

Locating the Hong Kong Film Industry in the Commodity Chain of Chinese Film: Revival or marginalization? (semi-finished article)

Shih-Chien Chang
chang17tw@gmail.com

Assistant Professor
Dept. of Journalism and Communication
Chuhai College of Higher Education, Hong Kong

Hong Kong film industry, which was honoured as “Eastern Hollywood” before, has demised rapidly since the beginning of the 21st century. The nervousness of being mainlandized is not uncommon when the ‘pure’ Hong Kong movies became less and less. However, the economic statistics published by HKSAR government demonstrated that the film-related industries have revived recently. The reasons might be the maturing of international division of labour in the film industry. When it happened, film workers in HK would mainly performed some specialized functions better than the others. But the exact compositions of the division of labour is not clear.

In order to understand the division of labour of Chinese film in the global commodity chain, the political economy of communication approach is deployed. The cast & crew in the top 10 (at box office) Chinese films each year which have been released since the late 1990s will be coded for link-analysis analysis. Based on the analysis, we are able to tell the clusters of production in film industry and then figure out the position of HK in the commodity chain. After that, the HK film industry’s development in the world-systems frame will be elaborated further.

The advanced division of labour geographically is critical for understanding modern film industry. Besides, the unequal distribution of resources and profits in the internationalized co-production projects deserves more attention to tell a world-systems story, which is critical for industrial-upgrading concern, too.

Keywords:

Hong Kong’s film industry, Global commodity chain, World-systems theory ,International division of cultural labour, Chinese film

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During the most prosperous time of Hong Kong film industry in the 1980s, more than 200 films had been produced a year and many of them could be exported to the East-Asian, South-East Asian and even the western countries for overseas Chinese audiences (Bordwell, 2011, p. 1). The record was so amazing (second only to U.S. Hollywood) that Lii (1996) called HK film industry as a “marginal empire”, which implies that other countries might be colonised by HK in the cultural field.

However, film industry in Hong Kong suffered hard times since the late 1990s when Lii proposed his argument. Though the theatre attendance grew steadily, both of the quantity and box offices of HK cinema have kept shrinking year by year, which means that the domestic consumers preferred foreign films to the local after the late 90s. According to the trade statistics that were published by government, HK imported more audio-visual products than the exported after 2006, as well as the total goods of cultural and creative industries (see figure 1). This seems to say: the empire collapsed in two decades.

The declining of HK film industry was no more than a platitude since the subsidy from Film Development Fund began in 1999. In terms of economics, government intervention signifies market failure which means that the allocation of production resources has problems to satisfy consumers' demand effectively. The founding of HK Film Development Council in 2007 is such a case again whose objectives involve financing, marketing, labour training that had been performed through market mechanism very well before. Besides, the latest Policy Address published in Jan. 2016 said that the HK government will “continue to foster the development of the film industry, including encouraging more local film production, nurturing new talent, building up audiences and promoting the Hong Kong film brand.”¹

Yet the revenue received by firms in this sector recently told a very different story. In the same period between 2005 and 2013, the value created by film, video and music industry (by CSD definition) increased in annual growth rate 5.81%. Compared with that of HK's GDP, 5.30%, it is not exaggerated to say that the film industry outperformed others in general. Besides, there are more audio-visual related establishments today than 10 years ago. And the persons engaged in it were

¹ Quote from 2016 Policy Address of Hong Kong Government website: <http://www.policyaddress.gov.hk/2016/eng/pdf/PA2016.pdf>. Retrieved on 26 Jan 2016.

almost as many as that in the golden age of the early 90s.² Based on these data, as the figure 2 to 5 show, the motion picture related industries are still attractive to labours and capital, at least outwardly.

People here said that the HK film industry was dying while the data showed it revived recently. This superficial contradiction is nothing new in the history of globalisation, which was defined as a progress of deep international division of labour by Hopkins & Wallerstein(1977). The interdependence between territories today facilitates not only the goods trading but also the production specialisation. In this point of view, the loss of local-production would not necessarily be a sign of demise of HK cinema. On the contrary, the increasing workers, firms and revenues of this industries might indicate that HK occupies a good position in trans-territories production of motion pictures.

With the international co-production films increasing in recent years, the claim of “comparative advantage” above might be persuasive, especially when the intense cooperation between HK and mainland China in cinema-related field is considered. The trade barriers set by China for HK audio-visual goods and services were lowered several times since the Mainland and Hong Kong Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement (CEPA) was signed in 2003. The import quota set for foreign films in mainland China market was not enforceable for HK-produced films. More than that, films co-produced by HK and mainland China are treated as mainland productions. Some administration procedures were simplified further for cost saving. And the post-production of a film of mainland China is allowed to be performed by HK-based companies.

However, it is a question that how long mainland China needs to rely on the contributions from Hong Kong film workers till she finally could establish independent and complete ability to produce a film. The answer is critical for the derived issues: If the principle of comparative advantage really works in Chinese film industry, which part of the whole film commodity-chain that Hong Kong workers occupied currently? Besides, is the advantage that HK holds stable and solid enough for long-term development?

All these questions represent a theoretical thinking in depth: the dynamics of world-systems. According to the world-systems theory, the development of capitalism in a country sooner or latter breaks the national boundaries and establish global commodity chains, in which the advanced countries are able to control the internationalised production procedure, allocate resources in

² All the data were retrieved from CSD. By definition of HK Standard Industrial Classification 1.1 before 2008, film-related economic activities are included in the category of “Motion pictures and other entertainment services (coded as 940-941)”, which is subdivided into film processing, film studios, motion and video picture companies, theatres, film distribution, radio and television stations and studios, theatrical production and entertainment services, distribution of videotapes. Since 2009, the industrial classification was fully revised and the film-related activities were rearranged into two categories: “Motion picture, video and television programme production, sound recording and music publishing (coded as 59)” and “Programming and broadcasting activities (coded as 60)”. The former includes the production, post-production, distribution of motion picture, video and television programme, and the sound recording and music publishing activities. Television and radio programming and broadcasting are belonged in the latter.

Ideally, the data of all the subdivision ought to be collected completely for better understanding of industry development. But the best-case scenario is hardly achieved, because the detail data are not open usually on account of privacy concern and only the major terms could be accessed by researchers, such as “Motion picture, video and television programme production, sound recording and music publishing.” These data are useful for initial analysis but far from the concrete conclusions. The vagueness of the statement and judgement based on these data ought to be clarified through more data comparison and qualitative methods (insider interviewing, field observation, etc.) by researchers.

different “boxes”, which means the separable processes constituting a commodity chain, and occupy major part of total profit. Meanwhile the developing or underdeveloped countries are forced to accept unfair conditions to produce low-end parts of the commodity and earn poor margins(Hopkins & Wallerstein, 1994).

Of course these core-peripheral frame could hardly sustain in the long. The achievement of newly industrialised countries in east Asia demonstrates the rapid improvements in the ladder of global commodity chain, while some thought they still were subordinated to the advanced countries and became ‘semi-peripherals’(Amsden & Chu, 2003; Li, 2002). Besides, the trading blocs facilitated by bilateral or multilateral free trade agreements recently make those countries in each bloc have more autonomy and opportunities to get rid of the dominance of advanced countries.

That’s why the modern film industry shall be studied in a cosmopolitan frame when the intensified international division of cultural labour in film production is considered(Miller, Govil, McMurria, & Wang, 2005). Since the Hong Kong film industry had been in a dominant position in the pan-Chinese markets once, demised after the end of the 1990s, and regains the new growth opportunities via co-production with players from mainland China(according to the CSD data), the development of Hong Kong film industry seems to be an ideal case for world-systems research.

2. Theoretical frame and literature review

2.1 The approach of film study

What is Hong Kong cinema? According to HK Motion Picture Industry Association (MPIA)³, there are two criteria: (1) a film is fully presented by companies that are registered in HK. (2) a film is partly presented by HK companies and more than half of the film’s producer, director, script writer, actor or actress are HK permanent residents. Besides, the eligibility for official fund application is stricter: the applicant must be a film production company registered in HK which should employ at least 1 permanent resident of HK in any 3 of the following categories of the main film crew and cast: (i) the film producer; (ii) the film director; (iii) the scriptwriter; (iv) the leading actor; and (v) the leading actress.⁴

The criteria listed above are not particular when compared with the policies of cultural protectionism implemented in the developing countries, or even the developed ones such as UK, France, Canada and South Korea. These countries dictate detail standards to define the origin or nationality of their motion pictures as the ground for subsidy and protection. Even in the highly globalised world the culture-related items were still largely excluded from the free-trade agreements. This so called “cultural exception” is part of the measures to protect cultural sovereignty, which are enforced by national governments in the name of cultural diversity(Frau-Meigs, 2012).

In spite of the government efforts on distinguishing the native products from others, the transnational production is so widespread that the pure origin of a commodity is not easy to tell. And the difficulties to tell the origin of HK cinema are not raised recently because the films of HK have been well-known for their cultural-hybridity that the Chinese, western and even the Japanese

³ Quoted from MPIA webpage: http://www.mpia.org.hk/content/about_definition.php. Retrieved on 26 Jan 2016.

⁴ Quoted from HK Film Development Council webpage: <http://www.fdc.gov.hk/en/services/services2.htm> . Retrieved on 26 Jan 2016.

elements were collided and then mixed as a new but unstable breed(Chan & Fung, 2013; Lent & Fitzsimmons, 2013; Yau, 2010; Y.-Y. Yeh & Davis, 2002). After studying the history of HK cinema, Curtin(2003, 2013; Curtin & Shah, 2010) concluded that the base of film production should be a city, rather than a nation.

Just like the Curtin's argument above, the object of analysis should be reduced to a city when we try to understand the economic geography of film industry today, because the capital are able to flow freely across borders and facilitate the division of labour between territories(Wasko & Erickson, 2008). More and more cities around the world compete with each other to adopt policies to attract investment from big entertainment companies, which are treated as job creators and the new engine of local economic growth. Therefore the Hollywood major studios which promote the order of new international division of cultural labour are the best beneficiary in this situation(Miller, 2007; Miller et al., 2005).

However, the concept of international division of cultural labour doesn't depict completely the new order in global cultural field. Under the anti-imperialism frame above, the U.S. was described persuasively as an almighty empire that the other countries have no chance to overturn the order(Storper, 1993). Although the core of hegemony is clear, the rest of the order is not. Since Hong Kong might not be the core anymore in East Asian film market, to figure out the position of HK in the new order structure is necessary and challenging.

There are lots of discussions about HK film industry repositioning, especially on the effect of co-production between Hong Kong and mainland China. While the squeeze of market because of Hollywood products dumping and the runaway of capital for HK film production became significant in the late 90s, mainland China was thought as salvation by reason of its rapid economic growth and market expansion. And the eagerness to catch up with the advanced countries has driven the entertainment companies in mainland China to upgrade by co-production, which was seen as effective and efficient means of learning and imitating. However, the culture gap and the political regime difference made the merger an uneasy and struggling process while the ideological and regulation requirements of mainland China transformed HK films into a mainland-oriented type. The argument might not be uncommon that the cooperation / co-production between HK and mainland had strangled the style, spirit or even the creativity of Hong Kong film makers. Not only the sense of accomplishment but also the the working conditions became more unstable or worse that would drain the energy of HK films(Chan, Fung, & Ng, 2010; Mok, 2006; Szeto & Chen, 2013). By textual analysis mainly, the HK films could be distinguished as two kinds: one is blockbuster type that with abundant budgets and mainland market oriented, and the other is more HK-spirit inherited and inclusive of different cultural elements. The latter was described as "SAR New Wave cinema" with subaltern translocality(Chu, 2015; Szeto & Chen, 2012), which was part of the new localism of recent Asian film production(Davis & Yeh, 2008; E. Y.-Y. Yeh, 2014).

Textual analysis is some kind of typology approach that might be applied for product classification through induction. Because the unit of textual analysis is a final good, a complete feature film which is presented by some talents in the industry, the hidden auteur theory might neglect the highly division of labour which is driven by capitalism for surplus exploitation(Bordwell, Staiger, & Thompson, 1985; Staiger, 1983), especially those workers of under-the-line was invisible in general(Mayer, 2011). For example, though the frame of HK vs. China or HK vs. others based on textual analysis of each film seems to say that the co-production with others results in the product differentiation, the tentative interviews by me with some HK film industry insiders showed that

they were getting involved in the international project during the past few years. For instance, Yeh & Davis(2002) had demonstrated the participation of HK directors and actors in Japanese film production and the increasing market share of Japanese products in HK will result in further product differentiation, and argued that is evidence of flexible accumulation of capital in film industry. However, the mode of flexible accumulation shall be based on complete division of labour geographically, as Hollywood has done(Scott, 2005; Scott & Pope, 2007). That's why the mode of flexible accumulation in Chinese film industry shall be clarified further under the commodity-chain perspective. Those increasing transnational outsourcing projects might reflect the functional specialisation between territories rather than product differentiation. Furthermore, the profit allocation among the different territories is determinant to the development of regional and global capitalism(Bair, 2009).

2.2 The frame of global commodity chain and film industry study

In order to understand the dynamics of film industries development in the globalised world, the frame of global commodity chain(GCC) is useful. According to Hopkins & Wallerstein(1986, p. 159), the definition of commodity chain is :

A network of labor and production processes whose end result is a finished commodity. All firms or other units of production receive inputs and send outputs. Their transformation of the inputs that results in outputs locates them within a commodity chain (or quite often within multiple commodity chains). In terms of the structure of the capitalist world-economy, commodity chains may be thought of as the warp and woof of its system of social production. By tracing the networks of these commodity chains, one can track the ongoing division and integration of labor processes and thus monitor the constant development and transformation of the world-economy's production system.

The definition demonstrates the 'global' commodity chain is an comparative idea, which means the value-added process of a good is no longer limited in a state. We might say that the GCC perspective highlights not only at the geographical spread of transnational production arrangements, but also at their organisational scope in order to understand their sources of stability and change(Gereffi, 1994, p. 96). As the international flows of information, capital and semi-manufactures accelerated, the production process could be divided and re-assembled by the top commodity designer or merchandiser who earn a large part of total profit usually. This so-called buyer-driven commodity chain have been popular since the 1970s(Gereffi, 1994, 2001) and the mass-production mode was replaced by flexible-specialisation method that allowed the manufactures to react to the market change rapidly(Piore & Sabel, 1984).

If the global production process could be divided into different components, we might see that the 'international division of labour' was not even at all. Instead of that, it might be the global hierarchies of production that some were dominated by others(Kiely, 1998; Korzeniewicz & Martin, 1994, p. 70). Therefore, the objectives of GCC studies are to figure out the 'boxes', the relationships between them, and the resources allocated in these boxes. After that, the boxes could represent the competence and contribution of their locations in the value-added process. And we could observe the movement of a certain region in the commodity chain, which represents the dynamics of region's competence compared to others.

Accordingly, there are several significant issues for considering. First, the degree to which the box is relatively monopolised by a small number of units of production. Second, the degree of geographic spread of the units of production filling that box. Third, the number of different commodity chains in which that box is located. Forth, to ask about any box is the kind of property-like arrangements associated with the units of production in that box. Fifth, what modes of labour control are to be found in the box. The final is to ask the linkages joining the boxes(Hopkins & Wallerstein, 1994, pp. 18-19).

As we know, the U.S. film industry has been globalised since its birth(Guback, 1969). And those Hollywood majors have adopted flexible-specialisation after the collapse of studio system in the 1950s(Storper & Christopherson, 1987). When the division of labour have been internationalised further since the late 1980s, the U.S. media conglomerates who control the financing, distribution and marketing of films could extract more returns through exploit cheap labours and resources around the world(Aksoy & Robins, 1992; Christopherson, 2006; Hozic, 2001). That's why the investment from Hollywood majors could support the local film industry on the one hand and absorb the local as part of the their world system on the other. For the local, or the peripheral, this is harmful in the long run.

In this point of view, the “new localism” proposed by Davis & Yeh(2008) and Chu(2015) shall be reconsidered via the frame of world-systems, which has been dominated by Hollywood conglomerates for a long time but challenged by China recently. However, the primary strategies employed by China's film industry is the duplication of Hollywood's mode, such as star system, high-concept & big-budget-first policy, and the big data analysis. In this way the critical issues raised by the emergent media conglomerates in China are not only the ideological conflicts but also the marginalisation of its neighbours.

2.3 General questions

Because of the unstableness of the world-systems, the specialised functions performed by workers separately would be an interesting but ambiguous subject for study. In order to locate Hong Kong in modern commodity chain of Chinese film, there are some issues ought to be dealt with:

1. Is the internationally division of cultural labour of Chinese film fully developed?
2. Are the specialised functions in Chinese film industry located in different territories that they could compose the global/interterritorial commodity chain(GCC)?
3. What is the function(s) that HK's film-related industries performed in the GCC of Chinese film?
4. What is the managerial relationship between HK film workers and others?
5. What is the development of Hong Kong along the GCC of Chinese film industry in the past decade?
6. Does the revival of Hong Kong film industry represent the marginalisation in the world-system?
7. How could we rethink and improve the world-systems theory based on the analysis above?

(b) Research plan and methodology

Film business is a labour-intensive industry(Guback, 1988). Generally speaking, all people with different job titles and institutions that are engaged in a film production will be listed at the end of

the film. Being listed as cast & crew is necessary for the worker because of credit accumulation for better development(Blair, Grey, & Randle, 2001; Randle & Culkin, 2009). That is why Weiss & Faulkner(1983) studied the freelance organisation by counting the number of specialists' credits as their productivity in 1881 films. Similarly, I'd like to establish a database of cast & crew of Chinese films and analyse the development of international division of labour from it. In addition to the workers, the studios, labs and institutions which were listed in the film will be coded as well.

1. Scope of the database

Since total production of Chinese film is over five hundred a year, the data of all the Chinese movies' cast & crew are too large to be completed with limited resources and period. This study would select the top ten movies at the box office in Greater China each year from 1998 to 2013 as samples for coding. The definition of Chinese film is the film that uses Mandarin, Cantonese or Taiwanese as its main language. There are two reasons for the period selection. First, these 16 years are the period when Hong Kong's film industry have experienced prosperity and then depression. Second, because of the maturity of the VCD/DVD technology and rental system, most of the films could be accessed more easily than those in early years.

2. Content of the database

All the workers and institutions engaged in each film will be coded. Every worker and institution would be labeled with a few basic data: 1. the job title or specialized function; 2. the origin of countries or cities(if available); 3. the title, box office and budget of the movie(if available). Based on the further calculation of these data, we might get the clusters of worker and institution in different stages and territories. Thus the dynamics of relationship between them could be depicted in graphs. Also we are able to trace the development path of particular worker or institution in the 15 years..

3. Hypothesis test

This study supposes that the GCC of Chinese film in Greater China has matured, which means that the Hong Kong workers might cluster around some occupations/functions in different stages. However, the results of data analysis might not support the assumption that the cluster isn't significant and stable. There are some possibilities when it happens. 1. There is no such a thing that the international division of cultural labour happened in Chinese film industry. The allocation of work in a co-production project between two or more cities/nations is random and has no inherent meanings. 2. The HK film workers are too weak to join the Chinese film industry. So the amount of them is not large enough to establish a cluster. 3. The international co-production that HK's worker engaged is diversified between different countries that the finished film may use foreign languages. This may be an evidence of translocality rather than mainlandisation (in terms of Szeto & Chen(2012)).

4. The complementary: In-depth interview with key players

Whether the establishment of GCC in Chinese film industry is significant or not, the result of analysis would suggest some key actors who are defined as authority or hub in the network. Based on the result I'd interview with them about the development of cluster in different territories,

especially their personal experiences. The interview is indispensable for further interpretation of the analysis results. This systematic sampling shall be more reliable and valid.

To summarise, this is an empirical study. There are two sources of empirical data: the principal part is the cast & crew list of each film and the complementary part is in-depth interviewing with the selected key players. The samples of the former would be the top ten Chinese films at box office that were released in Hong Kong, mainland China (Shanghai) and Taiwan(Taipei) between 1998 to 2013. Those key persons would be sampled according to the network analysis of the former.

Figures

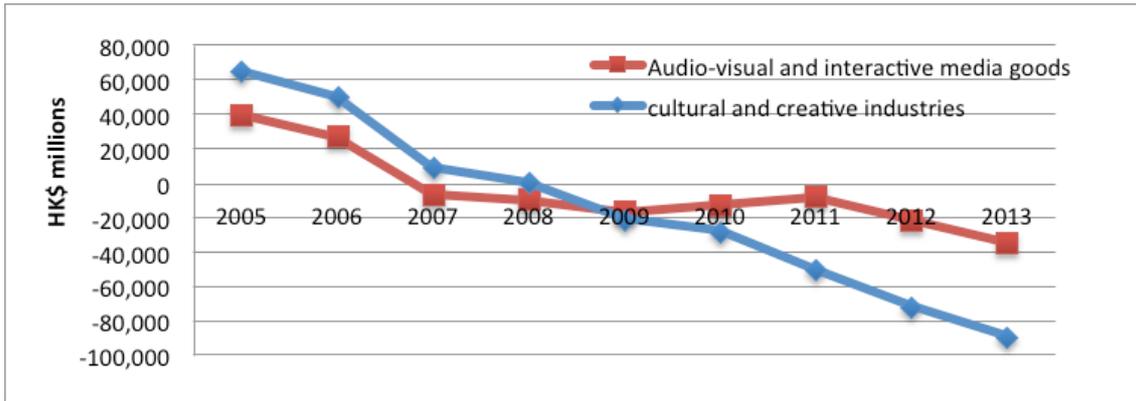


Figure 1. HK trade balance of some cultural and creative goods, 2005-2012.
Source: HK Census and Statistics Department (CSD).

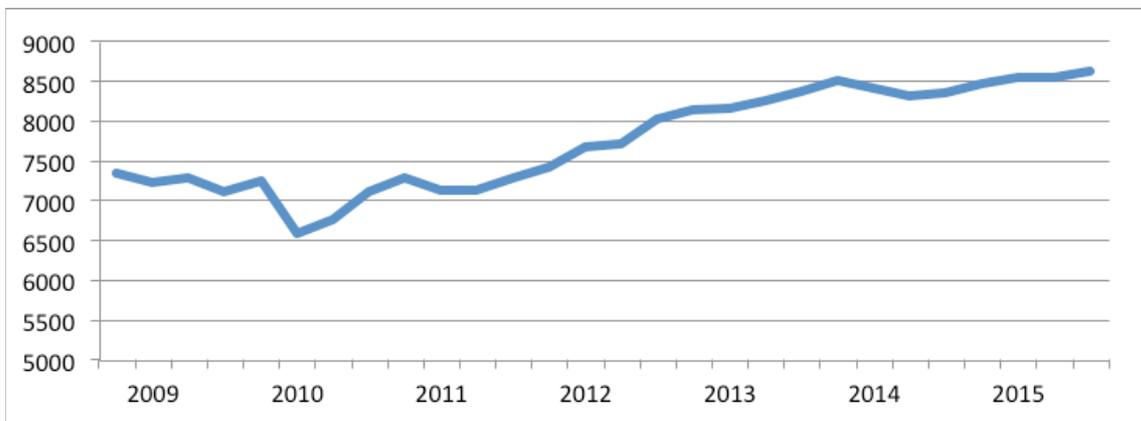


Figure 2. Persons engaged in HK motion picture related sectors (Code 591), 2008Q4-2015Q3.
Source: HK Census and Statistics Department (CSD).

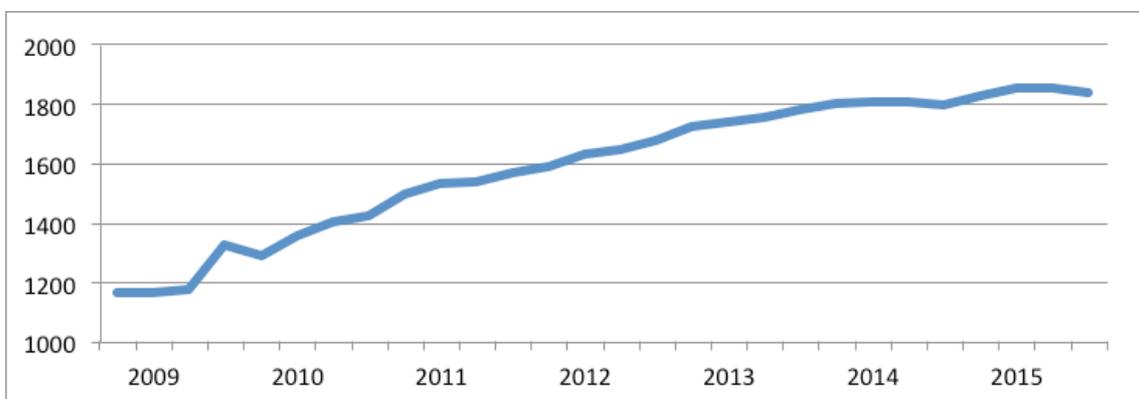


Figure 3. Establishments in HK motion picture related sectors (Code 591), 2008Q4-2015Q3.
Source: HK Census and Statistics Department (CSD).

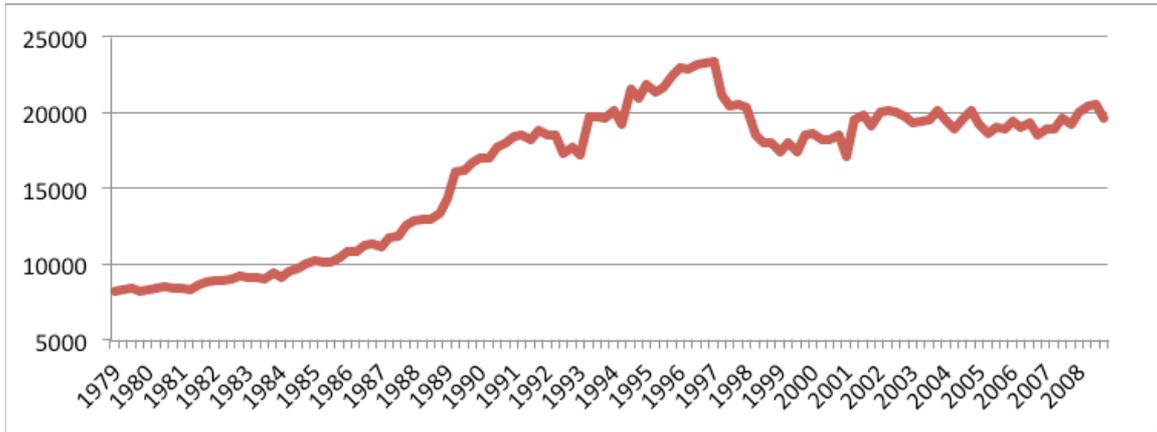


Figure 4. Persons engaged in HK motion picture related sectors (Code 940-941), 1979Q1-2008Q4.

Source: HK Census and Statistics Department (CSD).

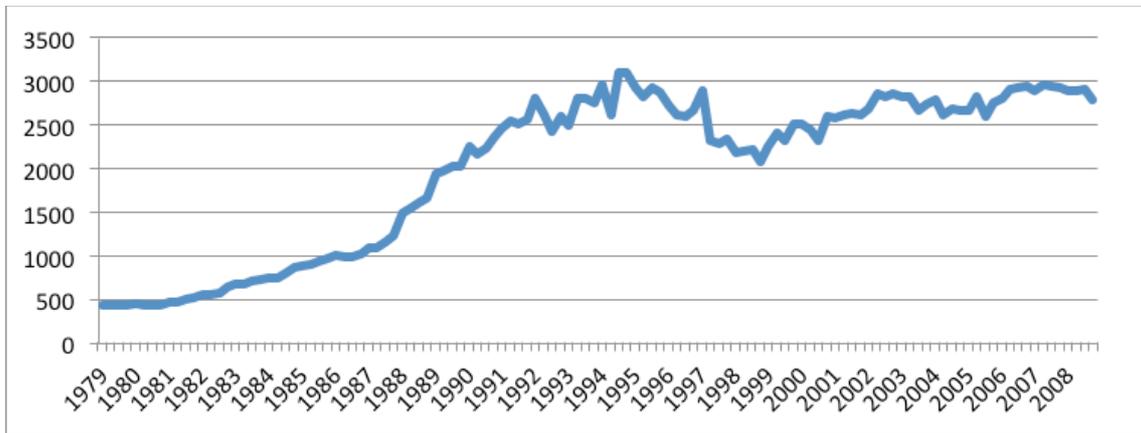


Figure 5. Establishments in HK motion picture related sectors (Code 940-941), 1979Q1-2008Q4.

Source: HK Census and Statistics Department (CSD).

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