

## Breaking the Distance: Asian Films, U.S. Critics, and Comparison Strategies\*

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*This study explores several factors affecting three different types of comparison strategies used by U.S. critics in their reviews of Asian films: U.S. comparison (comparing to U.S. counterparts), foreign comparison (comparing to counterparts from countries other than the U.S. and the focal Asian country that is compared), and home comparison (comparing to counterparts from the same country). Using 288 Asian film reviews, this paper reveals that critics tend to draw U.S. comparisons for films in culture-neutral and multiple genres that have been recently released in the U.S. In addition, this study reveals that critics use home comparison strategy more often than foreign comparison strategy on a large pool of prior home films in the U.S., while home comparison strategy is used more often on recently released films in the U.S. This suggests that critics' comparison strategies are mainly influenced by such factors as genre, multiplicity of genres, prior release of home films in the U.S., and recency.*

**Keywords:** Asian Films, U.S. Critics, Cultural Distance, Comparison Strategies

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## Introduction

Many studies in economic and cultural sociology have highlighted critics as a major influence in the field of cultural products (Baumann 2001, 2002; Boatwright, Basuroy, and Kamakura 2007; Caves 2000; Griswold 1987; Hirsch 1972; Levy 1979; Shrum 1991, 1996; Sochay 1994; Hsu 2006a, 2006b; White and White 1992). In particular, a growing body of researchers has examined the process in which film critics affect other market actors. Films are cultural products with a high level of uncertainty about their quality in the market context (White 2001), so audiences tend to rely on film critics to reduce their uncertainty about a film before deciding to consume it (Podolny and Hsu 2002).

For example, Shrum (1991) and Baumann (2002) claim that film critics, as cultural mediators, potentially influence the perception and behavior of other market actors such as audiences and distributors, and they also participate in the formation of cultural hierarchy through the critical discussion process. Hsu (2006a) and Hsu and Podolny (2005) argue that the primary goal of film critics is to establish the standards for other market actors who try to assess the value of film products. More specifically, studies conducted by Sochay (1994) and Boatwright et al. (2007) show that critics' favorable reviews positively influence the box-office performance of films. Allen and Lincoln (2004) find that the retrospective consecration of American films is affected by the discourse produced by film critics. As shown in the literature mentioned above, film critics serve as key players in the film market, providing audiences with general information about a film (e.g., characters and plot) and the criteria for evaluating the quality of the film in question.

Despite abundant research on the role of film critics as influencers or mediators, however, much less attention has been paid to the way in which film critics guide audiences to a better understanding of foreign films. In particular, most studies on the role of critics in the film market have been limited to studies on U.S. films. It is easy to hypothesize that foreign films offer greater uncertainty to the U.S. audiences than domestic films due to language barriers and cultural unfamiliarity. Thus, it would be interesting to examine the unique ways by which critics attempt to introduce foreign films to the U.S. market and influence U.S. audiences' understanding of foreign films.

While the role of film critics including that of film guides and evaluators

can vary depending on the interests and needs of the primary audience (Hsu and Podolny 2005), this study limits its focus to the guiding role of film critics by investigating the ways in which they enhance the general U.S. audiences' comprehension of Asian films. More specifically, we are interested in the "comparison strategies"—comparing a foreign film to other domestic and foreign films released to the market in the past—that film critics employ in their reviews to help audiences improve their understanding of Asian films. Towards this end, the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* reviews of Asian films released in the United States over the 1985-2006 period are used. This article explores product and market-related factors that lead to different types of comparison strategies film critics employ in their reviews through content analysis combined with the logistic regression method. More specifically, we suggest that critics' comparison strategies are mainly influenced by the factors that reflect the identity of a film and its cultural and historical background: genre, multiplicity of genres, prior release of home films in the U.S., and recency.

## Asian Films in the United States: A Brief History

In recent years, the presence of Asian films in the United States has dramatically increased (cf. Sklar 1994, 2002; Su, Kim, and Hong 2007). This phenomenon, which the media sometimes exaggeratedly terms as an Asian "invasion," is very new, but introduction of Asian films to the United States dates way back to the 1950s. In our study, an Asian film is defined as a film produced in an Asian country (or Asian countries) with a predominantly Asian language dialogue track, directed by a filmmaker (or filmmakers) of Asian descent, for primarily domestic Asian audiences (sometimes also global audiences);<sup>1</sup> Asian countries include East Asia (e.g., Japan, China, and Korea), Southeast Asia (e.g., Thailand and the Philippines), South Asia (e.g., India and Nepal), and West Asia (e.g., Iran). Figure 1 presents the yearly number of Asian films released in the United States during the period from 1982 to 2006.

The first wave of Asian films in the United States began with Japanese and Indian films in the 1950s. Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon* was the first

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<sup>1</sup> Our definition of Asian film is based on the criteria used by the Academy of Motion Picture Art and Science (for foreign language films: <http://www.oscars.org/awards/academyawards/rules/rule14.html>) and the San Diego Asian Film Festival ([https://www.withoutabox.com/03film/03t\\_fin/03t\\_fin\\_fest\\_01over.php?festival\\_id=1422](https://www.withoutabox.com/03film/03t_fin/03t_fin_fest_01over.php?festival_id=1422)).

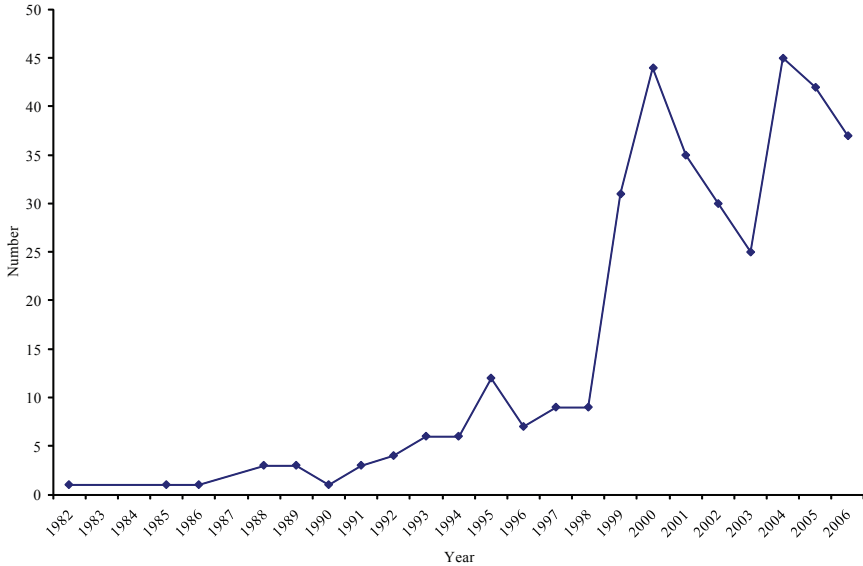


FIG. 1.—Asian films released in U.S. theaters, 1982-2006 (Source: IMDb).

Japanese film to be released in American theaters in 1951. This film first became famous in the Western world because it won several prizes at the 1951 Venice Film Festival. The influx of Indian films into the United States began with Satyajit Ray's "Pathar Panchali," which was released in the United States in 1958 after being nominated for the Gold Palm and winning other prizes at the 1956 Cannes Film Festival. Japanese and Indian films impacted U.S. audiences during the 1950s and 1960s. *Kung fu* films made in Hong Kong in the early 1970s led the second wave of Asian films in the United States, flooding mainstream theaters in the United States in 1973. For example, on May 1973, *Fists of Fury*, *Deep Thrust*, and *Five Fingers of Death* were at the top of the U.S. box-office charts (Desser 2003, pp. 186-87). The commercial success of Hong Kong *kung fu* films in this period made it possible for Hong Kong martial arts films to be continuously released in the United States during the 1970s.

Since the late 1980s, the number of Asian films in the United States has gradually increased with the introduction of Pan-Chinese films (Chinese, Hong Kong, and Taiwanese films) and Iranian films. For example, in 1988, two Chinese films—Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth* and Zhang Yimou's *Red Sorghum*—were released in U.S. theaters for the first time. Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou are representatives of the fifth generation of Chinese cinema,

producing new stylistic Chinese films in comparison to previous ones; their films won or were nominated for prizes at prestigious international film festivals including Cannes, Berlin, and the Academy Awards. The award records of some Chinese films in major film festivals can explain the increasing presence of Chinese films in the United States. The tremendous growth of some Chinese films at the U.S. box office is another reason for the increasing presence of Chinese films. For instance, Zhang Yimou's *Hero*, which was released in 2004 and grossed \$53.6 million, was at the top of the box-office charts for a short period in 2004 (IMDb). The influx of Taiwanese films was launched with Ang Lee's *Wedding Banquet*, which circulated in U.S. theaters in 1993 and was nominated for the Academy Award in Best Foreign Language Film category in 1994. Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, which won the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film (Taiwan) in 2000, was the highest grossing film of all Asian films released in the United States. In 1990, the first Iranian film, Bahram Beizai's *Bashu, the Little Stranger*, was introduced to the United States, and some Iranian films, if not many, have been released in the United States since then. Like some Chinese films, most of the released Iranian films in the 1990s won or were nominated for prizes at major film festivals. Vietnamese and Singaporean films have been released in the United States since 1994 and 1999, respectively.

Since 2000, many Asian countries have actively participated in the global film market, and, as a result, more diverse Asian films have circulated in U.S. theaters. Korean films have been introduced to the United States since 2000 with the release of Jang Sun Woo's *Lie*, which was nominated for the Golden Lion prize at the Venice Film Festival in 1999. The first Filipino and Bhutanese films were released in the United States in 2000, films from Thailand and Nepal since 2001, and films from other Asian countries including Cambodian and Pakistani films since 2004. Like other Asian films of different periods, most of the Asian films released in the United States since 2000 were films that received prizes at international film festivals. What is interesting is that this period saw a major wave of Japanese animation films that comprised about 30% of total Japanese films released in the United States. Circulation of Japanese animation films had been gradually increasing in the U.S. since the late 1980s, but they flooded American theaters during this period.

Overall, Asian films have increased dramatically in the United States around the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century with a much larger number of films, greater diversity in the number of countries where the films were made, and greater impact on the American film industry. Many Asian films released in

the United States were awarded prizes or nominated for prizes at major film festivals; moreover, some of these Asian films including Hong Kong films or Chinese films achieved huge commercial success in the United States. As a result, the increasing presence and popularity of Asian films in the United States exerted greater influence on Hollywood's production style as well as American audiences' perception of Asian films and Asian culture.

## U.S. Critics and Their Comparison Strategies

Through our perusal of Asian film reviews that have appeared in the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*, we find that film critics endeavor to help American audiences improve their understanding of Asian films by using some typical strategy in their reviews. In their reviews, critics often respectively compare a film, director, actor/actress to other domestic or foreign films, directors, and actors/actresses introduced earlier to the market. As described below, critics highlight some characteristics (e.g., story, scenes, and characters) of a film or evaluate the quality of the film by comparing it to other films that are more familiar to audiences. In their comparison of directors, critics discuss similarities or differences in the style or talent of directors in dealing with shots, images, and technique. When they compare actors or actresses, critics focus on the performance and images of actors/actresses appearing in the film.

In this study, we classify comparison strategies used by critics in their review of Asian films into three categories, depending on the comparison counterparts: U.S. comparison (comparing to U.S. counterparts), foreign comparison (comparing to counterparts from countries other than the U.S. and the focal Asian country that is compared), and home comparison (comparing to counterparts from the same Asian country). Each comparison is further broken down to film comparisons, director comparisons, and actor/actress comparisons. According to our survey of film reviews in the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*, comparison of films comprises a larger portion than comparison of directors or actors/actresses during the period from 1985 to 2006.

### *U.S. Comparison*

U.S. comparison refers to comparing Asian films/directors/actors/actresses under review with their American counterparts. For example, in his

*New York Times* review of *Gozu*, a Japanese film directed by Takashi Miike, A. O. Scott (2004) compares it to David Lynch's American film *Mulholland Drive* when discussing the characteristics of the film *Gozu*: "Its dreamy disconnection is reminiscent of David Lynch's 'Mulholland Drive,' but it is, if anything, even more hermetic and dissociated." As a comparison of directors, Dave Kehr (2004) invites American director Steven Spielberg as the comparison counterpart in his review of *Tae Guk Gi*, a Korean film, to describe the filmmaking style of Kang Je-gyu who directed the film:

The Korean filmmaker Kang Je-gyu is the Steven Spielberg of East Asia, and not just because his movies routinely become blockbusters. Both his 1996 first feature, "The Gingko Bed," and his 1999 "Shiri" broke box-office records in South Korea by building compelling genre stories around questions of national identity, a formula that has long been a winner for Mr. Spielberg.

For comparison of actors, Stephen Holden (1996), in his review of *Rumble in the Bronx*, a Hong Kong film directed by Stanley Tong, compares its main actor, Jackie Chan, to American actor Buster Keaton:

Mr. Chan, who does his own stunts, has been praised by his champions as something akin to a fusion of Bruce Lee and Buster Keaton.

### *Foreign Comparison*

Foreign comparison refers to comparison between an Asian film/director/actor/actress under review and their counterparts from various countries other than the United States and the focal Asian country that is compared. For example, to compare films, Janet Maslin (1994) introduces *Like Water for Chocolate*, a Mexican movie directed by Alfonso Arau, to highlight the use of food in her review of the Chinese film *Eat Drink Man Woman* which was directed by Ang Lee: "As in the comparably crowd-pleasing 'Like Water for Chocolate,' this film's use of food is both voluptuous and serious, amplifying the story even as it offers an irresistible diversion." As for comparison of directors, Vincent Canby (1989) refers to Spanish director Luis Bunuel to explain the style of Japanese director Juzo Itami in his review of *Taxing Woman's Return*:

There is also something of Luis Bunuel in Mr. Itami's eagerness to disorient

his audience with, perhaps, a sudden shot of a severed hand, or the lingering image of a corpse that's been some weeks in the water.

Similarly, Elvis Mitchell (2000) introduces a Hong Kong director, John Woo, to discuss the talent of a Korean director, Lee Myung-Se, in his review of *Nowhere to Hide*: "Like Mr. Woo, Mr. Lee has an astonishing talent for using enclosed space; unlike him, he is just as gifted with exteriors."

### *Home Comparison*

Home comparison includes comparison of films, directors, and actors/actresses from the home country of the film under review. For example, A. O. Scott (2002) compares *Lan Yu*, a Hong Kong film directed by Stanley Kwan, to *In the Mood for Love*, another Hong Kong film directed by Wong Kar-wai, in his review to characterize the film: "'Lan Yu' is like a less dizzily gorgeous companion to Mr. Wong's 'In the Mood for Love'—very much a Hong Kong movie despite its mainland setting." In particular, critics often present comparison of different films directed by the same director. For instance, in her review of *To Live* directed by Zhang Yimou, Caryn James (1994) compares the film to Zhang Yimou's two other films, *Red Sorghum* and *Raise the Red Lantern*.

In its emphasis on individuals, "To Live" has less in common with Mr. Zhang's earlier, less dramatic films, "Red Sorghum" and "Ju Dou," than with his recent ones... "Raise the Red Lantern" and ... "The Story of Qiu Ju."

As for comparison of directors, Dave Kehr (2003) reviews the Japanese film *Pokemon Heroes* by comparing its three directors to a famous Japanese director, Hayao Miyazaki:

The retro-Euro design of *Altomare*, as well as several passages in the musical score, seems meant to evoke the world of Japan's greatest animator, Hayao Miyazaki ("Spirited Away"). But "Pokemon Heroes" is flat, charmless and crudely executed, with the exception of some respectable 3-D effects used to present the narrow streets and canals of the city. Inviting a comparison to Mr. Miyazaki in this context is not a good sign of judgment.

For comparison of actors, Elvis Mitchell (2000) mentions a Japanese actor, Toshiro Mifune, as a reference of comparison to show the changing



images of another Japanese actor, Takeshi Kitano:

It's the way that screen icons age to become more vivid versions of themselves, and Mr. Kitano's evolution has demanded that he reduce himself even more, given that he's channeling Clint Eastwood through Toshiro Mifune with a little bit of Buster Keaton thrown in to keep the mix from crashing under its own ponderous weight.

### *Hypotheses*

Given the existence of information asymmetry between producers and customers, and the latter's uncertainty on the quality of the former, consumers tend to either rely on signals of producers' qualities such as status (Podolny 2005) and reputation (Fombrun 1996) or count on knowledge and guidance from information agents (Eisenhardt 1988; Mishra, Heide, and Cort 1998). These agents are required to devise various tactics to deliver information on the producer to the customer (i.e., the principal) in an effective and efficient way. Comparing a producer to other producers who are already familiar to the customer serves as a way by which customers can be quickly informed of the producer's values and characteristics, although this diffusion process may not be free of the agent's bias.

In the film industry, critics take on the role of information agent by introducing a film to the market audiences along with their own description and evaluation of its features and qualities (Baumann 2002; Podolny and Hsu 2002; Shrum 1991). Moreover, as discussed above, critics definitely utilize comparison tactics in their review of Asian films, directors, and actors/actresses, which probably help facilitate audiences' understanding of those films. Critics' use of such a comparison strategy is probably more prevalent for Asian films than for American or other Western films in the U.S. market because U.S. consumers feel more uncertain about Asian films. However, our reading of critics' reviews shows that not all reviews include a comparison strategy, indicating that some reviews involve a greater demand for a certain type of comparison strategy than other reviews. In this study, an attempt is made to explore sources of such variance by focusing on some features of Asian films and the historical context of those films in the U.S. market. More specifically, we propose that the extent to which a certain type of comparison strategy (U.S. comparison, foreign comparison, and home comparison) is used in film reviews is affected by film genres, multiplicity of genres, prior

release of films from the home country in the U.S., and recency of a film.<sup>2</sup>

### *Genres*

It is well known that consumers' acceptance of products from foreign countries varies, partly depending on the compatibility of the products with the value and belief systems of the home country. Such compatibility is particularly imperative in the film industry because a film is deeply embedded in cultural meaning, reflecting the writer's view of life, the director's imagination, and the actors' (actresses') interpretations (Craig, Greene, and Douglas 2005). Neelamegham and Chintagunta (1999) further suggest that variance in cultural compatibility is also derived from different film genres because certain genres are more culturally embedded than others.

For example, Hollywood comedies do not travel well because many components of comedy are closely related to language, that is, "short circuits between signifier and signified," and especially, laughter is heavily connected to the "unspoken assumptions that are buried very deep in a culture's history" (Moretti 2001). By contrast, action films travel relatively well through the dismissal of language which is a major cultural component (Hall 1976), replacing it with other expressions such as explosions or screams. Accordingly, strongly culture-bound genres are less successful in crossing national boundaries than culture-neutral genres (Craig et al. 2005).

Given the crucial role of culture in product compatibility across national boundaries and the close link between culture and film genres, we suggest that culture-bound genres are more likely to lead critics to make comparison of films, directors, or actors/actresses from the same country. However, their strong culture-oriented characteristics will make it difficult for critics to find the counterparts of comparison from countries outside the home country. In contrast, culture-neutral genre films will be more likely to induce U.S. or foreign comparison than culture-bound genre films. Therefore, we hypothesize as follows:

**Hypothesis 1a.** Asian films in culture-bound genres are more likely to lead critics to introduce home comparison than those in culture-neutral genres.

**Hypothesis 1b.** Asian films in culture-neutral genres are more likely to lead critics to introduce U.S. or foreign comparison than those in culture-bound

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<sup>2</sup> Note that we do not consider the three comparison strategies mutually exclusive such that critics' use of a certain type of comparison can increase without decreasing the use of other types.

genres.

### *Multiplicity of Genres*

Extending the theory of organizational niche width by Hannan and Freeman (1977), Hannan, Pólos, and Carroll (2007) formulate the consequences of product categories for audience expectation and market performance. One of their key arguments is that products spanning multiple categories lack representativeness in any one of their relevant categories and, thus, tend to suffer from a lack of identity. A set of economic sociologists lends empirical support to the liability of multi-category membership in their studies of the film industry, showing that films spreading over multiple genres are likely to be judged as having less authentic identity and inferior quality than those categorized into a single genre (Hsu 2006b; Hsu, Hannan, and Koçak 2009; Zuckerman and Kim 2003).

While membership with a single category enhances the strength and distinctiveness of product identity, single-category products have less “niche overlap” with other products than do multi-category products (Baron 2004; Hannan, Pólos, and Carroll 2007), thus hurting their comparability with other products in the market (Zuckerman et al. 2003). For example, films belonging to a certain single genre tend to be regarded as distinct and distant from other films, whereas multi-genre films are considered to have weaker boundaries with other films. This indicates that multi-genre films are more open to diverse interpretations and evaluations from audiences than single-genre films. Thus, critics will find it easier to find comparison counterparts for Asian films, directors, or actors/actresses of multi-genre films than single-genre films, regardless of whether they are compared with U.S., home, or foreign counterparts. Therefore, the second hypothesis is as follows:

**Hypothesis 2.** Asian films with multiple genres are more likely to lead critics to induce comparison strategies than those with a single genre across all types of comparisons.

### *Prior Release of Home Films in the U.S.*

Critics' comparison strategy will also be affected by the extent to which films from the home Asian country have previously been released in the U.S. market. If there is a large enough pool of reference films from a home country, critics will be equipped with a greater set of films to consider for

home comparison. Moreover, greater cumulative number of films from a home country will make it less necessary for critics to draw U.S. or foreign comparison, given that home films usually allow a greater level of comparability. Therefore, the third set of hypotheses is:

**Hypothesis 3a.** Greater number of prior home films released in the United States increases the likelihood that critics will draw home comparison.

**Hypothesis 3b.** Greater number of prior home films released in the United States decreases the likelihood that critics will draw U.S. or foreign comparison.

### *Recency*

Since World War II, United States has played a predominant role in leading the global cultural field, including literature and cinema (Janssen, Kuipers, and Verboord 2008). When it comes to cinema in particular, the United States has taken the principal position in facilitating globalization of film production and film distribution. Most major film producers and distributors are concentrated in the United States, resulting in the convergence of global film production toward Americanization. And as the Asian film industry has grown in the global market, it has been increasingly influenced by Hollywood in various ways as reflected in the term, “Hollywoodization” of Asian films (Klein 2004; Rampal 2005). This trend may suggest that recent Asian films in the United States are more comparable with the U.S. or foreign counterparts, such that more recently released Asian films are likely to lead critics to consider more U.S. or foreign comparison but less home comparison. Therefore, we hypothesize:

**Hypothesis 4a.** More recent release of Asian films in the United States increases the likelihood that critics will draw U.S. or foreign comparison.

**Hypothesis 4b.** More recent release of Asian films in the United States decreases the likelihood that critics will draw home comparison.

## Methods

### *Data*

The primary data of this study is 288 reviews of 254 Asian films released

in the United States from 1985 to 2006. All released films were reviewed in the *New York Times* while only 34 films were reviewed in the *Los Angeles Times*. We collected these reviews from the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) and the websites of the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*.<sup>3</sup> These two newspapers were selected because they are major U.S. daily newspapers with a large circulation,<sup>4</sup> they contain Asian film reviews for our entire research period, and they circulate in two top cities in terms of Asian-American population so that they allocate a higher proportion of reviews to Asian films. For other general information on Asian films, we used the Internet Movie Database and the Internet Movie Database Pro (IMDbPro);<sup>5</sup> the former is an online database listing general film information, reviews, and audience comments about all kinds of films, and the latter offers the entire content of the IMDb plus additional information for business professionals.

For this research, we used mixed methods, combining content analysis and logistic regression. First, two of the authors conducted a content analysis to examine what type of comparison critics employ in their reviews. Any disagreements between the two coders were resolved through discussion among all authors. Next, based on the results of this content analysis, we used logistic regression to assess the effects of our explanatory variables on the likelihood of a critic drawing a certain type of comparison. Logistic regression analysis is appropriate for our binary dependent variables described below. We used SPSS 15.0 to estimate a set of logistic regression models.

## Variables

### *Dependent Variables*

The dependent variable is a dichotomous variable that indicates whether a critic's review of an Asian film includes a comparison of the film, its director, or actors/actresses with their counterparts in the United States, home country, or other foreign countries, as described above. Accordingly,

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<sup>3</sup> The website of IMDb is <http://www.imdb.com>, that of the *New York Times* is <http://www.nytimes.com/ref/movies/reviews/index.html>, and that of the *Los Angeles Times* is <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/news/reviews/movies/>.

<sup>4</sup> As of 2006, circulation of the *New York Times* and the *LA Times* were ranked third and fourth in the U.S., respectively, next to *The Wall Street Journal* (first) and *USA Today* (second).

<sup>5</sup> See <http://pro.imdb.com>.

**TABLE 1**  
**SUMMARY STATISTICS FOR DEPENDENT AND INDEPENDENT VARIABLES**

Variable	Frequency	Percentage	Mean	SD
<u>Dependent Variables</u>				
<i>U.S. comparison</i>				
Yes	85	29.51		
No	203	70.49		
<i>Foreign comparison</i>				
Yes	60	20.83		
No	228	79.17		
<i>Home comparison</i>				
Yes	45	15.63		
No	243	84.37		
<u>Independent Variables</u>				
<i>Genre<sup>a</sup></i>				
Culture-bound	79	17.25		
Culture-neutral	111	24.24		
Others	268	58.51		
<i>Number of Genres</i>				
One	183	63.54		
More than one				
Recency			16.50	3.875
Prior release of home films			24.76	23.352
<i>Country</i>				
China	28	9.72		
Hong Kong	23	7.99		
Korea	73	25.35		
Japan	12	4.17		
Taiwan	96	33.33		
Other countries				
<i>Newspaper</i>				
<i>New York Times</i>	254	88.19		
<i>LA Times</i>	34	11.81		

NOTE.— $N = 288$ .

<sup>a</sup> Applied all genres of one film to three groups.

we created three dependent variables—U.S. comparison, home comparison, and foreign comparison—for three separate regression analyses. Each dependent variable takes a value of “1” for a review including any kind of comparison (e.g., films, directors, and actors/actresses) and a value of “0” for

no comparison. Our data shows that almost half (48.3%) of the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* reviews of Asian films between 1985 and 2006 has a certain type of comparison. A relatively small proportion of the reviews include more than one type of comparison. The distribution of each type of comparison is reported in table 1.

### *Independent Variables*

We presented four factors that can affect our dependent variables: genre, multiplicity of genre, prior release of home films, and recency. In our measure of **genre**, we follow the genre classification Hsu (2006a) proposed based on her investigation into three archival sources: Internet Movie Database, RottenTomatoes.com, and Showbizdata.com. According to her genre classification, films are classified into 17 genres: action, adventure, animation, comedy, crime, documentary, drama, family, fantasy, horror, musical, mystery, romance, science fiction, thriller, war, and western. For our study, we use 16 genres and exclude the western genre because it does not exist in Asian films. Building on this classification of 16 genres, film genres assigned to each Asian film are coded by referring to the genre information provided by IMDb.

To test hypothesis 1a and hypothesis 1b, genres are further categorized into three groups: culture-bound genre, culture-neutral genre, and other genre. To assign each genre to one of the three categories, we conducted a short survey on film genres with 160 undergraduate students and graduate students in the division of social sciences at a major public university in the U.S. We showed students a list of 16 genres and asked them to identify film genres that they thought were culture-bound and culture-neutral. Based on the results from the 112 responses to this survey, we assigned three genres—*comedy*, *family*, and *war*—to culture-bound genres and five genres—*action*, *adventure*, *mystery*, *science fiction*, and *thriller*—to culture-neutral genres. We used a cutoff of 75%-consensus among the respondents for this, and employing other cutoff points (65%-85%) produced relatively consistent results. The remaining genres—*animation*, *crime*, *documentary*, *drama*, *fantasy*, *horror*, *musical*, and *romance*—are classified as other genre because the results of the survey were quite mixed for these genres and most respondents consider them to be neither culture-bound nor culture-neutral.

In our analysis, we created two dummy variables, “culture-bound” and “culture-neutral,” which are coded “1” if an Asian film includes culture-bound or culture-neutral genres, and “0” if not. Note that a film involves

multiple genres, and the two dummy variables are not mutually exclusive. Thus, the effect of each dummy variable should be interpreted as that of including a particular type of genre on the likelihood of a critic drawing a comparison, as opposed to the effect of including other types of genres.

To test hypothesis 2, **multiplicity of genres**, a dummy variable was categorized into two groups: films affiliated with a single genre, and films affiliated with more than one genre. Multiple genre films are coded “1,” with single genre films as a reference category.<sup>6</sup> For this variable, we used the IMDb information about the number of genres assigned to each film based on the classification of the 16 genres described above.

To test hypothesis 3a and hypothesis 3b, **prior release of home films** in the United States was measured by the cumulative number of prior home films released in the United States up to the previous year. For example, for a foreign film released in the U.S. in 1996, the cumulative number of films from its home country released in the U.S. through 1995 is the measure of prior release. Information on this measure also came from IMDb.

To test hypothesis 4a and hypothesis 4b, **recency** was measured by the number of years elapsed since 1985. To create a standardized measure, we subtracted 1985 (the first year of the reviews in our sample) from the year a given film was released in the U.S. Thus, a higher value of this variable represents a more recently released film.

### *Control Variables*

Since the predictions presented by our hypotheses can be affected by the country-specific features of a film, we included **country** dummies in our analysis of all reviews of Asian films. Focus on the East Asian region, countries were categorized into six groups for the models of U.S. comparison and foreign comparison: China, Hong Kong, South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, and all other countries consisting of India, Iran, Thailand, the Philippines, Vietnam, Nepal, Cambodia, Afghanistan, Mongolia, Bhutan, Iraq, Pakistan, and Singapore. However, South Korea was classified into the category of “other countries” for the model of home comparison because reviews of South Korean films had no home comparison in our sample. Each category of country is a dummy variable and the category of other countries is the

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<sup>6</sup> In a set of separate analyses, we employed different numbers for dummy categories and found that single versus multiple genres is the most significant distinction affecting critics’ use of a comparison. We also used a continuous variable, but its effects were less significant, leading to poorer model fit in the regression analyses.



**TABLE 2**  
**LOGISTIC REGRESSION COEFFICIENTS PREDICTING U.S. COMPARISON**

Variables	Model 1			Model 2		
	Coef. Sig.	SE	Odds Ratio	Coef. Sig.	SE	Odds Ratio
<i>Genre</i>						
Culture-bound				-0.214	(0.329)	0.807
Culture-neutral				0.736 *	(0.365)	2.087
<i>Number of genres</i> <sup>a</sup>						
More than one				0.673 *	(0.397)	1.960
Recency				0.080 †	(0.055)	1.083
Prior release of home films				-0.004	(0.009)	0.996
<i>Country</i> <sup>b</sup>						
China	0.118	(0.387)	1.126	0.147	(0.416)	1.159
Hong Kong	0.443	(0.472)	1.557	-0.071	(0.522)	0.931
Korea	1.074 *	(0.483)	2.926	0.618	(0.537)	1.856
Japan	0.600 †	(0.344)	1.823	0.335	(0.451)	1.398
Taiwan	-1.277	(1.074)	.279	-1.352	(1.109)	0.259
<i>Newspaper</i> <sup>c</sup>						
<i>LA Times</i>	0.554	(0.393)	1.740	0.324	(0.427)	1.383
Constant	-1.233			-3.013		
-2 Log likelihood	337.830			316.588		
Cox and Snell R <sup>2</sup>	0.040			0.108		

NOTE.— $N = 288$ .

†  $p < 0.10$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$  (one-tailed tests for the hypothesized variables; two-tailed tests for control variables).

<sup>a</sup> Compared to one, <sup>b</sup> compared to other countries, <sup>c</sup> compared to the *New York Times*.

omitted variable in our analyses. Finally, since the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* might take different approaches to their film reviews, we also included a dummy variable for reviews from the *Los Angeles Times*, with reviews from the *New York Times* as the omitted category.

Table 1 displays detailed information about the frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations for our dependent, independent, and control variables.

## Results

Tables 2, 3, and 4 present the results of the logistic regressions in which

**TABLE 3**  
**LOGISTIC REGRESSION COEFFICIENTS PREDICTING FOREIGN COMPARISON**

Variables	Model 1			Model 2		
	Coef. Sig.	SE	Odds Ratio	Coef. Sig.	SE	Odds Ratio
<i>Genre</i>						
Culture-bound				-0.088	(0.376)	0.916
Culture-neutral				0.538	(0.430)	1.712
<i>Number of genres</i> <sup>a</sup>						
More than one				0.026	(0.420)	1.026
Recency				0.026	(0.051)	1.027
Prior release of home films				-0.023 *	(0.011)	0.977
<i>Country</i> <sup>b</sup>						
China	0.433	(0.409)	1.542	0.681	(0.446)	1.975
Hong Kong	-0.251	(0.603)	0.778	-0.473	(0.658)	0.623
Korea	0.494	(0.545)	1.639	0.116	(0.574)	1.123
Japan	0.012	(0.407)	1.012	0.382	(0.541)	1.466
Taiwan	1.533 *	(0.637)	4.632	1.400 *	(0.674)	4.055
<i>Newspaper</i> <sup>c</sup>						
<i>LA Times</i>	0.084	(0.445)	1.087	0.213	(0.476)	1.238
Constant	-1.547			-1.764		
-2 Log likelihood	287.001			279.149		
Cox and Snell R <sup>2</sup>	0.027			0.053		

NOTE.—*N* = 288.

<sup>†</sup>*p* < 0.10, \**p* < 0.05, \*\**p* < 0.01 (one-tailed tests for the hypothesized variables; two-tailed tests for control variables).

<sup>a</sup> Compared to one, <sup>b</sup> compared to other countries, <sup>c</sup> compared to the *New York Times*.

we examined several factors affecting the three types of comparisons—table 2 is for U.S. comparison, table 3 for foreign comparison, and table 4 for home comparison.

Model 1 in each table displays the effect of countries and newspapers on the likelihood that critics will use a particular type of comparison. Across all types of comparisons (tables 2, 3, and 4), there are no significant differences between the *Los Angeles Times* and the *New York Times*. Model 1 in table 2 shows that the effect of being from Korea on U.S. comparison is significant and positive, while the effect of being from Japan is marginally significant and positive. It indicates that critics are likely to make U.S. comparison for films from Korea and Japan, more so than films from other Asian countries. However, when our key variables are included in model 2, the effects of films

**TABLE 4**  
**LOGISTIC REGRESSION COEFFICIENTS PREDICTING HOME COMPARISON**

Variables	Model 1			Model 2		
	Coef. Sig.	SE	Odds Ratio	Coef. Sig.	SE	Odds Ratio
<i>Genre</i>						
Culture-bound				-0.086	(0.413)	0.918
Culture-neutral				0.168	(0.484)	1.183
<i>Number of genres</i> <sup>a</sup>						
More than one				0.180	(0.500)	1.197
Recency				-0.101 †	(0.067)	0.904
Prior release of home films				0.022 †	(0.015)	1.022
<i>Country</i> <sup>b</sup>						
China	2.376 **	(0.593)	10.766	2.236 **	(0.601)	9.356
Hong Kong	2.755 **	(0.644)	15.716	2.596 **	(0.689)	13.404
Japan	1.810 **	(0.594)	6.113	1.142	(0.694)	3.132
Taiwan	2.278 **	(0.840)	9.762	2.453 **	(0.902)	11.627
<i>Newspaper</i> <sup>c</sup>						
<i>LA Times</i>	-0.406	(0.589)	0.666	-0.378	(0.615)	0.685
Constant	-3.315			-2.199		
-2 Log likelihood	217.976			215.041		
Cox and Snell R <sup>2</sup>	0.104			0.113		

NOTE.—Korea is not listed as a control variable in this table because Korea has no home comparison.  $N = 288$ .

†  $p < 0.10$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$  (one-tailed tests for the hypothesized variables; two-tailed tests for control variables).

<sup>a</sup> Compared to one, <sup>b</sup> compared to other countries, <sup>c</sup> compared to the *New York Times*.

from Korea and Japan on U.S. comparison become insignificant.

Model 1 in table 3 shows that being from Taiwan has a significant and positive effect, indicating that critics are likely to make more foreign comparison for films from Taiwan. This effect remains unchanged when other variables are included in model 2. Model 1 in table 4 shows that the effects of originating from all of the four East Asian countries (China, Hong Kong, Japan, and Taiwan) are significant and positive, indicating that critics are more likely to make home comparison in their reviews of films from Pan-Chinese countries and Japan, in contrast with films from other countries (including Korea). However, when our independent variables are included in model 2, the effect of being from Japan on home comparison becomes insignificant. Overall, the effects of a film's country of origin on U.S. and

foreign comparisons are largely explained by other variables, although the use of home comparison is mainly explained by a film's country of origin.

Model 2 in each table shows the effects of our four main independent variables, which are examined to see whether our hypotheses are supported or not.

### *Genre Effect*

We expected Asian films in culture-bound genres to be more likely to lead critics to draw home comparison (hypothesis 1a) rather than U.S. or foreign comparison (hypothesis 1b), but the results do not support hypothesis 1a (as shown in table 4). It does, however, support hypothesis 1b, as can be seen in table 2 in which culture-neutral genres have significant and positive effects while culture-bound genres have insignificant, negative effects, indicating that critics are more likely to make U.S. comparison for films with culture-neutral genres, as compared to other types of genres. Table 3 shows that culture-bound genres have negative effects and culture-neutral genres have positive effects on foreign comparison, which is consistent with hypothesis 1b, although their effects are not significant.

### *Effect of the Number of Genres*

In hypothesis 2, we anticipated that Asian films with multiple genres are more likely to lead critics to induce comparison strategies than those with a single genre, regardless of the type of comparison. The results show that this hypothesis is supported for U.S. comparison. As shown in table 2, involvement of more than one genre produces significant and positive effect, indicating that critics tend to use more U.S. comparison for films with multiple genres than for single genre films. As for tables 3 and 4, the effect of belonging to more than one genre on foreign and home comparisons is insignificant, although the direction of the effect is consistent with our predictions.

### *Effect of Prior Release of Home Films*

We expected greater number of prior home films released in the United States to increase the likelihood of critics to utilize home comparison (hypothesis 3a) and decrease the likelihood of critics drawing U.S. or foreign comparison (hypothesis 3b). Overall, the results are consistent with these

predictions. In support of hypothesis 3a, table 4 shows the positive and significant, if marginal, effect of prior releases of home films on the likelihood of critics' home comparison. Consistent with hypothesis 3b, table 3 shows that the effect of the number of prior home films released is significant and negative, indicating that critics tend to use fewer foreign comparison in cases where there is a greater number of prior home films released in the United States. As shown in table 2, while the effect of prior release of home films on U.S. comparison is negative, it is not statistically significant.

### *Recency Effect*

Finally, we anticipated that the more recently released Asian films in the United States would increase the likelihood of critics using U.S. or foreign comparison (hypothesis 4a) and would decrease the likelihood of critics drawing home comparison (hypothesis 4b). Tables 2 and 3 provide partial support for hypothesis 4a, showing that the effects of recency are significant, if marginally, and positive for U.S. comparison, and insignificant and positive for foreign comparison. Table 4 also lends support to hypothesis 4b by presenting the negative effect of recency on home comparison.

## Discussion and Conclusion

This article explored several factors shaping American critics' comparison strategies in their review of Asian films, which are designed to help reduce the uncertainty the U.S. audiences feel toward Asian films. From the archives of the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* reviews of Asian films during the period from 1985 to 2006, we first found that U.S. critics tend to draw more U.S. comparisons when Asian films under review are associated with culture-neutral genres and multiple genres than when they are associated with culture-bound genres and a single genre, respectively. U.S. comparison is also prevalent for more recently released Asian films in the United States. These findings indicate that Asian films with culture-neutral and multiple genres can make it easier for critics to find a large, broad set of counterparts from American films. The positive effect of recency of film release on U.S. comparison may be consistent with recent scholarly observations as well as anecdotal evidence that Asian films have become similar to American films over time, probably because Asian countries have drastically increased their import of U.S. films and Asian film

producers have adapted their film production to the U.S. film market. This is also supported by our finding of the negative effect of recency on home comparison.

We also found that U.S. critics tend to induce less foreign comparisons and more home comparisons when there are abundant prior home films released in the United States. This suggests that critics tend to rely less on foreign films when reviewing Asian films with a large pool of prior home films released in the United States that contains sufficient counterparts for more effective comparisons, whether they compare directors, actors/actresses, or the overall nature of the films. In addition, our finding that critics significantly tend to draw home comparison for films from pan-Chinese countries and this effect persists even when our key variables are included in the model may suggest that U.S. critics realize that American audiences are more familiar with films from those countries than films from other Asian countries.

Overall, we believe that our quantitative analyses make further contributions toward existing literature on economic sociology, cultural sociology, and organizational studies by showing how some features of foreign cultural products and the historical background of those products in the domestic market affect the ways in which a market mediator influences and shapes domestic audiences' understanding of those products.

Broader implications for literature can also be derived from our study. First, this study extends its analytic focus beyond products in a single national market by investigating how foreign cultural products, which were initially produced to meet the demand of their home market, are perceived and evaluated in other markets—the U.S. market in this case. Few studies pay attention to what will happen if cultural products transfer from one national market to another national market, and this study serves as a novel attempt to demonstrate the role of evaluators in the receiving market (e.g., critics in the U.S.) in absorbing and channeling foreign cultural products.

Second, this study demonstrates that various types of comparison strategies used by critics may affect globalization of the film industry. The advent and growth of globalization certainly creates demand for the role of gatekeepers. Through the evaluation of products from foreign countries, on the one hand, gatekeepers can increase the rapport between domestic consumers and foreign products as well as facilitate transactions between countries. On the other hand, they can highlight the distance between foreign products and domestic taste, raising the hurdle that exists between the countries. This study further shows how different national markets interact

with the cultural products market. Examining film critics' review strategies appears to help show one instance of such interaction.

However, our study also contains some limitations which we should leave to future research to overcome. First of all, the sample size should be increased by collecting critics' reviews of Asian films from more newspapers such as the *Chicago Sun-Times*, or film magazines such as *Variety*, which are expected to help improve the validity and reliability of research. This would also control for possible distortions due to the sophisticated, unique nature of critics and audiences across different newspapers and magazines. In addition, current research does not present a clear interpretation of the distinction between the effects of countries and the effects of our key variables. For example, we do not have a clear idea as to why the effects of certain countries disappear when the key variables are added to the models of U.S. and foreign comparisons but not to the model of home comparison. A deeper qualitative investigation will be required to resolve this question. It may also be interesting to examine critics' comparison patterns in their review of American or European films and compare them with those in their review of Asian films. This line of research will help identify different cultural or aesthetic standards used by U.S. critics when they review films from different continents, and it will also elucidate more diverse motivations underlying critics' use of comparison strategies. Finally, future studies need to extend our analytical framework in terms of the consequences of critics' comparison strategies. For example, it would be intriguing to investigate the effects of critics' comparison strategies on a film's market performance, such as box-office receipts and the public's evaluation.

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