

Transnational Filmmaker, Fanboy-Auteur: Screening Nolan's *Inception* in China

Since the release of *Batman Begins* (2005) in China, Christopher Nolan's films have performed increasingly well in the Chinese film market. As the world's fastest growing film market, China has become the primary export destination for Hollywood films. Alongside the rapid development of the Chinese film exhibition industry, Chinese audiences have multiplied and diversified and gaining access to this lucrative market has become imperative for Hollywood films. Hollywood has always been globally-minded and applying transnational filmmaking techniques is one of the ways that Hollywood films seek to ensure their products play internationally. This chapter focuses on *Inception* (2010) as an example of transnational cinema in the Chinese film market and in doing so explores the reasons for Christopher Nolan's success in China. In exploring Nolan's success in China this chapter examines how the director's role as a fanboy-auteur has helped to ingratiate him with Chinese audiences.

Within the field of cinema studies, the definition of transnationalism is a subject of debate¹. Most notably, the term is often used as synonymous with concepts such as globalisation, world cinema, and co-productions or collaborations between two (or more) countries (Higbee and Lim, 2010). Anna Tsing's (2000) work seeks to create a helpful distinction between the globalisation ideology and the transnational as practice by suggesting that globalisation refers to an overarching ideology whereas transnational refers to "transborder projects" which, while operating within the globalised ideology, do not necessarily promote it. I suggest that *Inception* is an example of this kind of transborder project. Ezra and Rowden explain that, in the most basic sense, the transnational can be understood as "global forces that link people or institutions across nations" (2006, 1). Dina Iordanova suggests that transnational cinema is "defined by a growing awareness of

instability and change brought about by incessant journeying and border-crossing” (2007, 509). Iordaniova continues that this mobility is:

compounded by the foregrounding of locations that signify isolation and marginality, or presuppose a context that allows for reflection on fragile, mutating identities; where the meanings of ‘belonging’ and ‘return’ are questioned; where concepts of ‘centre’ and ‘periphery’ are challenged and gradually taken over by lively interactions between peripheries that put the centre in parentheses; and where diasporas-in-the-making, itinerants and travellers subtly problematise hierarchical notions of place.

As this chapter will show, *Inception*’s storytelling exemplifies these motifs and Nolan’s adoption of such themes and strategies positions him as a transnational filmmaker, which in turn helps to account for his success in the Chinese film market.

The dramatic rise, albeit not a steady trajectory, in Chinese box office for Nolan’s films (see Fig. 1) appears to indicate a growing popularity for his films.

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However, it is important to evaluate these figures with respect to the context in which the Chinese film market was undergoing unprecedented change and it is essential to view the performance of Nolan’s films in China within the context of wider industrial developments.

From the start of the 2010s, China underwent a so-called “multiplex boom” in which the number of cinema screens increased ten-fold, overtaking the US as the territory with the largest number of screens in 2016 (Schwankert, 2016). The multiplex boom led to a dramatic increase in access to cinemas and resulted in far larger attendance numbers. It is also important to remember that although China imposes a quota for all imported revenue-sharing foreign films, that quota increased over two decades, doubling from ten to twenty following China’s entry to the World Trade Organisation in 2001 and to thirty-four in 2012. Despite the relative opening of the Chinese market since 1994, foreign films that seek distribution in the

Chinese market are still hampered by import restrictions, as well as obscure censorship practices and a lack of marketing opportunities.² Thus, Nolan's films have been able to enjoy a less hostile market, though not one without its complexities.

Of the eleven feature length fiction films directed by Christopher Nolan, six have received a release in the mainland Chinese market and since 2010, all Nolan's films have been released in China. Once a film is released in China it must, of course, prove popular with the market. However, for a foreign film to secure a release in mainland China it must first navigate a complex web of restrictions and censorship. It is incumbent on a foreign feature to seek to appease and appeal to the Chinese government to play to a Chinese audience making it necessary for filmmakers and studios to consider both the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as well as the Chinese audience to succeed in the Chinese film market. It is therefore the task of a foreign feature to woo not only the audience but the gatekeepers in the CCP also. As such, the fact that every one of Nolan's films since 2010 have secured a release in China speaks to his acceptance—both as a person and in terms of his film style—by Chinese officials.

Since re-allowing foreign films into the Chinese market in 1994, those films released in China have been subject to regulation and censorship by the Chinese government. Censorship rules were first introduced in China in 1928 in response to the overwhelmingly negative portrayals of Chinese people and culture in foreign films. After reopening to foreign films in 1994 censorship was handled by the State Administration of Press and Publication, Radio, Film, and Television (SAPPRFT). Since 2018 censorship of films has been assigned to the China Film Administration, an arm of the Publicity Department of the Chinese Communist Party, which is also known as the Propaganda Department. Censorship of Chinese films has been directly linked to the promotion of political messages in the country's on-going attempt to promote nation-building and, in the second half of the 20th century,

socialist ideology (Xiao, 2013). Censorship happens at two main levels: the censorship board (cutting scenes that are subject to the censorship rules) and self-censorship (i.e. pre-empting the censorship board). This includes ensuring films do not negatively portray Chinese culture and society and do not promote Western models of society that feature individualism (Richeri, 2016). Censorship of films in China is multifaceted; acting as a way of controlling what cinema goers see to incentivise nationalistic sentiment and discourage offensive anti-Chinese themes. The fact that so many of Nolan's films have received theatrical distribution in China reveals Nolan's films do not generally offend or contravene Chinese sensibilities and do not challenge the dominant political ideology in China. Perhaps the only overt example of a Nolan film that did not play in Chinese cinemas was 2008's *The Dark Knight* which not only didn't receive a Chinese release but was not submitted for consideration. It was reported at the time that *The Dark Knight* did not seek theatrical distribution in China due to "pre-release conditions" and "cultural sensitivities" (Steinberg 2008). The cultural sensitivities in the film included scenes filmed in Hong Kong where a money launderer for organised criminals resides, and the brief appearance of Edison Chen, a Hong Kong singer who was embroiled in a scandal involving sexually explicit photographs posted on the internet earlier that year. Chen's scenes had already been reduced in the wake of the scandal, leaving only a brief cameo in the film that was inconsequential to the narrative. The details of these cultural sensitivities speak to the often-apparent contradiction between a film's aim to appease the Chinese censors and its aim to appeal to the Chinese audience.

Nolan's appeal with Chinese audiences can also be attributed to his characterisation as a fanboy-auteur. Building on work about "fanboy-auteurs" and "promoted fans" by Suzanne Scott (2013) and Naja Later (2018), I suggest that Nolan's success can be attributed to his popularity with the lucrative fanboy audience demographic that characterises the Chinese film market. Directors who work on popular Intellectual Properties (IP) can become

considered, what Suzanne Scott calls, “fanboy auteurs” (2013, 441), and are able to create strong positive associations with a very lucrative demographic. This is even more so the case in China where there is a culture of obsessive fandom (Burton-Bradley 2021). Naja Later defines the “promoted fanboy” as “auteurs who are hired to create cinematic or televisual adaptations of beloved texts to which they themselves have professed fannish adoration; thus, they are fans who have been “promoted” to official creator status” (2018, 536). Nolan’s status as a fanboy-auteur in the traditional sense is derived from his association with the Batman franchise which acted as a gateway appeal for Chinese audiences. However, his popularity was made clear when *Inception* made more than seventy times the box office yield of *Batman Begins* (industrial developments notwithstanding). As a science fiction film that was particularly epic in scale and spectacle, *Inception* was able to gauge Nolan’s appeal in China without the reliance on an existing IP. Nolan himself—his auteurist style and his association with the fanboy demographic—became the selling point, as proven by his later successes.

Hollywood in China: Screening *Inception*

During China’s so-called “multiplex boom” in the early 2010s, cinemas were being built across the country at an unprecedented rate and, with increased access, a growing middle class and an influx of capital, China became the fastest growing film market, increasing by more than forty percent every year between 2010 and 2016 (Li 2016). The release of Nolan’s films coincided with and benefitted from the increase in audience and from changing policies—such as China’s increased foreign film quota—that came out of the dramatic developments in the Chinese film market. In 2010 *Inception* became the second of Nolan’s films to be released in China. Not only was *Inception* granted a theatrical release in China, it was also reportedly released completely uncensored (China Daily, 2010).

To understand *Inception*'s success in China it is important to start by acknowledging the role that *Avatar* (Cameron 2009) played in developing the Chinese film exhibition industry and after revealing the potential of the “new” market when it took over double the total box office revenue of any other film ever marketed in China (Rosen 2012). Prior to *Avatar*'s success the Chinese theatrical industry was underdeveloped, and box office figures were comparatively small, with most audience members preferring to watch films on the internet and the cinema being the least likely place they would watch a film (Zhang 2009; Zhou and Song 2008). *Avatar*'s success was unprecedented, but it can be attributed to a number of factors including the film's use of transnational storytelling in its preference for action and spectacle as well as its innovative 3D technology and the fact that it was released on IMAX, factors that offered a persuasive motivation to watch the film at the cinema. *Avatar* also played well to Chinese audiences because of the inclusion of scenes filmed in Zhangjiajie National Park. *Avatar*'s runaway success, which has been discussed in academic work and in the trade press (see Tang 2011; LaFraniere 2010; Rosen, 2012), revealed the market for big budget “enhanced format” films, such as 3D and IMAX, in China. Under the revenue-sharing system for foreign imports, China stood to gain the most by screening enhanced format films, which can be charged at a premium cost per ticket. In 2012, when the quota was increased from twenty to thirty-four, there was a stipulation that the additional fourteen slots be allocated to enhanced format films. This helps to account for why all of Nolan's films since *Inception*, each of which were enhanced format releases, have made it into Chinese cinemas.

As news of the success of *Avatar* in China reverberated around the world, the emerging film market represented an enticing option for Hollywood imports. However, under the revenue-sharing rules of the foreign import quota whereby China receives the lion's share of a film's box office, it was also in the interest of the Chinese government to import and

exploit Hollywood products. Since the re-opening of the Chinese film market in 1994, Hollywood imports have been seen as a solution to the problem of underwhelming box office revenues and when in 1994 the Film Bureau approved a plan to import ten revenue-sharing films per year they specified they wanted to import “blockbusters that had already achieved good box office records overseas” (Su, 2016: 15). In essence, China seeks to achieve the highest possible return on the fewest number of Hollywood imports. When *Avatar* smashed box office records it told the world that Chinese audiences wanted to see spectacle-oriented, enhanced-format, action films. This became a blueprint for future imports and *Inception* fit the bill.

Just as *Avatar*’s use of 3D persuaded Chinese audiences to see the film at the cinema instead of watching via the internet or a bootleg copy, *Inception* was similarly persuasive due to its appeal as an IMAX epic. The spectacular nature of the film was made clear in the film poster (see fig. 2). Interestingly, *Inception* was not actually filmed on IMAX cameras, but instead was filmed predominantly in anamorphic 35mm with “key sequences” in 65mm (Nolan in Weintraub 2010) and then reformatted for IMAX screens. Despite not being filmed with IMAX cameras the film was promoted in China as a film to be experienced on IMAX screens.

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Although *Inception* was not based on a pre-existing IP, Nolan’s popularity in China due to his moderate success with *Batman Begins* and the fact that the film had already done well at the global box office made it a potentially lucrative option for importation. That *Inception* was reportedly released uncensored was likely less to do with Nolan’s popularity and more to do with the convoluted plot and the lack of any obvious taboos. The fact that the film remained “intact” provided another incentive to see it at the cinema, where the censoring of

films often acts as a deterrent when uncensored versions are available in other forms.

Although the film's reported uncensored release suggests an approval of Nolan and of the film, it was still subject to the Chinese protectionist tactics that are designed to safeguard the domestic market; *Inception* was released during a notoriously quiet period at the box office in China⁴, and there was a long piracy window as China was the last country to exhibit the film. Nevertheless, the film was a resounding success, achieving the fourth biggest opening by a foreign film at that time, behind *Avatar* (2009), *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen* (2009) and *Transformers* (2007) respectively (The Independent 2010)—all enhanced format films. In addition, these films also employ a transnational, spectacle-oriented storytelling style, which was a key to *Inception's*—and more broadly, Nolan's—success in the Chinese market.

Transnational Storytelling in *Inception*

One of the reasons that Nolan's films have done so well in the Chinese market is due to his employment of universal themes and transnational spectacle-based storytelling. In their work on transnational cinema, Higbee and Lim suggest that the term 'transnational' is taken "as shorthand for an international or supranational mode of film production whose impact and reach lies beyond the bounds of the national" (2010, 9). The authors argue that the term "transnational" is often used to describe international co-productions or global workforce collaborations irrespective of "aesthetic, political or economic implications of such transnational collaboration might mean" (Higbee and Lim 2010, 10). As noted by Geoff King (2000, 9) it is necessary for films to consider the interests and concerns of potential audiences across the globe, especially in key markets, in order to achieve commercial success in the global marketplace. Moreover, King explains that "cultural resonances that might tap into the concerns of potential moviegoers are taken explicitly into account by market researchers" and feed directly into marketing and publicity campaigns (King, 2000, 9). Universality, then, is key to the global appeal of Hollywood films and it is therefore the goal of Hollywood studios

to make films that are not designed for any one market but instead navigate the cultural dimensions of globalisation in order to produce products that are culturally malleable and appeal to a “universal audience.” Part of this challenge lies in finding themes that are not culturally specific to any one market. One way of achieving this is to adhere to familiar narrative archetypes such as Joseph Campbell’s (1968) “hero’s journey” or Christopher Booker’s (2004) seven basic plots and by avoiding ideological bias. Nolan's films are typically thematically existential, philosophical, and cerebral, and focus on concepts of time, identity, and consciousness and *Inception* is no different. Each of these could be considered “universal themes” that one could say are part of every human experience. Nolan is a vocal advocate of filming on celluloid and is a passionate and adamant cinephile, actively promoting the cinematic experience. It is no surprise, then, that Nolan’s films are so grand in scale and are designed to be seen on the big screen: his association with IMAX is testament to this. As a proponent of filming on IMAX, Nolan once stated “I think IMAX is the best film format that was ever invented. It’s the gold standard and what any other technology has to match up to, but none have, in my opinion” (Nolan quoted in Ressler 2012). In this way, Nolan’s universal themes and his promotion of the cinematic experience lend themselves well to the market tastes of the Chinese audience.

Nolan’s films are often non-linear or feature embedded narratives, which are complex narrative forms that require a level of thinking and intelligence that is not traditionally required of typical blockbuster viewing. Nolan has made a point of not “dumbing down” his films for audiences. In a preview for *The Dark Knight Rises* when audience members found the character Bane’s voice to be unintelligible, Nolan begrudgingly agreed to make only minor changes, rather than completely remixing the sound, as requested by the studio (Martin 2011). Nolan’s seeming indifference at times to bend to the whims or requests of the studio or even the audience serve to perpetuate his brand as a controversial and autonomous *auteur*.

Since *Batman Begins*, all of Nolan's films have been heavily focused on action sequences and visual spectacles. Indeed, he has spoken about how his films are just as reliant on the visuals as the dialogue (Kit, 2011a) stating that it is "OK for a moviegoer not to understand what was said at times, as long as the overall idea was conveyed" (Kit 2011b). Thus, Nolan balances the narrative complexity of his using the universal language of action and spectacle.

Unquestionably complex and cerebral, *Inception*'s plot was difficult to sell to prospective audiences. According to reports in China, Nolan assured Chinese audiences of *Inception*'s universal appeal in the lead up to the film's release, even suggesting they not try to follow the plot too closely, advising; "Do not feel you have to understand every aspect of it, it is intended as entertainment, and I hope you will enjoy the entertainment. . . . There is no test afterwards" (Nolan in *China Daily*, 2010). According to the article by *China Daily* (2010) Nolan suggested "Chinese audiences should just sit back and enjoy the ride, rather than get too involved in the complex plot." In fact, in recent years Chinese audiences responded favourably to Hollywood films that are accused of narrative incoherence, such as the *Transformers* films, suggesting that at times not understanding the dialogue may be of benefit to the overall experience. Thematically *Inception* delves into concepts of reality, of dreams and of the subconscious itself, all of which are explored in apolitical ways that seek rather to question than to answer.

Inception employed several transnational cinema techniques that helped to appeal to Chinese audiences including its international setting and its multinational casting. The film was shot in Japan, France, Morocco, and Canada as well as the UK and the US, meaning the shoot itself was an international undertaking. The action takes place across numerous national borders, as well as some imagined spaces (in dreams); there is no "homeland" in *Inception*; no specified country in which the film takes place. Dina Iordanova states in her work on transnational cinema that, in more recent years, "transnational cinema has yielded works that

foreground questions of place and passage and explore diasporic life” (2007, 509). This is very much the case in *Inception* where the main characters live or work in countries that are not their native home. Ezra and Rowden posit that in transnational cinema “identities are necessarily deconstructed and reconstructed along the lines of a powering dynamic based on mobility” (2006, 8). The goal of the lead protagonist, Dominick Cobb (Leonardo DiCaprio) is to find a way to return to his native country—the US—where he has been wrongly accused of murdering his wife and is therefore exiled. In his fugitive state, Cobb is “stateless”; travelling the globe in an attempt to ultimately find a way back home.

Cobb’s attempts to make his way home exemplify the diasporic imagination of transnational cinema, where “a psychological investment in mobility is usually counteracted by the emotional construction of a homeland, which provides a foundational narrative of departure and a validating promise of return” (Ezra and Rowden 2006, 7). The underlying plot of *Inception* thus exemplifies the “new, culturally significant space” that is made possible through the endeavours of transnational cinema; a space that “allows the members of the growing community of global migrants to overcome the brand-mark ethos of lost homelands and experience a meaningful and coherent existence, one in which place is perpetually transformed by movement” (Iordanova 2007, 509).

By not centring the film in the US, and by filming and locating it in numerous countries, *Inception* positions itself as a product of transnational cinema. The ensemble cast play characters from numerous countries including Japanese, French, Kenyan, British, and American. The casting of Ken Watanabe was a particularly strong selling point for Eastern Asian audiences as was the casting of Leonardo DiCaprio. DiCaprio already had a sizable fanbase in China following the immense success of *Titanic* (1998). As such, *Inception* contained several elements that help to produce success in the Chinese film market. Indeed, so successful was it that it received a Douban rating of 9.3 (Douban 2021b) out of over 1.7

million ratings and is the highest ranked of all of Nolan's films on the Douban "top 250" list⁵ (Douban 2021a). As China lacks a formal open system of professional film criticism (Wang 2011), opinions about films are restricted to online forums. Sites like Douban provide a platform for Chinese fans and intellectuals to talk about films; to offer critique or post a score on a review aggregator similar to IMDb and Rotten Tomatoes (Brzeski 2016).

Importantly, *Inception*'s transnational strategy was implicit, rather than explicit, and the film did not appear to overtly cater to Chinese audiences. Following the push within Hollywood to appeal to Chinese audiences in recent years, academics and the trade press have repeatedly accused Hollywood of "pandering" to Chinese audiences⁶. This type of transnational pandering is evidenced in three key areas: content, release dates and marketing techniques. The techniques used to appeal to Chinese audiences and investors are exemplified by the inclusion of "special" references, techniques, and considerations that are specifically included (or excluded) to appeal to Chinese audiences, censors, and financiers.

Considerations of the Chinese film market influences Hollywood film content in three key ways; in the use of transnational storytelling, which simplifies cultural differences and blends cultures and nations) (with emphasis on visual effects (VFX) in the incorporation of Chinese elements (this includes casting, locations, brands and culture), and in the avoidance of taboo subjects in efforts to pass the Chinese censorship process. Critics suggest that, in trying too hard to create content that will play in the Chinese film market, Hollywood has forfeited its identity (Robinson 2016). However, Hollywood has been operating on a transcultural "universal" storytelling model for as long as it has existed. The issue appears to lie with the very recent trend of including Chinese elements in films, as typified by the inclusion of Chinese locations and Chinese characters, as well as the drive towards films that are so focused on the "universal" language of spectacle that they lack complexity and narrative

drive. *Inception*, however, does not forcibly include Chinese elements, and although spectacle-oriented, is very much driven by a substantive plot.

Nolan as Transnational Fanboy-Auteur

Inception's success in China is indicative of both Nolan's popularity and the wider relationship between China and Hollywood. Perhaps most resoundingly, it is evidence of the successful branding of Nolan himself. Nolan's success in the Chinese market demonstrates his appeal with the most populous audience demographic in the territory: young males. Nolan's early success was made possible in large part because of his association with the *Batman* franchise. *Batman* is particularly popular with young males and so-called "fanboys." The term fanboy is used to describe a male fan who is obsessed with a particular IP. IP is a category of property that is made up of intangible, intellectual works that include literary and artistic works, as well as copyrights, patents, and trademarks. IP is intrinsically linked with film franchises which are usually built around pre-sold properties; existing artworks that already have an audience. Films based on existing IP have been an integral part of the Chinese and Hollywood film industries for years (Chen 2016) and since the turn of the 21st century this is even more so the case. Ben Fritz suggests that audiences have now switched loyalty from stars to franchises, noting that, "moviegoers looking for the consistent, predictable satisfaction they used to get from their favourite stars now turn to cinematic universes" (2018, 85). Fritz explains that studios began to focus on the types of films "that delivered the biggest and most consistent profits to their publicly traded parent corporations" (2018, 22), which increasingly meant films that appealed to audiences overseas, particularly China, and that can "guarantee"—as best as possible—an audience, such as in the case of films based on existing IP.

Cinema's fanboys are generally interested in films that are adaptations or part of a long-standing franchise. The fanboy demographic has a disposable income and represents a hugely lucrative sector of the market: a pre-existing fan. According to market research, the Chinese film market is increasingly made up of younger audience members in the 19-24 and 25-29 age groups (Statista 2021) owing to the increasing population and the burgeoning middle class. Factoring in the ramifications of China's one-child policy and the country's gender imbalance it makes sense that for years films in the Chinese market were aimed at men. This is no longer the case as the gender imbalance has decreased and is now more evenly split (Maoyan Entertainment 2021). However, it remains the case that Chinese audiences consistently prefer the genres of action, comedy and sci-fi and are especially interested in superhero films and—more generally—films that are based on an existing IP. With *Batman Begins* being Nolan's first theatrical release in the Chinese market, and likely many Chinese audience members' first interaction with one of his films, Nolan benefitted from *Batman*'s built-in fan-base, and was able to reach a far wider audience.

Thanks largely to the internet, IPs are now able to reach audiences in the farthest reaches of the globe. Take for example the *Doctor Who* fiftieth anniversary special which was simultaneously broadcast in ninety-four countries (Booth 2013). The global appeal of intellectual properties such as *Doctor Who*, *Sherlock Holmes*, *Batman*, *Superman*, *Star Trek*, *Harry Potter*, *Star Wars*, and many more, is made possible by the technologies and media consumption habits of the digital age. Furthermore, the internet has enabled and extended the concept of “intermediality”, that is, the interconnectedness or intersectionality between different media. As noted by Nicolle Lamerichs “the Internet has increased the visibility of fan practices and the number of people who actively engage in them” (2018, 14). In this way, the internet enables the flow of transnational cinema by permeating and “dissolving” national borders. The internet allows fans across the globe to connect, creating a global community

that is based on fandom rather than geographical bounds or social setting. Fans—and for our purposes, fanboys—are not restricted geographically, culturally or socially from engaging in global intellectual properties. Thus, fanboys are an inherently transnational audience demographic.

Another theme of the fanboy-auteur is the notion of authenticity and autonomy. Nolan's auteurist style is synonymous with impressive visuals and soundscapes, his work is known for choosing practical effects over visual effects, and his films are extraordinary in their scale; from mathematical manipulations of space in *Inception* to the complex visualisation of the space/time continuum in *Interstellar*. In the lead-up to the release of *Inception* Sue Kroll, the president of worldwide marketing for Warner Bros., noted the power of Nolan's brand and how important the director's reputation was in selling an otherwise difficult film to market due to its convoluted plot. If Nolan's brand is taken as his role as a fanboy-auteur and his association with universal themes, spectacle-oriented storytelling and enhanced format big-screen-epics, the success of *Inception* in China is testament to the Chinese film market preferences. Authenticity has become an important topic for debate in recent years.⁷ Nolan's presumed and promoted authenticity, such as is characteristic of the fanboy-auteur, helps to ensure his auteurist legitimacy. There are numerous rumours and reports of Nolan's purported freedom from studio control (*Interstellar's* sound mix, *Tenet's* untenable plot, *Dunkirk's* distinct lack of dialogue, to name a few) which serves to brand Nolan as an unwavering creative. *Inception's* success proves that Nolan's branding as an autonomous fanboy-auteur and a purveyor of big screen epics had succeeded in persuading Chinese audiences that Nolan films are worth seeing and worth seeing on the big screen, which paved the way for his future success in the territory.

Conclusion

Inception presents an apt case study of a Nolan film that succeeded in China on multiple levels: success in achieving distribution in China, in passing censors unscathed, in achieving success at the box office and in realizing success in popular opinion. Part of this success of course is down to the backdrop of the developing Chinese theatrical market; the increased access to cinemas afforded by the multiplex boom. Thus, *Inception*'s route to the Chinese market and the way in which the film was received, exemplifies the complex relationship between Hollywood films and Chinese audiences. This chapter has argued that it was Nolan's use of transnational cinema techniques and his position as a fanboy-auteur that ensured the success of *Inception* and indeed his films that followed. Since *Inception*, every feature film directed by Nolan has received a Chinese release, which is a distinction afforded to very few foreign filmmakers. Nolan's success in getting his films into China and his financial triumphs at the Chinese box office suggest that he has successfully wooed the Chinese audience as well as its gatekeepers. The popularity of his films adds to our understanding of the Chinese film market as well as our understanding of transnational cinema and of the powerful and lucrative credentials of a fanboy-auteur. Nolan's use of spectacle-oriented storytelling, his preference for the action, superhero and science fiction genres and his affiliation with a beloved IP inform the Nolan brand which, whether by chance or design, is particularly well suited to Chinese market tastes.

Nolan's success in China offers insight into Chinese audience tastes, proving that spectacle-oriented "fanboy fare" is popular. All of Nolan's films—including those that did not have a theatrical release in China—have a rating on China's equivalent of IMDb, Douban (Douban, 2021a). This suggests that, despite not being released in China through official avenues, the films have been seen via other means. In fact, of the five Nolan films that did *not* receive distribution in China, three are ranked in Douban's "top 250" highest ranked films (as of the time of writing *The Dark Knight* is ranked 28th, *The Prestige* is 77th and

Memento is 173rd) (Douban 2021a), proving not only that Nolan's films are popular, but that Chinese audiences have found ways of engaging with his work even when it is denied a theatrical release. Out of Nolan's films, *Inception* still holds the highest spot on Douban's "top 250" list (positioned 9th) demonstrating the transnational appeal of the film—and the director—with Chinese audiences.

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¹ See for example, Higbee and Lim, 2010 and Berry, 2010.

² Foreign film studios notoriously receive short notice of a theatrical release in China, or when that release will be. Traditional print and advertising marketing avenues historically have not existed in China where advertising is closely monitored and controlled by the CCP (Gao 2007).

³ Warner Bros., Formal Poster Mainland China, 2010, image, 6183x8835, Douban.com, Online, <https://movie.douban.com/photos/photo/616776018/>.

⁴ The first weekend of September is known to be quiet due to students returning to school (The Independent, 2010).

⁵ *Inception* is ranked 9th at the time of writing.

⁶ See for example Song 2018, Swanson 2015, Rosen 2015, Zhu 2014, Qin 2017.

⁷ See for example Song 2018, Swanson 2015, Rosen 2015, Zhu 2014, Qin 2017.