

## **Getting close to the media world? On the attraction of encountering film industry professionals at Shanghai International Film Festival**

Min Xu & Stijn Reijnders,  
Erasmus University Rotterdam, Netherlands

### **Abstract:**

Despite its important role in film festival experiences, media encounters, post-screening talks in particular, have only been sporadically discussed so far. This study probes into the meanings attached to media encounters in the Chinese context, by focusing on film festival-goers' motivations and experiences at the 19th Shanghai International Film Festival. Based on in-depth interviews and participant observation, results show that SIFF goers expect to get close to film industry professionals, and by attending talks, they hope to gain insights into the film production process and discover the personal drives of production team members. The respondents draw a line between meeting celebrities and meeting film production members, showing an outspoken preference for the latter based on articulations of professionalism. Contrary to their expectations, most SIFF goers experience a clear distance between themselves and the film industry professionals. This rift is not criticised, but justified by both practical arguments and ideas about how it should be. We conclude that talks at the SIFF enrich the communal setting of the film festival and provide more opportunities for social engagement, while at the same time reconfirming the special status of media professionals.

**Keywords:** Film festival; Chinese audiences; media ritual; festival talk; film industry professional; celebrity; seeing

### **Introduction**

In mid-June 2016, crowds gathered in cinemas in Shanghai almost every day, making the 19<sup>th</sup> Shanghai International Film Festival a hit. During the course of nine days, more than 600 hundred movies were showcased in 45 cinemas, together making more than 20 million

Yuan Renminbi (approximately 2.68 million Euros) at the box office. In social media, film festival-goers cheered by uploading photos of dozens of tickets, and those who travelled to Shanghai for this major cultural event asked for subway solutions as they hurried from one cinema to another.

The Shanghai International Film Festival (SIFF), one of the largest film festivals in East Asia, organises approximately one hundred talks before and after-screenings with directors, actors and actresses each year. These sessions are open to the public, accessible by film tickets. Opportunities for seeing and listening to film industry professionals are guaranteed as a selling point of the festival.

How to explain the popularity of these festivals? According to existing studies, the embodied experience of participating in film culture is what makes attending a film festival different from a standard moving-going experience. In particular, the interactions of audiences with filmmakers in Q&A sessions have been recognised as key parts of such experiences (Stevens 2016, p. 187), and being physically close to actors and directors has been identified as a pleasure for film festival audiences (Dickson 2015). More in general, entering the media world has gained a powerful symbolical meaning in today's mediated society (e.g. Couldry 2002, 2003; Reijnders 2011). However, so far, there has been no empirical research focusing on film festival talks, and most existing studies of media encounters are based solely on empirical fieldwork in Western countries. Little is known about encounters with the media in the non-West. Chinese film festivals like SIFF are an interesting case in point because of their hybrid character, combining Western with non-Western film cultures, and blockbuster movies with niche productions.

An increasing number of scholars have studied film festivals in Asia and advocated the significance of the Asia region in the world cinema as well as the continual advancement of the film festival. On the one hand, film festivals are said to be inherently transnational. As Lordanova argues, the diverse content showcased at these festivals undermines national agendas (2016, p. xiv). Likewise, Stringer reminds that there is not a singular "Asia" as various film festivals are organised in distinct parts of Asia (2016). On the other hand, several scholars have shown how processes of localisation do occur. For example, Berry compares the Hong Kong and Shanghai International Film Festivals, stating that localisation occurs at both festivals and is an ongoing process (2017, p. 29). In a similar vein, *Chinese Film Festivals: Sites of Translation*, a recent book edited by Chris Berry and Luke Robinson, invites discussions on what is actually distinctive about Chinese film festivals (2017, p. 3-4). The current paper aims to contribute to this line of research.

As Colin Sparks (2010) points out, 'studies of the Chinese media have tended to prioritize political issues', and the limitations of such an approach are becoming ever more obvious. He argues that cultural phenomena need to be understood first in their own terms. The absence of much serious work on cultural phenomena makes it hard to address huge changes. For example, there is an explosive growth of the middle class in China, as Sparks suggests, whose 'cultural life, or at least the cultural life of its younger generation, is significantly different to the patterns that prevailed 20 years ago' (2010). This is undoubtedly

the case for Shanghai as one of China's wealthiest cities. Therefore, we are determined to shift the focus from the purposes of Chinese film festivals to the meanings that audiences – in particular the younger generations – attach to a cultural event like SIFF.

This study analyses encounters between audiences and film professionals during the 19th Shanghai International Film Festival held from June 11 to June 19 in 2016. More particularly, it poses the following questions:

why are people motivated to see film industry professionals in person during SIFF;

how do these film festival-goers experience seeing and listening to industry professionals such as film directors and key players;

and how do these findings relate to the Chinese context of SIFF?

It aims not only to contribute to the current body of research on media rituals and film festival audiences, especially in non-western contexts, but also to offer an original point of departure for further comparative analysis between western and Asian media culture.

The research is based on a combination of in-depth interviews and participant observation during the 19<sup>th</sup> SIFF. We attended five screening sessions including their pre-screening talks and post-screening talks in different cinemas, and carefully observed festival-goers who participated in the talks and the red-carpet moments before the screenings. Following these events, we held interviews with 16 film festival-goers who had at least watched several films and had attended at least two talks by directors and actors. In the next three sections, we will discuss relevant concepts in film festival research, background information on SIFF, and existing findings in media encounters. The methodology section will then be presented before the results of our analysis.

### **Attending film festivals**

Film festivals like SIFF are events, which not only generate media coverage, but also serve to provide collective experiences for different audience groups. Non-mainstream films are celebrated at festivals, next to the more mainstream ones (De Valck 2007, 2014), and yet audiences' experiences include much more than watching those films. While admitting that festival attendance is used as 'bragging evidence of one's cultural capital', De Valck stresses 'attention', 'spectacle', and 'experience' as ways to frame the popularity of contemporary festivals (2007, p. 196). Indeed, film festivals offer the potential of an unreproducible and unexpected spectacle, attracting people to 'be there' not only for a unique cinematic experience but also for social engagement (Stevens 2016, p. 186).

This spatial dimension of 'being there' is essential for understanding the popularity of film festivals. Firstly, the consumption of place plays an important role in festival-going, as audiences value spatial pleasure and physical presence in space with 'other bodies' (Dickson

2015). Secondly, the cities and nations that host film festivals use these events for promoting local identities. The distinctive identity of a festival location is embedded in such a cultural event. For example, film festivals in East Asian cities such as Busan, Hong Kong, and Tokyo, involve city branding priorities of local governments (Stringer 2001). Likewise, SIFF was founded in 1993 and started as a local initiative from the city government. When the festival became China's only A-list international film festival in 1994, accredited by the FIAPF (Fédération Internationale des Associations de Producteurs de Films), the festival faced pressures. This was partly due to the FIAPF's rule that A-list international film festivals only accept the submission of films that have not been presented before. It then became difficult for SIFF to reach an objective of promoting the Chinese film industry and encouraging co-operations with global industries. Nowadays SIFF places more emphasis on its national and transnational context, 'focusing on Asia, promoting Chinese-language films and supporting new talents.'<sup>1</sup>

While many film festival studies have highlighted the economic, geopolitical agendas and the close relations between film festivals and film industries, there have been limited academic discussions in the significance of film festivals to the general festival audiences (Dickson 2015) and why these audiences would invest time and money to visit film festivals. In Dickson's focus groups at Glasgow Film Festival, several respondents are glad to see people they know from films, including one respondent is excited about the directors' autographs he got. Dickson therefore identifies 'spatial freedom' as one of the four dominant 'vocabularies of spatial, social and embodied pleasure', in short, being physically close to not only other audience members but also visiting directors and actors (2015). These findings resonate with more general theories on media rituals. According to scholars like Couldry (2003), being 'close' to places or people from the media has become an important status symbol in today's mediatised society. These theories will be further explained in the following paragraph, showing how post-screening talks can potentially be interpreted as media rituals whereby the symbolic boundary between outside and inside the media is both performed and crossed.

### ***Media Encounters***

To understand people's motivations to see film industry professionals in person, it is fruitful to start from Couldry's theory of media rituals. According to Couldry, the symbolic power of the media is constructed and reinforced by ritualised events around the distinction between media people (or celebrities) and ordinary people (2003, p. 27). The replicated and naturalised hierarchy of people in the media over people not in the media reinforces the status of the former, thus contributing to the symbolic power of the media. Such difference between the two categories implies media as the access point to society's centre, which Couldry defines as the 'myth of mediated centre' (2003, p. 47). The symbolic difference between inside and outside the media is not only imposed by the media but also internalised. At the sight of a celebrity, people act out the difference between the two

categories in formalised ways, such as holding back or rushing forward, revealing a principle that media celebrities deserve special attention for being special (2003, p. 52).

Couldry offers an important point of departure for explaining the general popularity of the media world, but in order to analyse the precise characteristics of media encounters at film festivals, we need more detailed studies. In their study of meet-and-greets with Dutch singer Marco Borsato (Reijnders et al. 2014), the authors examined the reasons why fans would be interested in direct personal contact with celebrities and how meet-and-greets are organised. Commenting on a 'Couldrian' approach, they argue that reinforcing the special status of media people is not the be-all and end-all. Instead, to complete the picture, they suggest that a meet-and-greet is a cultural happening, with various parties participating from their own motives and perspectives. Based on a series of interviews with Borsato fans, they identify three strong motivators: validation, status symbols within the fan hierarchy, and, in some cases, therapeutic healing.

The aforementioned theories and findings are helpful for us to examine the symbolic boundary between inside and outside the media, and provide important insights into fans' experiences of these meetings and the meanings they attach to the direct contact. Fans value the validation of the celebrity's personality when they have the opportunity to meet him or her in real life. Likewise, in terms of this case study, an encounter with a film / TV actor can be regarded as a superior activity to watching film and TV productions; audiences can validate their images outside of a fictional setting and possibly learn some behind-the-scene stories about playing the characters. At the same time, they can gain something exclusive enough to stand out among their peers.

However, to apply the findings of these studies to this case study, certain aspects need to be taken into consideration. Firstly, it is unclear whether people would respond to all media people in the same fashion, and how responses of different people would vary. After all, there is an inevitable difference between media encounters with professionals (celebrities) in the popular media world and in the setting of film festivals. It is insufficient to simply describe such moments of encounters as the intersection of the ordinary and the extraordinary, because there can be nuances in the so-called extraordinary and in how ordinary people really perceive them. For example, whether film festival-goers would be more enthusiastic about seeing certain film industry professionals because of their fondness for the movies, or whether their reactions depend on the fame of star directors and actors. In other words, if audience find media people (or some of them if not all) extraordinary, what contributes to this extraordinariness in their eyes, and what differentiations can be found?

Secondly, meet-and-greets are likely to magnify fans' positive experiences as the meetings are small-scale and more intimate, while film festival-goers see film industry professionals from a distance together with others for less than half an hour. Giles points out that encounters with famous people can bring about three categories of responses, based on a survey he carried out: enhancement, when encounters are positive experiences; normalisation, when the respondents pay attention to celebrities' appearance in reality,

eliminating the mystique associated with their appearance; or disillusionment, when respondents are disappointed at, for example, being ignored (2000, p. 134-138).

Finally, we doubt whether the symbolic boundary between the media world and the normal world are drawn and experienced in the same way in China and the UK. We would expect to find differences based on the fact that it is not suitable to interpret Chinese media landscape using the teleology of Western theories on democratisation or a binary opposition between the state and society; instead, a more reasonable approach to study current Chinese media landscape is a state–media–market–society negotiation model, in which each party more or less takes other players’ interests into consideration (Yu 2011; Huang 2007). More particularly, western popular culture is deeply embedded in capitalist culture. Contemporary Chinese culture, in comparison, is characterised by a hybrid of post-socialist and post-modern elements (Yu 2009, p. 6). In other words, it is ‘within a residual socialist system’ while ‘becoming further integrated into the global capitalist system’ (Yu 2009, p. 6).

## **Method**

To understand film festival-goers’ motivations and experiences as well as the meanings they attach to their activities, we have chosen to follow a phenomenological approach, by adopting qualitative interviews and participatory observations. Such an approach is productive in terms of bringing to light meanings that events have for individuals (Marshall and Rossman 2016, p. 153; Kvale 2009, p. 28-32).

Starting from the last day of the film festival, we conducted interviews with 16 respondents across eight days. We deliberately chose this period to conduct interviews so as to ensure that respondents had already seen the movies and talks they planned to see, but still had fresh memories. The respondents were approached on site and via a film festival-goers group on social media, with 9 male respondents and 7 female respondents, aged from 20 to 35. With the exception of two university undergraduates and one graduate student, most respondents were white-collar professionals, with a medium or high level of education. Amongst these respondents, most of them were not new to SIFF, and each has attended several film screenings and a minimum of two talks this year. Impressively, a few respondents have attended more than 20 films screenings, and were likely to see and listen to more film industry professionals. A majority of respondents gave their permission for quotations to be used with their real names, while some respondents preferred to remain anonymous.

The interviews were semi-structured, based on three main topics: motivations (frequency of watching movies, preparation after the screening schedule released, decision-making), experiences (atmosphere, favourite talks, memorable experiences and feelings) and reflections afterwards (views on talks and seeing film professionals in person). During the interviews, respondents could bring up topics of their own interests. In order to stimulate detailed and descriptive discussions, they were also asked to share photos with us via an instant messenger, as taking pictures was a common behaviour of film festival-goers. Varying

from half an hour to one hour in length, interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, coded, and thematically analysed (Bryman 2012, p. 578-581).

Complementary to the interviews, we attended five film screenings including pre-screening or post-screening talks and one red-carpet moment before the screening for our participatory observations. We chose two extremely popular film screenings and three ordinary sessions, based on their performance on the first day of online ticket selling, making sure that we could participate in a variety of events and experience all kinds of atmosphere in different cinemas. Guests invited to talk for these sessions include Hollywood celebrity actors, famous Asian and Chinese directors and actors, and people from production teams. On site, we observed the crowds' and attendees' behaviours before, during and after the talks, took pictures, kept field notes, and had short conversations with some film festival-goers. All of these benefited the interviews in terms of pushing forward with specifying questions (Kvale 2009, p. 135-136), and furthering conversations to get to the bottom of their opinions and meanings.

Then analysis of interview transcripts and field notes began immediately after the data was collected. Through thematic content analysis, we identified the following three recurring patterns on the basis of transcriptions: motivations for attending talks; notions of proximity versus distance between audiences and film industry professionals; values underlying the meetings. In the next three Sections, we will analyse these patterns in more detail.

### **Motivation and Expectation**

During the 19<sup>th</sup> SIFF, there were multiple ways for film festival-goers to see and listen to film industry professionals. Despite the fact that the opening and closing ceremonies required internal invitations which are mostly given to officials, the press and other related important people, red carpets were also decorated in a few cinemas to welcome directors, actors and actresses for pre-screening and post-screening talks. This is also the reason why crowds gathered to get glimpses of film industry professionals, especially stars. Some arrived fairly early before the screenings to occupy the best locations in the small cinema halls and to get close to the stars as soon as they enter. For most film festival-goers, attending pre-screening and post-screening talks is their best chance to see film industry professionals in person, to hear their voices and ideas, and to take as many pictures as they like. Those who had intentions of doing so usually tried to buy front row tickets. Occasionally, when directors and actors happened to be free, front-row audience might request photos or autographs (fieldnotes).

While some respondents claimed that they care more about movies than about the talks, many film festival-goers were aware of opportunities for included talks, and put a priority on the films with talks:

I checked out movies with talks first, and went online to see whether the movies would be of my interest, such as genre, etc. Haiyun (20, female)

If it is a movie by a director that I like, and the director will give a talk, that would be the best and a priority when I buy tickets. Dai (23, female)

What Haiyun and Dai say, reveal their different ways of making decisions. The former starts with talks and matches her interest later, while the latter starts with her interest and checks the possibility to see and listen to directors. For both of them and many respondents, talks are a plus, an ideal package, if they can watch movies of their interests.

For those who intended to see and listen to film industry professionals, what were their motivations?

It was a pre-screening talk. As the movie began, I felt that almost half of the audience left. Obviously, they were going to the cinema gate to see Ian McKellen. Seeing the audience leaving to see him, I decided to join in the fun. [...] I was there for a little while, and then I sensed that he wouldn't go this way. Pan (32, male)

I will just go there with an attitude of joining the fun. I cannot afford to miss the opportunity. After all, it's impossible for me to see those stars many times in my life. [...] I would see the person in real life, flesh and blood. This is different from what we see on the television. Normally we have television or computer screens separating us from the real, and they cannot be 100% authentic. This cannot give me the feeling that I am there. Lei (27, male)

As Pan puts it, he *joins in the fun* to see the real. Lei, some respondents and festival-goers on site also confess to the same incentive. Noticeably, from the interview, Lei regards seeing the real as a rare chance that may enrich his life experience. He also comments on the difference of seeing people on screen and seeing people in real life. For him, mediated representations suffer from a barrier to reaching audiences, as screens *separate* people on screen and audience. His comment of *cannot be 100% authentic* can be explained by what Reijnders et al. (2014) have identified, that recognizing the difference between the singer on screen and the singer in real life is more about an emotional reflection on the distance than a cognitive comparison.

On occasion, a rare chance may be even regarded as a once-in-a-lifetime chance, especially for fan-celebrity encounters or seeing international film industry professionals in person. During the pre-screening red carpet moment of a Japanese popular band, the leading singer was welcomed by lots of fans. As Dai recalls:

I think those who were there for the red carpet were more or less fans, or they liked the singer. Even though it was just for one minute, which could have been

the only chance to see Yosiki. So it was worthwhile, no matter how fleeting it was, just to see him in real life. Dai (23, female)

Dai notes that most people haven't seen this singer in real life except in vocal concerts. What she implies is that, even though a concert is not mediated, it is a different situation involving a stage where the singer performs; it is therefore not the same as the real him. For her, directors, actors and actresses who give talks on stage during a film festival are more real.

A few more respondents mention that they would like to see and listen to European, American, Japanese and Korean film industry professionals in particular, or give priority to those talks. In fact, as respondents named the talks they had been, we found out that all respondents had attended talks by international film industry professionals. This choice of respondents is partly related to the premise of SIFF. People consider it as the very opportunity to see and listen to international film industry professionals, while there are indeed other occasions to see domestic ones in person.

Another motivation mentioned by Lei during the interview is *showing off* in social media. Other respondents did not explicitly say such a motivation, for the reason that they did not see it as a main motivation. However, during the on-site fieldwork we noticed that most people were busy taking photos, and film festival-goers were constantly posting photos in social media groups. Such behaviour seems to suggest that the motivation stated by Lei is more widespread among festival-goers. People are more likely to share special moments in social media instead of mundane occasions. In the study of meet-and-greets with Dutch singer Marco Borsato, Reijnders et al. (2014) identifies meet-and-greets as status symbols within the fan hierarchy because the participating fans experience a sense of exclusivity that other fans envy. In this sense, the motivation of *showing off* is similar. Even among the general public (instead of the fan community) such significance of exclusivity still exists.

When it comes to seeing and listening to film professionals, some respondents have more specific expectations:

If it is a small-scale event, I want to see something different, [...] different from official topics, something off-record, not something he deliberately wants to present, maybe some personal thoughts. Otherwise I don't think there is a big difference. Xiang (20, female)

Deleted scenes are something that I want to hear but no one has talked about. Some scenes which have been cut may be helpful for audience to interpret the film. [...] A directors cut can be very different from a theatrical release of a film. I would be most interested to know what things a director intended to keep are, and eventually leave out for various reasons. Lei (27, male)

Xiang expects to hear something *off-record*, and suggests that, without such special content, it may be the same as watching interviews in the media. She does not comment on seeing

the real, but expects something more than appearance, such as behind-the-scenes facts and ideas. Lei, who claims to *join in the fun* and *show off*, in fact, does have more specific expectations. What he says is indeed an example of something off-record, which is not likely to be shown in the media.

Since some respondents express expectations such as hearing off-record stories and showing off, while others are not straightforward about those motivations, it would be flawed to assume that all audiences just want to *join in the fun*. Instead, even though the general audience may not be familiar with the works as much or as enthusiastically as fans, it does not necessarily mean that they are there only for sightings.

### **Distance and Justification**

Half an hour before a screening, crowds had been waiting for the film professionals in the cinema hall. They stood along two sides of the red carpet, behind red rope stanchions, and queued all the way to the second floor on stairs where people could look down the hall. People chatted with each other, with mobile phones in hands. Each time anyone entered the cinema gate, crowds became a little bit more anxious. As the celebrity actor and famous director finally arrived, crowds cheered, screamed, and rushed forward. Security guards got busy, keeping crowds at the right place. When the audience was finally seated in the auditorium, security guards placed red rope stanchions at the first row to prevent the audience from getting too close to the stage. Moreover, people in the audience took pictures of film industry professionals on stage even as many came to the front row, standing on tiptoes (fieldnotes). Two respondents talked about this event in the following way:

The leading actor just turned up for a little while. In my impression, if you really care about the movie, you would at least sit down in front of the big screen and watch it till the end, and chat with us. But the production team and the actor were only there for a short while. They took a photo with the poster and the actor then left, surrounded by security guards. Most discussions always ended up that way. Ke (28, female)

The production team entered the Shanghai Film Art Centre, signed autographs on the autograph board, and posed for a photo. They must have been in a hurry because the audience in the auditorium still expected their pre-screening talk. [...] No one sought the celebrity's autograph because there were security guards all around. About 10 security guards surrounded them. Jun (23, male)

What Ke and Jun recall are typical scenarios of red carpet moments and talks, especially when there are famous directors or actors. They are not the only two respondents who notice the distance between the professionals and the audience. One may argue that turning up for a little while and then being surrounded by security guards are necessary or arranged by the organiser, yet such arrangements are also symbolic in the way of organising

and meeting the film industry professionals' session. Details like these build up the symbolic boundary between the media people and the audience. Meanwhile, apart from seemingly objective factors, there are factors from celebrities' side:

Although he is very approachable, he is not a person that you can be in close proximity to, unlike directors. Many directors would have photos with us and chat for a while, and maybe after the talks, they would talk to their friends, standing just beside you. [...] While a celebrity pays attention to the physical distance. Except the fact that you can indeed see the real, a sense of distance is always present. [...] He wouldn't sit in the first row and watch the movie together with you. [...] In fact, he doesn't dare to get closer to audience. Weibiao (26, male)

Weibiao comments on the phenomenon that celebrities are deliberately keeping a distance, while directors tend to be close to the audience and chat for a while. What Weibiao notices and talks about in particular is not when a celebrity meets the audience or the fans, but rather, when the celebrity is not communicating with the audience, for example when a celebrity is comfortable with ignoring the audience around him/her. He makes a comparison between celebrities and directors, to explain the things that directors would do but celebrities would not. Later, he adds that if the popularity of celebrities exists, celebrities have to keep a distance from audience for safety reasons.

In fact, all respondents experience a distance between the film industry professionals and the audience. They do not protest at this, but come up with seemingly logical arguments as to why this distance is needed sometimes:

Because a talk is just 20 minutes. They are on stage and the audience are in the auditorium. It is very hard to deepen understandings. Jia (33, male)

Someone took a photo of the celebrity actor, with us in the background while he was on stage and audience was below. But it was very close, maybe just about one meter or so. So you can think it as a photo together. It should be very close in the photo. Xiaoshen (35, male)

In such a situation, a conversation is relatively public. Even if I get a chance to ask something, he will still give an answer to all the audience. It wouldn't be like a conversation as you and me are having now. Wen (31, female)

The distance is inevitable. Because every day we face different things. As a result, we have different ideas and thoughts. Although the famous actor is standing on stage, we have nothing in common. Jun (23, male)

The quotes above are representative of what many respondents experience: a clear gap between them and the film professionals. This gap is explained away by practical arguments, such as the physical distance of film professionals being on stage and the audience being in the auditorium; time limit and restrictions of public talks; the rigid structure of prepared talks that makes it difficult for more interaction; and different life backgrounds.

However, talks seem to be relatively more effective in creating approachability when delivered by international film industry professionals:

Famous actors and actresses seemed to be more approachable. For example, she (Meg Ryan) just appeared and greeted us, without an introduction by the host, when we weren't ready for it yet. Then the host explained to her, and started again. But that talk became lively. [...] Ian McKellen seemed also very approachable. He had a lot to tell. If the staff at the British Council didn't stop him, he would have continued sharing his stories. Lei (27, male)

I was standing quite close to him (Ian McKellen). He might not see me. I just waved to him, unconsciously, for I suddenly saw someone I know. [...] He's very kind. There were other audience waving. As he got on the elevator, he didn't forget to turn around and wave to everyone. Jun (23, male)

These details mentioned by the respondents result in approachable images of film industry professionals and celebrities. What the celebrity wears, the way he or she greets the audience, the content of their talks, their willingness to sit together with the audience and to spend extra time with them can all make strong impressions of approachability on film festival-goers.

Behind these reasonable explanations, are there any other factors for such approachability? Noticeably, previous impressions and expectations play an important role in the respondents' experiences. As respondents expect the glamor of international stars, when international stars appear casually during talks and respondents compare what they see in the cinemas with what they have seen on television, respondents are likely to find these stars approachable:

I was really excited, while others were not extremely enthusiastic as I expected. He (Bradley Cooper) is such a superstar in Hollywood. I was wondering whether he would think that he was not very famous in China. Because my impressions from the media that at red-carpet moments of other film festivals, people would scream until they cannot make a sound anymore. [...] He was there as a producer dressed casually. During the talk, he told us his thoughts about the film. Weibiao (26, male)

Through media representations of red-carpet moments at film festivals, Weibiao is informed of how glamorous Hollywood movie stars should be. On the contrary, without previous impressions of media representations of his red-carpet moments, other respondents who attended this talk found it particularly popular already. Therefore, how festival-goers experience the approachability of international film industry professionals can be influenced by impressions of those professionals' popularity from the media.

Apart from justifying the distance and commenting on approachability, several respondents also offer ideas about how to bring film industry professionals closer to the audience, proposing solutions to the limitations previously mentioned. Firstly, with regard to diminishing the physical distance, a few respondents give suggestions:

There could be a session in which the host randomly invites lucky audience members to get on stage to interact with directors. Haiyun (20, female)

There is a distance, of course. But attending film festivals like this, the distance has already been reduced. For example, during a particular screening, the film's director watched the film in the auditorium with us, from the beginning to the end. Dai (23, female)

Maybe the director could ask fans to get on stage and interact, for example directing the fans to do some movements (as if he or she were directing actors). Jia (33, male)

Haiyun imagines a session in which lucky audience members are invited onto the stage to either shake hands or interact with directors. She proposes the idea of a raffle to offer certain audience members this privilege. Both Haiyun and Jia put forward the possibilities of directors and audience members being on stage together. From their perspective, the precise positions for everyone participating in the media ritual matter because it makes face-to-face interaction possible. Instead of having conversations, Jia imagines fans to be on stage and experience what it is like to be actors with the directors' instructions. For Dai, going to film festivals like SIFF brings her to closest to film industry professionals.

Dai suggests that the audience and the director should watch the film together, off stage. The experience of watching the director's work, with the director present, could possibly transform festivalgoers in the auditorium into reviewers or beta viewers with the directors' invitation—certainly a more exclusive experience than that provided to the usual audience. Either being on stage together or in the auditorium together implies not only a change of position, but also a temporary illusion of changing roles (or at least equilibrium) so that festival-goers can experience what it is like to work in the film industry. This temporary illusion of changing roles is also being applied to the film industry professionals:

People on stage can ask the audience questions, too. This would be a nice interaction. For example, ask the audience why they have come to watch this movie, or what kinds of movies they would like to see me play in, etc. It doesn't need to be specific, just something broad. Bing (30, male)

I want to hear their sharing about personal experiences beyond their roles (as actors or directors). Xiaoshen (35, male)

I would probably ask about his life. I guess a director has already gotten tired of all those questions about films. I would ask, for example, how old is your child, where does the kid attend school, and things like these. That would be interesting. Pan (32, male)

What these respondents say can be viewed as a change of film professionals' roles. According to Bing's suggestion, film professionals on the stage give the audience opportunities to express their thoughts, and thus it becomes interactive, even if such interactions would not take long. Xiaoshen and Pan imply dual identities of film industry professionals – one public and one private. For them as well as many other respondents, film industry professionals (especially celebrities) appear at film festivals as public figures. In the roles of film industry professionals, what they say and express are stereotyped. Following what Xiaoshen says about sharing *personal* stories *beyond their roles*, Pan gives examples of questions he would ask, such as the age of his kid and his kids' experiences at school. These conversations are not only *off-record*, but also mimic personal interactions between friends in daily life.

The wish to hear things *beyond their roles* implies that respondents are aware of the distinction between private and public selves, particularly for film professionals. Thus, if an industry professional could say something else beyond his or her position as a film professional or celebrity, such as sharing personal experiences, it would be a significant difference and might increase their perceived authenticity.

### **Agency and Specificity**

As respondents reflect on their experiences of seeing film professionals and listening to their talks, on occasion, the experience can be impressive and positive:

By attending talks and meetings, we tend to judge whether an actor or actress has a high quality and heartfelt passion for art, and whether he or she treats the audience as friends. [...] My impressions of some actors have changed a lot after I attended their talks. Some are so nice, and I would support them even if I don't care much about certain films. [...] Nowadays it is easy to badmouth a person online. If an actor has a good reputation among the audience, this is an advantage. Lei (27, male)

Having attended many talks at film festivals and roadshows, Lei is now familiar with many celebrities and famous directors. During the interview, he uses their first names plus elder brother or elder sister whenever he refers to the actors and actresses he has met in person (which is a way to call friends of different ages, often used by the more expressive young generation, and in this case, the typical fan wording to show friendship or proximity with public figures they admire in Chinese culture). He gives examples that he was moved by how the celebrities enthusiastically interacted with the audience, shook his hand and agreed to take photos together until he got a perfect picture. From the quote above, he also posits the idea that, from a celebrity's standpoint, it would be beneficial to win more fans (thereby implying displays of enthusiasm as productive and beneficial). At the same time, he notes the tendency to judge film professionals, revealing the role of agency.

A certain level of agency is even more evident, when some respondents explain the preference of having a distance instead of justifying the distance:

I wouldn't buy tickets specifically for talks, for example, during film premieres. I don't want to see directors or actors in real life. I wouldn't make efforts to do so. Jing (33, female)

I'd rather not to have that proximity. That's because I want to keep a distance from film production teams, especially actors. In this case, my screening experience will not be influenced at all. [...] Perhaps a film is a world. Those people are just part of that world, presenting the story. I just want to experience it as a world. I don't want to separate it and put it into the real world where I am. Fang (age unknown, male)

Jing does not feel the need to seek out opportunities to see film professionals in person. To take it one step further, Fang avoids seeing or hearing too much about film production in the reality, as he wants to separate the media world and the real world. He accepts the public selves of public figures, yet cannot take in much information about their private selves. For him, the private selves of these public figures may diminish the creditability of the media world. Although this is a minor point of view, it provokes thinking about the symbolic boundary between the media world and the real world. The symbolic difference between inside and outside the media is, on the one hand, imposed by the media, to construct and reinforce the symbolic power of the media. On the other hand, the difference is internalised particularly because individuals push the relation with the media in this direction to co-create the media world to immerse in.

The way to experience the media is then decided by individuals. Similar to Fang who has specific ideas about the way he wants to immerse in the media world, several respondents express more admiration for directors for a reason of accessing the media world:

For me, at film festivals, directors are the ones who play leading roles. We are not here to see celebrities. New films are often promoted at roadshows. So people can see celebrities outside film Festivals. For film Festivals, the main focus should be on the interaction with directors, and for many people, the directors are a kind of star. Dai (23, female)

I would attend talks or meet-and-greets with directors only when I regard the directors as celebrities. For example, I have seen his works and find his ideas very interesting. [...] I think meeting directors would be more meaningful, while celebrity watchers may care more about the atmosphere. Xiaoxin (25, male)

If you like particular directors and actors, watching their films is enough. Outside film festivals, almost all events are commercial. [...] But seeing and listening to directors like Emir Kusturica is really a memorable experience. Kusturica's talk was full of wisdom. Lexie (26, female)

For me, a talk or meet-and-greet would be more valuable and create proximity if the celebrity shares the film he produced or directed (if he or she has one). Because when he is there as a producer or director, he would provide his take on this film, and we could obtain important information, rather than seeing his appearance. Weibiao (26, male)

Both Dai and Xiaoxin point out the situation in which directors are stars. Lexie implies that a great director's talk can be exceptionally memorable. It is understandable that many respondents have similar perceptions of directors, since directors, auteurs in particular, are undisputed stars of film festivals throughout film history (Hing-Yuk Wong 2011:8). Weibiao describes a scenario in which a celebrity gives a talk as a director or producer instead of as an actor. For him, a director or producer can provide important information beyond his appearance, which is, in a similar vein, *more meaningful* as Xiaoxin sees it, or *full of wisdom* as Lexie recalls. Separating famous directors from celebrity actors, the respondents imply that directors are the ones who can better guide them into the undiscovered media world.

Not only do respondents articulate their preference for film industry professionals to celebrities, but also exclude some types of activities. When trying to create proximity, giving autographs and taking photos are favored by very few respondents. Instead, many respondents prefer a conversational format:

I think a chat would certainly be better. Taking pictures itself is a thing with a strong sense of ritual. But a chat can really involve communication, which would be obviously different. For example, we can chat about their shooting experiences, or things in Shanghai. Weibiao (26, male)

Seeking photos or autographs is the fans way to express feelings. [...] I don't think the autograph itself means a lot. Talks, at least, guarantee some information, even if someone else asks questions and you don't, and some questions or answers may sound like promotions. Wen (31, female)

Weibiao associates taking pictures with the word 'ritual', and expresses his hope for more content beyond the ritual. Wen describes having a photo or an autograph as one-way expression, with which fans seek *ways to express their feelings*. Like Weibiao, Wen and Pan who would like to ask about one's life, many respondents prefer having conversations with film industry professionals, focusing on the content (and ideally on a small scale), while having autographs and photos can be a form of ritual without special meanings for the general audience. The latter, as ways of making the experience tangible, may be more appreciated by fans. By comparison, film festival-goers pursue experiences beyond superficial ways of seeing film professionals in person:

I saw him (a famous actor) outside a screening room. I didn't feel very close to him, because we didn't say anything to each other. I just saw him for a short moment, and it ended too quickly. [...] During talks, we can at least hear their words. They chat about their ideas, although we sit at a distance. Jun (23, male)

The content of his film is similar to our life experiences. So we have something in common. There is an advantage to having proximity. Jia (33, male)

For Jun, the physical distance is not the sole key for increasing the audience's perception of proximity, although later he does acknowledge that such a brief meeting is *more direct because the person is standing in front of you* and provides more *familiarity*. On the other hand, Jun did not appreciate such a celebrity sighting very much because he could not know what the celebrity would say. Hearing film industry professionals' thoughts and ideas leads to a deeper understanding of them than seeing them in person at short range does. Likewise, watching their works may also have an effect of conversation. This view is shared by several respondents, including Jia who explicitly suggests that a sense of proximity derives from the similarity between the story of the film and audience. Jia takes fictional content or mediated images as a part of perception of film industry professionals. Ideal conversations could be actualised in the form of talks or by exchanging ideas through works.

As we have shown in this section, respondents appreciate gaining insights into the media world from film industry professionals instead of celebrities, preferably by having conversations. It becomes worthwhile to investigate whether these kinds of talks can also arouse their interests in cultures of foreign countries, especially at this cultural event SIFF, in which film festival-goers can see and listen to many international film industry professionals. Regarding this, several respondents express their hesitations:

Attending talks by international production teams probably wouldn't deepen my understanding of another culture. Instead, I would focus on films. If I like a film, I may become more interested in the culture behind this film or the culture of this country. Yet, a film or a talk is not enough. My understanding of a country is based on what I know in daily life. Jia (33, male)

Talks can only deliver opinions of those individuals. I wouldn't become interested in a country just because of seeing and listening to one's talk. But I would be influenced by films, for example, getting to know the culture of an ethnic minority in China. After watching a film with a lot of cultural elements, I would become more interested in the culture of that region. Jun (23, male)

Although Jia and Jun doubt the impact of talks on representing or promoting cultures of foreign countries, they return to state the positive influence and importance of the media world. Staying in China rather than a foreign country, Jia's way of getting to know a foreign country in his daily life is likely to depend on the media or discussions with others. By comparison, Jun mentions an ethnic minority in China which is less represented in the media, and a film at SIFF introduces the culture of that ethnic minority to him. In this sense, several respondents get the impression of being more familiar with certain foreign cultures while being unfamiliar with some other foreign cultures or even certain regions within China. This perception is a further indication of the impact of media content on our imaginations of places.

## **Conclusion**

This article has investigated film festival-goers' motivations and experiences of seeing and listening to film industry professionals at the SIFF, and probed into the meanings attached to these media encounters. Based on in-depth interviews with 16 film festival-goers and participant observation during the festival, several conclusions can be drawn from the analysis.

First, it is clear that there is no single, clear-cut motivation for visiting these kind of film festivals talks. Most respondents interviewed for this study mention several motives for attending, such as joining in the 'fun', watching movies together with producers, hearing people talk about their beloved movies off-record and, last but not least, being close to those people one normally only encounters through the media. In that sense, film festival talks seem to operate as 'Couldrian' media rituals, centred on the symbolical boundary between what is 'inside' and 'outside' the media. Attending the talks offers the potential of temporarily crossing this line and becoming part of the media world.

Second, findings show that there is a gap between expectations and experience, especially where it concerns the hope to get close to the 'media world'. In practice the difference between 'inside' and 'outside' the media remains very much present. However, when experiencing this continued distance, respondents do not show disappointment, but

they actually justify this symbolic boundary or even appreciate having it (notwithstanding their prior intent of wanting to cross the same boundary). Respondents defend the accustomed distance as a preferred comfort zone or mindset for them to appreciate the media world without distractions from the ordinary world or the real world to which they belong themselves.

In his classical work on media rituals, Couldry is highly critical of the symbolic boundary between inside and outside the media, stating that the related 'myth of the mediated centre' is one of the pillars of the (symbolical) power of the media (Couldry 2003). We do not want to ignore the power dynamics inherent to these kind of media rituals, but we do note that most of the respondents interviewed for the current study actually praise the same boundary. Having the idea that the media belong to another world – even the idea that there is actually another world – is something our respondents would not want to let go.

Finally, SIFF goers articulate a categorical difference between famous celebrities from the film industry and film industry professionals working behind the scenes (directors, camera operators, etc.). They mainly hope to gain insights into the media world from these professionals rather than getting close to particular celebrities. They are clear about their preferences for particular types of events and specific ways of interactions. Most respondents prefer having conversations with film industry professionals to having autographs and photos, and appreciate valuable information of the undiscovered media world and those who can guide them to discover. In this respect, they often admire creative professionals such as directors. Such admiration implies a status difference between directors and celebrities, and between the values of professionalism versus status.

Couldry's study of the *Coronation Street* studio is more or less based on a generic quality of media rituals, underlined by the black and white opposition between 'inside' and 'outside' the media. However, in this study, all respondents were very outspoken concerning their preferences: most of them were enthusiastic about seeing and listening to directors. The prestige status of these media people does not depend on their fame, but on other qualities assigned to them, such as their knowledge, creative powers or cultural capital in general. Thus, this study shows how some audiences do not have one single conception of 'the media world' but identify several layers, whereby some layers are assigned more prestige than others. This implies that the boundary between inside and outside the media is – at least in the perception of these audiences – less rigid than sometimes suggested.

This study has shown that by attending screenings and talks at the SIFF, these audiences – who are mostly educated youths – honour work ethic and creativity. In this case, honouring the media is about honouring professionalism. This value of professionalism may also fit in a larger cultural trend of today's China: a need for a national culture that promotes progress (Yu 2015, p. 18-20). In the West, the fame of contemporary celebrities, as the often cited argument suggests, rests overwhelmingly on media coverage of their lifestyle, instead of talent and achievement (Redmond and Holmes 2007, p. 8). Chinese film culture, so we would like to suggest, seems to go into a different direction. Some good-looking and popular

young Chinese actors are slated for their wooden, robotic, ‘emoji acting’. In comparison, the filmmakers are glorified for their ‘hard work’ and ‘creative insights’, personifying the ideology of ‘Created in China’.

### **Biographical notes:**

Min Xu is a PhD candidate at the Erasmus University Rotterdam. Her research interests revolve around empirical studies on ritualised practices in the Chinese film industry. Contact: [xu@eshcc.eur.nl](mailto:xu@eshcc.eur.nl).

Stijn Reijnders is Professor of Cultural Heritage at the Erasmus University Rotterdam. His research focuses on the role and importance of media culture in everyday life. Currently he is supervising several large-scale projects on media tourism, funded by the Dutch Science Foundation as well as the European Research Council. Contact: [reijnders@eshcc.eur.nl](mailto:reijnders@eshcc.eur.nl).

**Funding:** This study was carried out with the financial support of the China Scholarship Council.

### **Acknowledgements:**

The authors would like to express their gratitude towards the Editor Professor Martin Barker, and reviewers Associate Professor Adrian Athique and Associate Professor Marijke de Valck, for their thorough feedback and helpful suggestions.

### **References:**

- Berry, C. (2017). Shanghai and Hong Kong: A Tale of Two Festivals. In Berry, C & Robinson, L, (eds.) *Chinese film festivals: sites of translation*. (pp. 15-33). New York, US: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Berry, C., & Robinson, L. (eds.) (2017). *Chinese film festivals: sites of translation*. New York, US: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bryman, A. (2012). *Social research methods*. Oxford, UK: Oxford university press.
- Couldry, N. (2002). *The Place of Media Power. Pilgrims and Witnesses of the Media Age*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Couldry, N. (2003). *Media rituals: A critical approach*. London, UK: Routledge.
- De Valck, M. (2007). *Film festivals: From European geopolitics to global cinephilia*. Amsterdam, the Netherlands: Amsterdam University Press.
- De Valck, M. (2014). Supporting art cinema at a time of commercialization: Principles and practices, the case of the International Film Festival Rotterdam. *Poetics*, 42, 40-59.
- Dickson, L. A. (2015). ‘Ah! Other Bodies!’: Embodied Spaces, Pleasures and Practices at Glasgow Film Festival. *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies*, 12(1), 703-724.
- Giles, D. (2000). *Illusions of immortality: A psychology of fame and celebrity*. Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Huang, C. (2007). Editorial: From Control to Negotiation – Chinese Media in the 2000s’, *The International Communication Gazette*, 69(5), 402–12.

- Iordanova, D. (2016). The film festival and film culture's transnational essence. In de Valck, M, Kredell, B, & Loist, S, (eds.), *Film Festivals: History, Theory, Method, Practice*. (pp. 34-48). Abingdon, UK: Routledge.
- Kvale, S., & Brinkmann, S. (2009). *InterViews: Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing*. Los Angeles, US: Sage.
- Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. B. (2016). *Designing qualitative research*. Los Angeles, US: Sage.
- Redmond, S., & Holmes, S. (eds.). (2007). *Stardom and celebrity: A reader*. London, UK: Sage.
- Reijnders, S., Spijkers, M., Roeland, J., & Boross, B. (2014). Close encounters: Ritualizing proximity in the age of celebrity. An ethnographic analysis of meet-and-greets with Dutch singer Marco Borsato. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 17(2), 149-169.
- Reijnders, S. (2011). *Places of the imagination: Media, tourism, culture*. England, UK: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd.
- Sparks, C. (2010). China Media Colloquium | China's Media in Comparative Perspective. *International Journal of Communication*, 4, 15.
- Stevens, K. (2016). *Australian Film Festivals: Audience, Place, and Exhibition Culture*. New York, US: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Stringer, J. (2001). Global Cities and the International Film Festival Economy. In M. Shiel & T. Fitzmaurice, (eds.), *Cinema and the City: Film and Urban Societies in a Global Context* (pp. 134-144). Oxford, UK: Blackwell.
- Stringer, J. (2016). Film Festivals in Asia: Notes on History, Geography, and Power from a Distance. In de Valck, M, Kredell, B & Loist, S (eds.), *Film Festivals: History, Theory, Method, Practice*. (pp. 34-48). Abingdon, UK: Routledge.
- Yu, H. (2011). Doing Chinese media studies: A reflection on the field's history and methodology. *Media International Australia*, 138 (1), 66-79.
- Yu, H. (2009). *Media and cultural transformation in China*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.
- Yu, K. (ed.) (2015). *On China's Cultural Transformation*. Brill.

**Note:**

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.siff.com/a/2017-11-15/2175.html>.