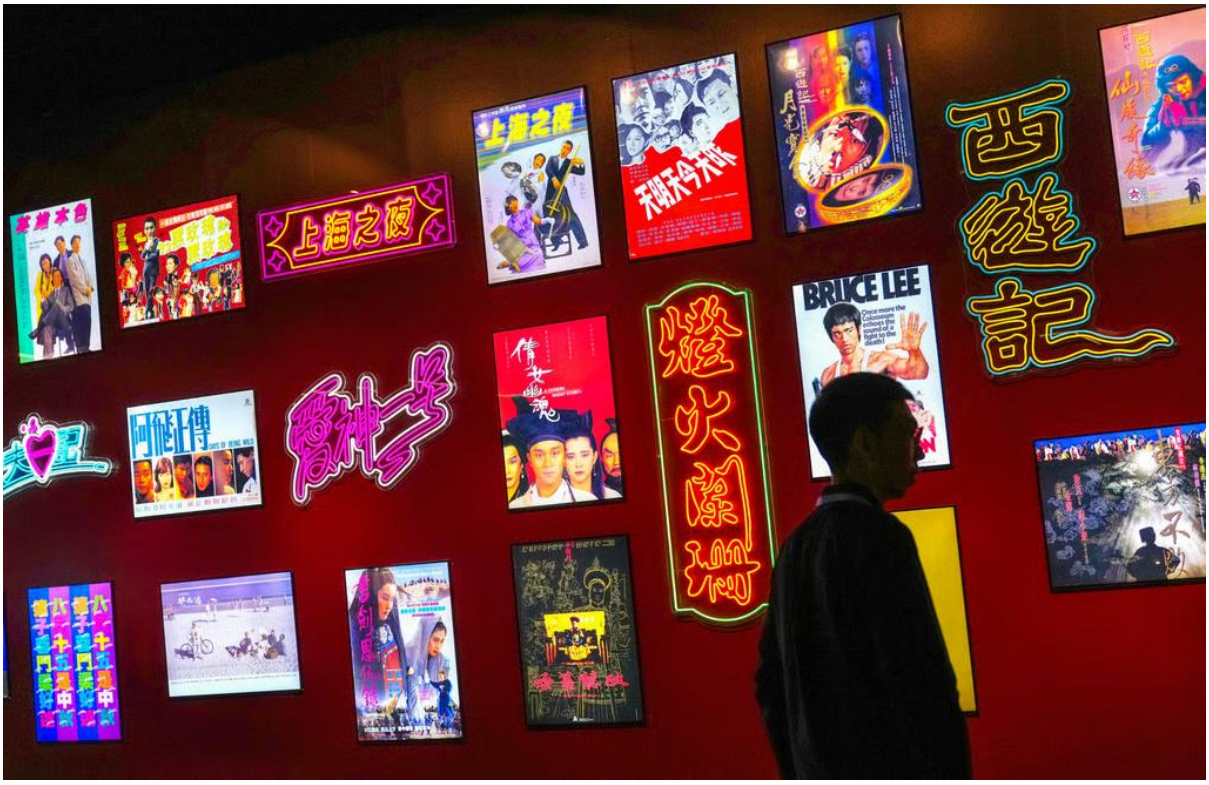

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