



INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

Hollywood censorship of Tibet blasted in PEN America report

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Hollywood studios that once spotlighted the Tibetan cause now censor their movies to appease the Chinese government, PEN America says in a new report raising alarms about China's domination of the film industry.

“The Chinese Communist Party, in fact, holds major sway over whether a Hollywood movie will be profitable or not—and studio executives know it,” the organization warns in its hard-hitting report, “Made in Hollywood, Censored by Beijing.”

“The result is a system in which Beijing bureaucrats can demand changes to Hollywood movies—or expect Hollywood insiders to anticipate and make these changes, unprompted—without any significant hue or cry over such censorship.”

1997

It didn't always used to be that way. As PEN America—which promotes freedom of expression and represents more than 7,000 writers and supporters nationwide—says in its report, Hollywood made several films in the past that directly confronted China's abysmal human rights record.

In 1997, major studios released two films that depicted China's invasion and bloody conquest of Tibet: “Seven Years in Tibet,” starring Brad Pitt, and “Kundun,” directed by Martin Scorsese.

Beijing quickly retaliated. It banned the companies that produced those films from doing business in China for the next five years, sending Hollywood a chilling message about the cost of criticizing China.

By the very next year, Disney CEO Michael Eisner traveled to Beijing to apologize for “Kundun”—and to negotiate a new Disney theme park in Shanghai. “The bad news is that the film was made; the good news is that nobody watched it,” Eisner told Chinese leaders. “Here I want to apologize, and in the future we should prevent this sort of thing, which insults our friends, from happening.”

More than 20 years later, “Kundun”—based on a script by the late International Campaign for Tibet Board Member Melissa Mathison—remains a black sheep in the Disney stable.

In a story about PEN America's report, The Hollywood Reporter says the film is not available on Disney's new streaming service, Disney+, “and the studio did not respond when asked if it plans to add it to the platform.”

High-water mark recedes

“Seven Years” director Jean Jacques Annaud has also backed away from his movie about Tibet.

In 2009, when he attempted to work on a Chinese-French joint film production, he published a letter on the Chinese social media platform Weibo claiming he “never participated in any Tibet-related organization or association ... never supported Tibetan independence, and never had any private contact with the Dalai Lama, and moreover, becoming friends with him is out of the question.”

Annaud’s letter, no longer accessible to the public, contrasts with his comments in a 2015 Los Angeles Times article, in which he claimed no one asked him to apologize for or denounce “Seven Years.”

As PEN America says in its report, movies like “Seven Years” and “Kundun” are hard to imagine in the Hollywood of today.

“Several Hollywood professionals,” the report says, “made reference to 1997 as a sort of high-water mark for Hollywood studios’ willingness to make films that engaged in direct, high-profile criticism of Beijing.”

“Doctor Strange” makes Tibetans disappear

Fast forward to 2016, and Hollywood had not only turned its back on Tibetans but was actively erasing them from movies.

That year, Marvel Studios’ “Doctor Strange” remade the character of the Ancient One, who was Tibetan in the comic books, into a Celt played by Scottish actress Tilda Swinton.

Faced with accusations of “whitewashing,” the movie’s screenwriter, C. Robert Cargill, defended the change by saying: “If you acknowledge that Tibet is a place and that [the character is] Tibetan, you risk alienating one billion people ... and risk the Chinese government going, ‘Hey, you know one of the biggest film-watching countries in the world? We’re not going to show your movie because you decided to get political.’”

Cargill’s statement “reflects that of a screenwriter taking the Chinese government’s attitude toward Tibet into account when determining how his story should be told,” PEN America says in its report. “In fact, the sentiment within Cargill’s answer is almost irrational in its deference to Beijing, questioning whether Tibet even exists as a specific place.”

The organization adds:

Cargill’s reference to the risks of getting “political” is also notable. Is it more political to hew to a story as written with a Tibetan character, or to write that element out of existence? Both are political acts, yet in Cargill’s mind Beijing’s taboos evidently rule the day.

Hollywood censorship reaches billions

PEN America notes that Beijing’s censorship of Hollywood is part of the Chinese government’s success in compelling foreign companies to comply with China’s propaganda.

In 2018, Mercedes-Benz apologized after quoting the Dalai Lama in an Instagram post, claiming it was an “extremely erroneous message.”

That same year, Marriott apologized for listing Tibet, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau as separate from China on its website. An American employee of Marriott working in the United States also lost his job after “liking” a pro-Tibet tweet.

But from Hollywood, the reach of Beijing’s censorship spreads all across the globe.

Films are “perhaps the world’s most influential artistic and cultural medium,” PEN America notes. “Stories shape the way people think, and the stories told by Hollywood reach billions.”

The organization warns about what the future will hold.

“As the Chinese box office market continues to outpace America’s, and as the relationship between Hollywood and Beijing becomes even more lopsided, the pressures on Hollywood studios to accede to [Chinese Communist Party] censorship will only increase,” PEN America’s report says. “The phenomenon of self-censorship will presumably only worsen.”

“That is why it is so important to have this conversation now, before acquiescence to Beijing’s censorship becomes even further normalized for Hollywood filmmakers.”

Richard Gere testifies in Congress

Thankfully, all the way across the country in Washington, DC, lawmakers from both parties are having that conversation.

On June 30, 2020, International Campaign for Tibet Chairman Richard Gere testified at a Senate subcommittee hearing on how Chinese censorship hurts US interests.

Gere, who is also a social activist and philanthropist in addition to being an actor, said that, “While I can’t say that my speaking out for human rights in China has directly affected my career, I’m probably an unusual case.”

“There’s no doubt that the combination of Chinese censorship, coupled with American film studios’ desire to access China’s market, can lead to self-censorship and to avoiding social issues that great American films once addressed,” Gere said.

Gere added: “Imagine Marty Scorsese’s ‘Kundun,’ about the life of the Dalai Lama, or my own film ‘Red Corner,’ which is highly critical of the Chinese legal system. Imagine them being made today. It wouldn’t happen.”

Illustrative of China’s weakness

During his testimony, Gere described how Chinese directors and actresses told him they couldn’t work with him because it wouldn’t ruin their careers and hurt their families.

Asked by a senator about China pressuring Hollywood studios, Gere said, “It’s very illustrative of their weakness.”

“It’s the way that they’re hypersensitive about the Dalai Lama, the kindest, most generous man on the planet, who’s consumed and saturated with love and compassion and forgiveness. The mere mention of his name makes them crazy.”

Tenzing Barshee, a Tibetan American activist and president of the Capital Area Tibetan Association, also warned that Hollywood’s deference to China will hurt it with the public.

Quoted by The Hollywood Reporter, Barshee said: “If Hollywood is siding with the money, sooner or later they will be on the wrong side and lose money because the general public will stop watching [all] movies.”



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