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Hong Kong: Hollywood's Chinese Punching Bag

As action directors chase the mainland movie boom, wary Beijing censors tell them to keep the mayhem offshore.

By DAVID WALTER

Hong Kong is bracing for a devastating bout of mayhem and destruction next year at the hands of mammoth robots. The territory will barely have had time to rebuild after being crushed to rubble by giant sea creatures this summer. And as if that wasn't bad enough, last year aliens toppled the territory's iconic Bank of China tower in a cascade of glass and shrapnel.

Fortunately reality has been rather kinder to Hong Kong than Hollywood, despite this week's typhoon. Still, the constant death and destruction visited on the territory in movies such as "Transformers 4," "Pacific Rim" and "Battleship," respectively, raises a question: What has Hong Kong done to earn directors' ire?

Unlike Godzilla's postwar rampages through Tokyo, which served as a dark reflection of Japanese nuclear anxieties, Hong Kong's trials cannot be traced to any open psychic wound. Leveling Hong Kong is simply good business.

It all traces back to China. The mainland is a big prize for the American film industry. Last year China became the world's second-largest movie market by total box office, with overall ticket revenues topping \$2.71 billion. U.S. movies made up 49% of that amount despite a limit of 34 foreign movies a year allowed into the country. Action movies captured 44% of the total 2012 haul.

Accordingly, Hollywood has tried to court mainland audiences by adding Chinese elements to its summer tentpoles. To do so, however, Hollywood must play by the rules of China's strict state censors, who worry that too much carnage on the mainland could discredit the Communist Party.



"If you want to wreak havoc and mayhem, you're always politely—or not so politely—told 'Yeah, go do that in Macau or Hong Kong. Those kinds of things don't happen here, because China's such a perfect Communist utopia,'" says China film consultant Robert Cain.

In June, rumors surfaced online that China-set "Transformers 4," would include the destruction of

victor fraile/Reuters
9 out of 10 killer space aliens prefer the Fragrant Harbor.

such Beijing landmarks as the Bird's Nest Stadium and the Olympic Water Cube. To avert catastrophe—the financial kind—the movie's producers quickly assured Xinhua that the buildings would remain intact.

The stakes are high for the "Transformers" team. China's State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (or Sarft) not only censors foreign films; it also dictates movies' release dates and advertising campaigns. Sarft's displeasure thus comes at a cost.

In 2007, for instance, "The Mummy: Tomb of the Dragon Emperor" had its release date pushed back after Sarft faulted its depiction of "white Westerners saving China," the film's director told the New York Times. The delay allowed pirates to spoil ticket sales by importing the movie from overseas. "Skyfall," the first James Bond movie to film in China, endured similar delays last year until censors cut a scene that showed a French assassin killing a Shanghai security guard.

As a result of these strictures, Chinese cities rarely face the kind of full-scale cinematic assault recently visited on Hong Kong, Moscow and New York in Hollywood movies. (An exception is made for Chinese cities destroyed in political history films—for instance, the Rape of Nanjing in Zhang Yimou's 2011 "The Flowers of War.")

True, Shanghai came in for some damage in 1998's "Armageddon" and 2007's "Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer." But tellingly, neither film won Sarft approval to show in China—a fate that studios are eager to avoid as China's box office booms.

Films that take place in Hong Kong face no such barriers to entry in the Chinese market. In Sarft's eyes, "Hong Kong still has a lot of western and capitalist influence," Mr. Cain says. "Bad things can happen there—crime, corrupt police, guns—that just don't happen in mainland China."

Cosmopolitan, recognizable and mostly (but not entirely) Chinese, the special administrative region is an ideal punching bag for Hollywood film studios trying to balance politics and profit on the mainland. With its bustling harbor and compact skyline, Hong Kong makes for an enticing, permissible target.

Beijing's indifference toward Hong Kong's celluloid destruction is worth a moment's pause for city residents. This is, after all, a Chinese government that regularly takes to the airwaves with promises that the motherland will provide for Hong Kong's defense. What does it say about the true nature of Hong Kong-China relations that Beijing's culture ministry is more concerned with saving a single Shanghai security guard than a city of seven million?

On the other hand, difficult as it may be to watch their city reduced to smithereens, Hong Kongers can take pride in being judged open and self-confident enough to withstand such beatdowns. Milton Friedman famously picked the territory as the setting for the first part of his documentary series "Free to Choose." To that we can now add an action-movie corollary: "free to bruise."

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