

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Suspect narratives: “Sinifying” an “Indianized” Japanese story

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Abstract

In 2013, the Malayalam film *Drishyam*, a suspenseful story of the cover up of an accidental murder, became a huge hit in India that inspired remakes in many regional languages including one in Hindi that, as with other recent Bollywood hits, traveled to China. This time, though, instead of screening the Hindi film in theaters, the narrative reached Chinese audiences with a Chinese language remake, titled *Sheep Without A Shepherd* 《误杀》. The original film has been accused of lifting its story from a popular Japanese detective novel, *The Devotion of Suspect X*, which was also made into films in Japanese, Chinese, and Korean. This essay traces the many versions of the narrative to explore how comparing the Indian and Chinese films can recenter our understanding of global cinema and film circulation. When considering the many version of *Drishyam*, instead of focusing on tensions between center and periphery, we can examine both the anxieties and the creative power of cultural borrowing and the retelling of narratives in an increasingly inter-connected Asian film market

Key words: Inter-Asian Connections; Asian Cinema; Chinese Cinema; Hindi Cinema; Film Adaptations; Global Cultural Circulation

A twenty-first century uptick in the popularity of Hindi films in China has given way in the past decade or so to first an experiment in partially state-sponsored co-productions, and most recently to a flurry of adaptations of film narratives from Hindi to Chinese. Chinese fans’ admiration of Bollywood in the twenty-first century began with Aamir Khan and the 2009 PRC theatrical release of *3 Idiots*, followed by the 2016 screening of *Dangal* which became the highest non-Hollywood foreign film in China. Aamir Khan’s narratives about family pressures, tensions between village and urban centers, and intense competition to get ahead in highly populous societies have resonated with many Chinese young people.¹ For many years, it seemed that Aamir Khan was the only person who could successfully break into the Chinese market, but the more recent successes of Salman Khan starrer *Bajrangi Bhaijaan* (Kabir Khan 2015) and the 2018 film *Andhadun* (Sriram Raghavan) have encouraged Indian filmmakers to set their sights to markets and money in China. Building on the successes of Hindi films in China, in 2014, during the “Year of Sino-Indian Friendship” when Narendra Modi and Xi Jinping had state-level exchanges, the two nations announced three film co-productions, *Xuanzang* (Huo Jianqi 2016), *Buddies in India* (Wang Baoqiang 2017), and *Kung-fu Yoga* (Stanley Tong 2017). The three films, featuring superstars Huang Xiaoming, Wang Baoqiang, and Jackie Chan, were released to mixed reviews in both countries, but they were never as successful in the box office or with fans as films like *Dangal* or *3 Idiots*.² This

¹ I discuss Aamir Khan’s popularity in China in my article, “Uncle Aamir: Translating Hindi Film Stardom in China” (Van Fleit 2021).

² I discuss the films produced as part of the 2014 Year of Sino-India Friendship in my current book project, tentatively titled *Bollywood to Beijing: Film Exchange and Cultural Production in Asia*.

flurry of coproduction has extended to the announcement in April 2019 of the planned remaking into Chinese of the popular Hindi film *Taare Zameen Par* (Aamir Khan)/地球上的星星, and two more co-productions, *The Jewel Thief*/珠宝大贼 (Siddarth Anand) and *The Zookeeper* (Kabir Khan).³ In this article, I discuss the Chinese film *Sheep Without a Shepherd* (Quah 2019), an adaptation that, though it did not receive the fanfare of national coproduction announcements, is the first film to be adapted into Chinese from Hindi and found great success in the Chinese box office. In recent years, adaptation studies have moved on from a focus on the fidelity of the new film to the old to consider questions such as intertextuality and a more productive transtextual relationship between the original and the remake or audience reception; one example of this kind of scholarship is found in the excellent study of the adaptation of *The Journey to the West* into *A Chinese Odyssey* by Li Zeng (2012). For the purposes of this special issue, I use adaptation to examine the cross-pollination of film markets in Asia, with an eye to how productive intertextual and intercultural relationships shape the new films. I do not argue for the fidelity of a film or the primacy of any one text; instead, I explore the modifications to the narrative necessary for changes in cultural and political landscapes, while simultaneously examining how the many intertextual film referents in the movies make visible an increasingly entangled global film network.

The story at the core of the film *Sheep Without a Shepherd* has gone through many transformations; I will first take a moment to untangle the many threads of the narrative, starting with the mysterious position of Keigo Higashino's 2005 detective novel, *The Devotion of Suspect X*. Higashino's Japanese language crime fiction has been widely translated into both Chinese and English and has a significant fan base around the globe. *The Devotion of Suspect X* is a novel in the Galileo series of crime novels, a series that has also been made into a television series in Japan and subsequently many film versions. The novel, and also the films that bear its name in Korea, Japan, and China, features a cover up of a murder, and the brilliant Dr. Manabu Yukawa (aka Detective Galileo) works with local police to discover his old friend Tetsuya Ishigami has played a central role in a crime committed by his next-door neighbor, a single mother who was being harassed by her ex-husband. Ishigami helps Yasuko and her daughter fabricate an elaborate alibi to keep them out of prison, in his mind he is justified in committing horrendous acts to help the woman he barely knows. The novel is an intense exploration of loneliness, commitment, and selfless love, narrated in the engaging pulpy style of a twenty-first century mystery. The television series based on the novels aired in Japan from 2007 to 2013, and the film versions of the first novel in the series were released in 2008 (*Suspect X*, Hiroshi Nishitani, Japan), 2012 (*Perfect Number*, Bang Eun-jin, Korea), and 2017 (*The Devotion of Suspect X*, Alec Su, China).

In 2013, popular South Indian film director Jeethu Joseph made a film in Malayalam called *Drishyam*. The film was quickly remade into many different regional Indian languages, including the 2015 Hindi version, directed by Nishikant Kamat and featuring top Bollywood stars Ajay Devgan and Tabu. Because of the circulation of Hindi-language films in China, when comparing the films in this article I focus primarily on the 2015 Hindi version of *Drishyam*, which is faithful to the 2013 version in plot and style. *Drishyam* is the story of Vijay Salgaonkar, a fourth-grade dropout who is obsessed with films, and his small family composed of wife Nandini (Shriya Saran) and two daughters named Anju and Anu. Anju goes to a summer camp where she runs into Sam, a bad kid who harasses girls by filming them on his cellphone. It turns out that he secretly filmed Anju while in the shower, and later goes to her home to threaten her with exposure if she does not sleep with him. Anju tells her mother and that night, while Vijay is in his office watching another film, the two confront Sam, but Anju accidentally kills him in the confrontation. The rest of the film shows Vijay's attempt to cover up the murder, which he does by using his encyclopedic knowledge of film to recreate a timeline that will fool the police into thinking they were out of town the day Sam came to visit and serve as their alibi. His plot is complicated because a local corrupt policeman with a vendetta against him witnessed him driving Sam's car the day after the murder. Sam's mother Meera Deshmukh, played by Tabu, is the chief inspector of the Goa police and will stop at nothing to

³http://www.china.org.cn/arts/2019-04/20/content_74703143.htm (accessed October 13, 2021).

find her son. She, like many of the police officers featured in the film, is willing to compromise her morals and integrity to force confessions out of petty criminals. In the end, after beating the family and threatening the young Anu, the police, surrounded by a crowd of curious onlookers, dig up a body in the Salgaonkar's garden, but it is an animal, not Sam. The story is then publicized in the local media as another case of police corruption and abuse of power. In the end, Vijay and his family stay free, and Sam's parents move to England having lost their reputations and learned from Vijay that their son is in fact dead. It is not a happy ending, but the audience feels a jolt of satisfaction that Vijay outsmarts the corrupt policeman and protects his family.

Drishyam was so popular with audiences that it was remade into many Indian languages, with a version also in Sinhalese in Sri Lanka, and then finally, in late 2019, a Chinese version released in theaters in the PRC. It was one of the last big films before the Covid-19 pandemic ended theater-going in China and was one of the top ten grossing films that year. *Sheep Without a Shepherd* (误杀) was directed by Malaysian Chinese director Sam Quah (柯汶利) and produced and distributed by three major PRC film corporations, Wanda, Hengdian, and China Film Company. Michael Curtin (2016) has written about the PRC's push to become a major hub of international film production, and this film, with its connections to India, Thailand, and the PRC, is evidence of the pan-Asian scope of that drive. *Sheep Without a Shepherd* is advertised as a remake of *Drishyam*, and it is faithful to the plot with a few key differences. The bad kid, instead of threatening to release a video of the daughter in the shower, drugs and rapes her, and it is the video of that incident that he threatens to release. The whole film is set in Thailand, where the main character Weijie (a name that sounds remarkably like Vijay) lives in an overseas Chinese community. The main difference comes in the ending, when after getting away with the murder Weijie feels so guilty that he turns himself in and the film ends with a scene of him in prison.

The similarity of these stories to *The Devotion of Suspect X* lies primarily in the main suspect's fabrication of an alibi that involves an elaborate recreation of the timeline of events leading up to the murder, which is crafted in *Drishyam* and *Sheep Without a Shepherd* with the help of protagonist Vijay/Weijie's encyclopedic knowledge of film. Ekta Kapoor, a leading Bollywood producer, threatened legal action against Jeethu Joseph, claiming that his film was an adaptation of *The Devotion of Suspect X* and that she had already bought the rights to the novel. Jeethu Joseph denies that his film is an adaptation, insisting that he never read the novel nor watched the Japanese film *Suspect X*. A prominent feature of both *Drishyam* and *Sheep Without a Shepherd* is the fascination the main character has with film, and the use of intertextual references in both films shows a complex network of influence which can best be interpreted using a global lens. A national cinemas model that would look at influence between China and India as discrete national traditions with insular film conventions cannot adequately describe the complexity of cinematic entanglement, both in the production of the films, in their plots, and in their visual language.⁴ Bollywood film has long been a center of remakes and adaptations, and this activity increased in the twenty-first century with increasing globalization of "Bollywood" film (Nayar 2003; Rajadyaksha 2008; Smith 2017). Michael Curtin writes that while Mumbai has long been the media capital of South Asia, in post-Mao China the first priority of Chinese filmmakers and politicians alike was to grow the domestic audience for film, creating a strong national network of film institutions in Chinese cities like Beijing, Shenzhen, Shanghai, Qingdao, and Wuhan. In recent years, however, companies like Wanda and China Film Group are increasingly active in global film production and distribution. Curtin writes: "By self-consciously seeding the growth of mainland movie audiences, the PRC has emerged as an imposing force in East Asia, greatly influencing the strategies and operations of the media institutions in Japan, Taiwan, Singapore and South Korea" (Curtin 2016,

⁴Among numerous critiques of the national cinemas model of film scholarship, the work of Yingjin Zhang, Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar, Sheldon Lu, and Song Hwee Lim in Chinese language film studies are only a few of many examples. In South Asian film studies, critiques of the national cinemas model are almost inherent to the field, considering the multiple regional language film industries in India. Critique of the national cinemas model has been widely discussed in the film studies field in general; essays by Andrew Higson and Ian Jarvie in the edited volume *Cinema and Nation* are a good starting point for research into the beginning of the conversation in this area.

p. 69). As I will show, the use of intertextual references to film texts from many different areas in Asia and in the West in the two films illustrates the increasing polylocality of cinematic space in Asia.⁵

Adaptations and comparative film studies

The emerging field of China-India study has arisen, at least in part, with the turn to the global in academic study and much of the work in this issue will fit comfortably in theoretical frameworks developed in world history, world cinema, and world literature. The use of a global lens has also gained fashion in film studies in China and in India. In Chinese film studies, the turn from the national cinemas model to a transnational model began nearly three decades ago, with critiques that emphasized historical, political, linguistic, and geographical ruptures that have characterized cinematic production in China and Chinese-speaking regions since its inception (Berry and Farquhar 2006; Lu 1997; Zhang 2004). Studies of Indian cinema in the same time period have been marked first by a conceptualization of Hindi film as a force in the creation of a “national popular culture,” differentiated from other regional language cinemas by its ability to garner national film audiences, among other things, and next a turn to the concept of global Bollywood, famously proposed by Ashish Rajadhyaksha and then taken up by numerous scholars of South Asian cinema (Rajadhyaksha 2009). In this section, I discuss the intersection of adaptation studies and transnational film studies, with an eye to the ways in which the space of cinema is both produced and productive. With the turn to the transnational or the global we sometimes lose sight of the local, a pitfall that Arjun Appadurai has warned about in his writings on the production of local culture for some time now. In a recent essay (2010, p. 12), he writes: “Localities ... are temporary negotiations between various globally circulating forms. They are not subordinated instances of the global, but in fact the main evidence of its reality.” When discussing *Drishyam* and *Sheep Without a Shepherd*, I interpret local versions of a global narrative to show how the interactions between narrative form, film industry, and film audience work productively together. I have been inspired by Yingjin Zhang’s work on cinema and space in twenty-first century China (2010), and as such a focus on the shifting centers of film production in this story of adaptation exemplify the pertinence of his term “polylocality” when looking at contemporary cinema in China. Zhang (2010, p. 8) differentiates translocality, which he describes as a term that highlights the possibility of identification with more than one space, both in terms of subjectivity, identity, and the mobility of the circulation of capital, technology, ideas, styles, modes of communication, etc., from polylocality by saying that this term “acknowledges that identification and connection between localities can be denied or prohibited; that not all polylocality is brought into translocality in the same way; and that inequality or unevenness exists in polylocality because of different access to translocality” (2010, p. 9). This uneven form of spatial representation captures well the multiple refractions and the push and pull of the global and local forms of the film narrative I discuss here.

Film adaptation studies began with examinations of issues such as fidelity, an emphasis on the national character of film, audience reception, and the artistic nature of remakes. Theorists looked for the artistic stamp of the director in film production, exemplified by André Bazin’s famous objection to remakes that simply changed the geography of a script. He argued instead for a film practice that would transform the script, making it more suitable for the new space of production.⁶ When looking at audience expectations of remakes, theorists ask questions such as: Is the audience aware that the film is a remake? Is there something new in the remade version, and if not, why not simply watch the original? In remakes of famous suspenseful stories such as *The Fly*, for example, directors would have to tell the story in such a way that the suspense was not integral to the filmmaking experience (Leitch 1990, p. 42). A national cinemas-centered model of adaptation studies, especially in the case of cross-

⁵As in much of my research in China India studies, when discussing the position of Asia vis a vis the West I am greatly inspired by Chen Kuan-hsing’s (2010) work on Asia as method.

⁶For a discussion of Bazin’s writings on remakes, see Forrest and Koos (pp. 8–9). They discuss Bazin’s original article “Remade in USA” which was published in French in 1952.

cultural or transnational film adaptation, might look to both the power involved in telling a story in a different culture, and the extent to which the adaptation brings its own cultural values to the narration. In many of these earlier studies, Hollywood is at the center of the story, whether as colonizer in remaking stories for elsewhere, or imperialist in terms of forcing American narratives on the rest of the world. Coming to the topic from the standpoint of China India studies, the multilayered borrowing of narratives throughout Asia allows us to reframe the debate and examine shifting locations of film production. Instead of focusing on tensions or exploitation between center and periphery, a story contained in Asia allows for a rich understanding of film remakes, adaptation, and cultural borrowing that looks to a productive use of film traditions that construct a new geography (or, a polylocality) of film influence and borrowing. Studies of globalization and nationalism have shown that regional and national differences, and the power struggles that arise from them, are created; they do not exist naturally or prior to our conception of them. The copious use of film references in these many versions of the crime story and the way they function in the films' narratives emphasizes both the flexibility with which centers of film production ebb and flow, and a non-hierarchical mode of film circulation. The portrayal of the main character's engagement with film in both *Drishyam* and *Sheep Without a Shepherd* demonstrates how the imagination of the center of commercial film production, a spatial construct that was located in Hollywood throughout most of the 20th century, is in flux in an increasingly globalized world of the twenty-first century.

In an earlier moment in film studies, critics often decried the "Americanization" of films from other national traditions. Directors of Hollywood remakes released in the 1990s, such as *Diabolique* (Chechik 1996), *Point of No Return* (Badham 1993), and *Sommersby* (Amiel 1993), were accused of cultural appropriation and watering down the original stories to suit popular audiences. When examining this phenomenon, authors of a 2002 volume on the theory of remakes write: "Critics jumped to reveal, if not the political agenda of the remake, then its political repercussions. While little issue is made of domestic remakes, with reviewers limiting themselves to remarks on whether the new version is better or worse than the original, remakes of foreign films are a sore spot of contention" (Forrest and Koos 2001, p. 6). They argue that Hollywood movies were seen as taking the art out of the original films and repackaging them into typical narratives that would be more palatable to the American audience, particularly by changing the ending in the Hollywood films. Critics writing in this vein argue that whereas a typical French film might be seen to privilege ambiguity, an American film would have clear-cut motivations in which good and evil are clearly portrayed. This often comes in the ending, where American films usually give a comforting resolution while their European films leave the viewer in a gray space (Forrest and Koos 2001, p. 8). This interpretation of Hollywood's power and failings is a version of what Michael Curtin describes as theories of media imperialism. He writes: "Throughout the 1970s and 1980s this body of scholarship flourished, asserting that the United States and its European allies control the international flow of images and information, imposing media texts and industrial practices on unwilling nations and susceptible audiences round the world. According to this view, Western media hegemony diminishes indigenous production capacity and undermines the expressive potential of national cultures, imposing foreign values and contributing to cultural homogenization worldwide" (Curtin 2007, p. 6). Curtin's work challenges this conception of Hollywood hegemony by examining the central and changing role of China in globalized film production. Here, I further complicate the story by situating China and India at the crossroads of a global film industry that traverses Asia; the travels of this narrative and the changes it sees along the way exemplify a shifting center of gravity, not in a unidirectional move from Hollywood to Asia, but rather in a multivalent, polylocal construction of space and place that moves freely around the world.

If in this earlier period of film studies Hollywood remakes were accused of commercialization and cultural appropriation when taking European films as the original text, they were further lambasted when adapting Asian scripts for the American audience. The accusation of cultural appropriation when looking at adaptations between Asia and Hollywood, often performed by film critics writing for the popular audience, has lasted well into the twenty-first century. Two major twenty-first century films that have received negative critical attention are *The Departed* (Scorsese 2006), a remake of the

Hong Kong film *Infernal Affairs* (Lao and Mak 2002) and Spike Lee's *Oldboy* (Lee 2013). Many critics argue that Scorsese's "de-Asianizing" of the film renders *The Departed* less successful than the original *Infernal Affairs* (Chan 2017, p. 88). In an article about Spike Lee's adaptation of the Korean New Wave film *Oldboy* (Park Chan-wook 2003), Daniel Martin (2017) discusses an underlying essentializing of Asian culture in film critics' negative reviews of Spike Lee's film. He argues that there are two ways in which this essentializing is expressed, by either viewing fans of Korean culture who protest the remake as "outside the mainstream" and worthy of dismissal, and then by positing that American film could never be as extreme as South Korean. Martin argues that when critics discuss Spike Lee's version of *Oldboy* as "Americanized," suggesting it is more extreme in its representation of violence and graphic content than most "typical" American films, but that it falls short of the excess in South Korean cinema, this is a form of Orientalizing, in which the chaotic energy and violence of an Asian film simply cannot be contained in a Hollywood production (Martin 2017, pp. 202–203). In the rest of his article, Martin goes on to list a number of cases of Orientalism in Spike Lee's film, concluding that the film was destined to fail in American theaters, because critics and viewers of the original film will always view the remake as a failure. "While Lee's personal promotional campaign to brand his film a 're-interpretation' was innovative in many ways, and while his film is certainly not without clear signs of an auteur's creative preoccupations, his *Oldboy* failed precisely because the appeal of the South Korean film is, in essence, its Koreanness" (Martin 2017, p. 207). Another, unofficial, remake of *Oldboy* was released in India in 2006. Directed by Sanjay Gupta and starring Sanjay Dutt and John Abraham, the film was successful in India, but did not do well overseas. The plot of the film, and especially the ending, was changed drastically to suit Indian audiences, in a process of what Tejaswini Ganti (2013, p. 89) refers to as "Indianization."

As the national cinemas model has come into question, various analytical frameworks have been suggested in its stead: transnational cinema, comparative film studies, world cinema, to name just three. In a discussion of current developments in the field in the journal *Transnational Screens* (formerly *Transnational Cinemas*), Lim (2019, p. 2) describes transnational cinema "as a conceptual framework that can be both inescapably national and inadvertently nation-less." To flesh out this statement, he looks at two forms of transnational cinema, popular state-sponsored film activity carried out under the aegis of soft power, and what he proposes as "slow cinema," described as a "non-nation-based new wave" (2019, p. 5). Lim argues that in the first form, the national is emphasized in the flow of capital across borders, citing examples of Wanda Dalian buying theaters in the United States or politicians in China demanding a global blockbuster from Chinese studios. In the discussion of the national in the transnational Lim also discusses the Chinese audience's appetite for watching characters travel abroad, such as *Finding Mr. Right* (about a Chinese woman coming to the United States to give birth), *Dying to Survive* (about the sale of generic medicine acquired illegally in India by a Chinese businessman), or *Mountains May Depart* (where the main character flees to Australia to escape a criminal past). He argues that this portrayal of foreign locations, coupled with Chinese overseas investment in Hollywood, shows an increasing wealth and power in the PRC that: "ceaselessly interfaces the national and the transnational, whose power dynamic fluctuates in tandem with broader fortunes in the political and economic realms" (2019, p. 4). This is the context in which *Sheep Without a Shepherd* was produced. In the next section, I look at the preservation of the national, or perhaps more accurately the local, in a narrative that is adapted with different audiences in mind. I do not intend to privilege the national or the local in my analysis; rather, my goal is to demonstrate how the film language in both movies portrays a global view of cinema while simultaneously trying to localize the narrative.

Indianization, sinification

An exploration of film connections in Asia, and specifically the many adaptations of *The Devotion of Suspect X*, highlights changing centers of gravity in both economics and culture. A careful reading of changing cultural referents in each version shows how filmmakers and producers imagine local

audience expectations, both preserving some of the international flavor and themes of the original story, and also making significant changes to ensure their films will resonate with local fans. The box office success of *Drishyam* and *Sheep Without A Shepherd* shows that, while academics and film critics often focus on the limitations of a national cinemas model, directors and their local audiences still often rely on stereotypical “Indian” or “Chinese” elements. These creative adaptations center local color while simultaneously activating a global imaginary through intertextual references and also exploiting transnational economic connections to increase profits and visibility. When considering Jeethu Joseph’s film and the changes the story underwent when it moved to China (or Thailand), we might first ask: how are these film narratives related to the original Japanese novel? Ekta Kapoor sees a clear connection, as she threatened to sue Jeethu Joseph, claiming that his film was an adaptation of *The Devotion of Suspect X* and that she had already bought the rights to the novel. Jeethu Joseph denies that his film is an adaptation, insisting that he never read the novel nor watched the Japanese film *Suspect X*.⁷

The scandal over whether or not the film is a copy can be examined using insights from studies of plagiarism and copyright by scholars from both Chinese and Indian studies who often focus on the creativity involved in questionable adaptations rather than their legality. In her book *Copyright Matters*, Lena Henningsen (2010) explores the concepts of borrowing, copying, and plagiarizing. In one chapter she delves into the 2006 plagiarism case against popular novelist Guo Jingming to answer questions of authenticity and creative license in China, reading court transcriptions and analyzing the plots of both novels in order to determine what percentage of the novel was stolen. She then looks at the two novels and determines that while she agrees with the courts that Guo Jingming did steal a certain amount of the novel, there was still a significant amount of creative energy in the novel he produced, thus making the question of plagiarism much more complex than it would seem in a court case (Henningsen, p. 58). In a section on remakes and adaptations in her book *Bollywood: A Guidebook to Popular Hindi Cinema*, Tejaswini Ganti (2013, pp. 87–88) explains the numerous remakes and adaptations in Hindi film with reference to Indian copyright law and film culture: “Many filmmakers believe that once something is in the public domain, it is fair game and think nothing wrong of being ‘inspired’ by a particular film. The idea of the public domain is much more expansive in India than it is in the U.S. The Copyright Act in India – introduced in 1957 and amended in 1984, 1994, and 1999 – protects the original expression of an idea but not the idea itself. Since many people can have the same idea, the concept of originality refers to how an idea is expressed.” Box office returns show that filmmakers’ frequent borrowing from earlier source material is popular with the audience, even while the practice is often derided by critics in India.

While *Drishyam* never ended up in court for its relationship to *Suspect X*, film reviewers in India generally do not buy Jeethu Joseph’s insistence that his script was not based on *The Devotion of Suspect X*. In an interview he says: “After Ekta’s legal team sent us the letter, I watched the Japanese film, *Suspect X*, which is an adaptation of the Japanese novel. There could be similarities between my film and that Japanese film, but my film is neither an adaptation nor a copy. The Japanese film is also about a murder cover-up and hence the allegation. Similarities are quite common in the works of creators and that shouldn’t be made into an issue.”⁸ While we cannot know for certain whether or not Jeethu Joseph had seen *Suspect X* before making his film, his insistence on the originality of his story might be interpreted in the context of Ganti’s discussion of the filmmakers’ attitudes to the free flow of ideas. Having first watched *Drishyam*, the experience of reading *The Devotion of Suspect X* is a bit jarring. The reader knows that when the female protagonist Yasuko’s ex-husband shows up at her house he will be killed, but instead of an accident, this time Yasuko, the mother, not the daughter, kills him out of desperation to protect her daughter from his evil intentions. The

⁷*Suspect X* was also a popular Japanese television series, predating the film, but it is not mentioned in the Indian articles on the scandal.

⁸<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/entertainment/tamil/movies/news/Drishyam-director-responds-to-Ekta-Kapoor-legal-notice/articleshow/38802704.cms> (accessed 1/4/2021)

crime is discovered, not by her husband, but by a next-door neighbor whom she hardly knows. The neighbor, Tetsuya Ishigami, goes to great lengths to forge an alibi for Yasuko and her daughter, instructing them to go out and watch a film, being sure to collect tickets and other evidence that will bolster their alibi. He essentially recreates the timeline, which is what Vijay does in *Drishyam*. But as the mystery progresses, we delve into the psychology of Ishigami, and begin to question his intentions toward Yasuko. He had gone to the restaurant where she works every day to see her, though the two never spoke. Now that he is entangled with their lives they are in constant contact, and he gets extremely jealous of Yasuko when he sees her with another man, leading the reader to question his intentions. This suspense is absent from *Drishyam*, as is the much more violent true cover up, involving the murder of a second man, and finally the ending is tragic, with both Ishigami and Yasuko facing prison.

The Devotion of Suspect X is a study of the difficulty of human connection, loneliness, and the characters of isolated individuals. The two male protagonists are the physicist and police consultant Manabu Yukawa, and the mathematician Ishigami Tetsuya, who are brilliant graduates of a famous top Japanese university. Yukawa's desire to solve the case sees him reunited with his old college classmate, a strange boy who was brilliant but had few friends. As the two become reunited, we see Yukawa struggle with his feelings that his friend may be guilty. Ishigami lives alone in an apartment, dirty and cluttered with papers. He never became a professor; having to care for his sick parents, he instead settled for life as a lonely high school teacher, who spends his free time solving math problems that top experts around the world struggle with. His motives in helping his next-door neighbor remain mysterious until the end of the novel, when he tells Yukawa that he helped the two because they saved his life. He was on the verge of suicide when Yasuko first moved to the apartment and her knock and friendly introduction interrupted him as he was about to hang himself. "Ishigami's life changed after he met the Hanaokas; in that moment he was renewed. All thought of suicide faded. Joy returned to his daily rituals. It made him happy just imagining where the two of them might be, what they might be doing. He had added the coordinates of Yasuko and Misato to the matrix of his life, and to him, it seemed like a miracle had occurred" (Higashino, p. 291). The two women gave meaning to his life that inspired him to go to great lengths to protect them, so when Yasuko turns herself in the end of the book, Ishigami breaks down. The final sentence of the book reads: "Kusanagi watched as Ishigami screamed and it seemed to him as if the mathematician was shouting out his very soul" (Higashino, p. 297). At the end of the novel, the reader is left with desolation and emptiness, moved by the intense passion of Ishigami's story, but also alienated and alone.

The novel takes place in an urban setting in Japan, where people rush about to their jobs and home again on bikes and subways, and where meaningful connections with others are few and far between. Just two years before *Sheep Without a Shepherd* was released, *Suspect X* was adapted into a film in China, but the desolate story was far less popular than that of *Sheep Without a Shepherd*. Like *Sheep Without a Shepherd*, *The Devotion of Suspect X* (嫌疑人X的献身) was directed by an overseas Chinese director wanting to break into the Mainland box office. Director Alec Su is a Taiwanese pop music star who set his sights on filmmaking. Perhaps the prospect of the large audience across the straits in the PRC influenced his choice to set the film in a fictional mid-sized city in the PRC, producing the film with a prominent Mainland production company. The film is faithful to the novel, and Edward Luyi Zhang, who plays the mathematician Shi Hong gives an especially strong performance. The film is engaging and captures the feeling of the novel, but with its post-production dubbed soundtrack the film can feel stilted, and the slick youthful appearances of the actors makes it difficult to identify with their stories. The film did relatively well, with a worldwide gross of \$59,035,664, and it has a *douban.com* rating of 6.3 with 269,288 user ratings.⁹ Contrasted with this, *Sheep Without a Shepherd*, released just before Covid-19 shut theaters worldwide, grossed \$191,602,146 and has a *douban.com* rating of 7.6 with 738,330 ratings.¹⁰ When Joseph was asked why the film was so popular in China

⁹<https://movie.douban.com/subject/26606743/> (accessed 10/06/2021)

¹⁰<https://movie.douban.com/subject/30176393/> (accessed 10/06/2021)

he simply stated: “The Chinese makers must have seen something that resonates with their culture, too.”¹¹ Indeed, while Asian “zones of contact” are often traced in East Asia, in popular cinema there is much crossover between South Asian film from India and China.¹² The circulation of this text and the changes that were made for it to work in Mainland China give a different perspective on the circulation of culture not just in Asia, but around the globe.

Jeethu Joseph’s insistence on the originality of his film is met with suspicion at best as in the statement by reviewer Pronoti Datta: “Joseph has denied this but those who’ve read *Devotion* will find shades of it in *Drishyam*.”¹³ Other film reviewers were not as kind, as the subheading of Aniruddha Guha’s essay in *The Quint* reads: “Jeethu Joseph’s claim that *Drishyam* is not inspired by *The Devotion of Suspect X* is hogwash.”¹⁴ Guha goes on to castigate the director’s denials: “What is really irksome is Joseph’s insistence that his film is an entirely original piece of work, with absolutely no influences from either the book, or its two official remakes, *Suspect X* (2008) and *Perfect Number* (2012). The Hindi film, in fact, begins with a slide that says that the film is based on an ‘original’ story by Jeethu Joseph, which is just laughable.”¹⁵ Guha criticizes Jeethu Joseph for not crediting *Suspect X*, but his main reason for outrage was not simply because in his eyes the film is so obviously inspired by the book. Seemingly more frustrating for Guha is that he sees the brilliance of the adaptation as remake, especially when compared to what he sees as hackneyed remakes such as *Zinda*. Jeethu Joseph takes the original story and adapts it to an Indian landscape and gives it Indian cultural referents. Guha writes: “To Joseph’s credit, his adaptation is one of the smartest seen in Indian cinema – a far cry from the scene-to-scene rip-off many a Bhatt and Sanjay Gupta film has succumbed to in the past.”¹⁶ Indeed, the desolate urban landscape which tells a story about alienation and struggling for connection is traded for a lush semi-rural landscape where the family bond is strong and people are connected to one another in the face of a corrupt society. In fact, the story is flipped; whereas in the Japanese novel and film adaptation, the police and society are upright and courageous while the protagonists are damaged and desperate, in Joseph’s version, the police are corrupt, and the family must work to stay together and fight the corruption. This type of adaptation is what critics of remakes, especially film reviewers in the Indian popular press, seem to crave. It is also a form of what Ganti refers to as the insertion of “emotion” into (Hollywood) remakes as part of the process of “Indianization:”

While remakes from other Indian languages resemble the original screenplay, adaptations of Hollywood films barely do as they have been transformed, or “Indianized.” The three main elements of “Indianization” are adding “emotions,” expanding the narrative, and inserting songs. Hindi filmmakers frequently describe Hollywood films as “dry” or “lacking in emotion,” and claim that in order to Indianize a film, one has to “add emotions.” (Ganti, p. 89)

She argues that emotions for Hindi filmmakers are located primarily in a web of familial relationships, rather than being centered on the individual (Ganti, p. 89). When we look at *Drishyam*, *Suspect X*, and *Sheep Without A Shepherd* together, we see that the insertion of a kinship-based emotion Ganti refers to as “Indianization” also happens when a film is “Sinified.”

Sam Quah’s creative adaptation is closer to *Drishyam* than *Drishyam* is to *Suspect X*, but also changes significant details to make the film palatable to the Chinese audience, and also, the Chinese censors. The process of adapting *Drishyam* for the Chinese audience was not as simple as going from Malayalam to Hindi or Sinhalese, nor was it as simple as the remaking of *Suspect X*

¹¹<https://www.theweek.in/theweek/leisure/2020/01/17/remade-in-china.html>

¹²See Karen Thornber, *Empire of Texts in Motion* (2009) and “Rethinking the World in World Literature: East Asia and Literary Contact Nebulae” for more on zones of contact in East Asia.

¹³<https://www.thedailybao.com/film-review-drishyam/> (accessed 1/4/2021)

¹⁴<https://www.thequint.com/entertainment/drishyam-a-cover-up-in-itself#read-more> (accessed 1/4/2021)

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶<https://www.thequint.com/entertainment/drishyam-a-cover-up-in-itself#read-more#read-more>

from the original Japanese. The underlying theme of police corruption is both a main selling point for the Chinese audience and also one of the risky aspects of a Chinese adaptation. I have written before (Van Fleit 2018) about popular engagement with stories of corruption in China and India, and this film continues that general cultural trend. The corruption in the narrative appears in two key areas: first, the local policeman, Sub-inspector Gaitonde *Drishyam*/Sangkun *Sheep Without A Shepherd*, who harasses people at the local café where Vijay/Weijie spends most of his free time, and second in the son of the powerful police chief Sam/Suchat. The police chief, played by veteran stars Tabu and Joan Chen, is depicted as corrupt both in her dealings with local criminals and also in the way she bends rules to try and extract confessions from the family. The local police officers are caricatures of the corrupt policeman, shaking down poor families for money and violently threatening Vijay/Weijie. Chinese fans' desire (Bai 2008; Van Fleit 2018) to see narratives featuring comeuppance of corrupt police officers is partially fulfilled in the film, making it especially popular in China, even while the film purports to be about police in a different country.

Sheep Without a Shepherd is set in Thailand, a move that could have a few different reasons. Primary among these is the inability to depict the Chinese police as corrupt in a film that would be released in theaters in the PRC. The theme of corruption was very popular in film and television shows in the early 2000s, but it was usually framed in the context of what Bai (2008) described as the *qingguan*, or the upright official who would root out the corruption among him. Other reasons for the setting in Thailand could be director Sam Quah's identity as a Southeast Asian Chinese director who would be comfortable depicting the lives of an overseas Chinese community in Thailand, or Thailand and Southeast Asia as main crossroads where Chinese and Indians would meet. Following increased tourism and especially the popularity of the film *Lost in Thailand*, Chinese audiences welcome stories about life in the Southeast Asian nation. In fact, the line readings and some of the imagery in the film are reminiscent of the style employed in *Lost in Thailand*. A final reason for the setting might be the fact that, as Lim (2019) points out, Chinese audiences in the twenty-first century are increasingly drawn to depictions of lives of Chinese characters living outside of China.

The main conflict between Sam/Suchat and Anju/Pingping is modified in the Chinese adaptation. The incident of sexual harassment differs in the two versions, with the Hindi version depicting the boy filming her in the shower while she is drugged and raped in the Chinese version. Actually, in the original Malayalam *Drishyam*, the audience does not clearly see an image of the girl in the shower, and in one online review of the Hindi version, the commentator takes issue with the amount of skin shown: "Following the same vision of a 'Family thriller', the regional films do not have the girl's secretly shot mobile video presented with some skin show (*sic*). But in the Hindi version, the visuals clearly focus on a bare back of a minor school going girl, probably to make it more sensational which is unnecessary."¹⁷ In the Indian context as represented on screen, this exposure threatened to severely damage the reputation of the whole family, to the extent to which Anju's mother exclaims that if the video leaked they would have to commit suicide. The two films represent this key scene according to permissible cultural values in mainstream cinema. A different sort of analysis might go into an investigation of the shying away of depicting sexual violence onscreen in India, when in much of the conversation of current events in India, rape is one of the most serious and pressing issues facing the country.

As mentioned earlier, critics of American remakes of French films writing in mid-late twentieth century often found the most telling betrayal of the original French films in the endings. The ending of the Chinese adaptation of *Drishyam* departs significantly from the original in the very end when Weijie turns himself in to the police. *Drishyam* ends with Vijay in the police station, grinning as he tells an officer that he is sure the police station will protect him and his family. At this moment the audience is meant to feel a surge of adrenaline because as he is speaking to the police officer, the *mise-en-scène* shifts between him talking to the police officer in the present and flashbacks to

¹⁷<https://www.news18.com/news/movies/four-deliberate-insertions-in-drishyam-that-were-not-present-in-the-original-1030392.html> (accessed October 13, 2021).



Figure 1. Ajay Devgan as Vijay in *Drishyam*.

him burying Sam's body under the floor of the police station, which is being constructed throughout the film. As long as the new police station stands, the body will not be discovered, and the family will remain safe from prison. This satisfying ending almost happens in *Sheep Without a Shepherd*. Weijie, like Vijay, moves the body and when the police try to dig it up they find instead a baby goat (killed earlier in the film by the corrupt policeman), leading to the exposure of police corruption followed by a national scandal and rioting in the city. The departure from *Drishyam* happens in the last five minutes of the film, when Weijie suffers a crisis of conscience and the penultimate scene shows him being carried away in a police wagon. After the credits, the film ends with a shot of the prison yard, ending in a close up of Weijie's eyes that mirrors Vijay's in the final scene of *Drishyam* (Figures 1 and 2).

The abrupt ending feels similar to that of the PRC release of *Infernal Affairs*, when, instead of seeing Andy Lau's character go free, the film is abruptly cut off with a voiceover announcing his arrest as the elevator opens. When searching for the Mainland ending on the Internet recently, I came across mostly posts of the Hong Kong ending with comments like: "真正的原版结局!原来当年我看的是修改版! This is the original Hong Kong ending! The film I saw back then had been edited!"¹⁸ The Mainland edit of the *Infernal Affairs* ending is clumsily done, with the voiceover and the settings both obviously out of place in the film. In the case of *Sheep Without a Shepherd*, the ending, regardless of the possible motivations for the change, is a creative vision of the director, rather than a clumsy post-production insertion of a politically correct narrative by film censors. In an article about the film's ending in *The Beijing News*, Sam Quah is quoted: "We wanted to go a bit deeper, we didn't want to simply make the audience happy. Xiao Yang, acting as Li Weijie, has a smile on his face once he has turned himself in and sits in the police car, that moment is the actual beginning of his freedom, this is what we wanted to say in the film."¹⁹ Viewers commenting online are of two minds about the ending. They remark upon the significant difference, but then they either criticize the Chinese version for not remaining true to the original for strictly political reasons of censorship, or they have an intricate reading of the ending that acknowledges the censorship and the practical reasons for the change, but also argue that for this film the ending is fitting. One representative commentator writes that if the director changed the ending to fit in with Chinese censorship guidelines, then it should be considered to be a good ending, but if it was simply the vision of the director, as Sam Quah said in the interview quoted above, then the ending should be considered a failure.²⁰

If we watch these two films with attention to the commonalities of either "Indianization" or "Sinification," we highlight family relationship, police corruption, and, as I will show in the next

¹⁸<https://3g.163.com/v/video/VH461R9GL.html> (accessed 03/13/2021)

¹⁹"我们想探讨得更多一点, 不只让观众觉得好爽。肖央饰演的李维杰自首后在警车上有个微笑的镜头, 那一刻开始其实才是他真正的自由, 这也是我们电影里面想说的。" "误杀结局没有考虑过别的版本" http://epaper.bjnews.com.cn/html/2019-12/18/content_774277.htm?div=0 (accessed 10/06/2021).

²⁰<https://movie.xunlei.com/reviews/174221> (accessed 10/06/2021).



Figure 2. Xiao Yang as Weijie in *Sheep Without a Shepherd*.

section, relation to Asian film traditions. This shared cultural emphasis diverges, though, when attending to political and cultural specificities in each national tradition, whether in the ending of paying for the crime or in the depiction of sexual violence. When studying China and India together in the context of global film culture, we disrupt a simple narrative of West/India or West/China and complicate the understandings of what it means to make a film “Indian” or “Chinese.” Here we have a Sinification of an Indianization of a Japanese narrative, which is more popular with Chinese audiences than a Sinification of the Japanese narrative. The detour through India, with the additions of the themes of family drama and societal corruption, made the Japanese narrative more attractive for Chinese fans, as reflected in both ticket sales and also engagement with the films *Suspect X* and *Sheep Without a Shepherd* on the Internet. In the next section, I examine how intertextual film references in each of the movies contribute to a rich understanding of media networks in Asia, and also consider how they activate a potentially subversive reading of the ending of *Sheep Without A Shepherd*.

If you’ve seen 1000 films, anything is possible

The central role of the art of film, and the recreation of events in the real world using cinematic conventions, is one of the strongest aspects of the *Drishyam* stories, and something that is absent from the Japanese novel and the film versions of *Suspect X*. The way film itself is portrayed in these two movies shows how the imagination of the center of commercial film production, once firmly located in Hollywood, is now in the process of being unmoored. Hollywood commercial film is envisioned in these films as simply one of many centers of a polylocal construction of cinematic space. Vijay’s inspirations come from films from all over the world, but he is primarily inspired by Bollywood films. For instance, in an early scene in the film, Vijay is having lunch at his favorite café when he hears of a troubling miscarriage of justice by the corrupt policeman Gaitonde, who has falsely imprisoned the son of an older couple who frequent the café. Upon hearing their story, Vijay visualizes a scene from a Bollywood film in which two characters discuss the concept of habeas corpus, which he then explains to the older couple using language from the film. The couple then use this method to save their son. Vijay’s favorite actress is the famously sexy Bollywood star Sunny Leone, and when he imagines scenes and gets inspiration for his plot, it is Hindi films that we see him watching and remembering. The film includes sporadic references to classic Hollywood films, but it is really an homage to (global) Bollywood both in its film references and on the formal level as shown in its feel of a family drama, the long run up to the story before the interval, and the vaguely late-90s style of the songs and the screening. This film is reminiscent as well of many twenty-first century Bollywood films that are full of intertextual references, especially to Hindi film classics (Murthy and Meitei

2016; Shastri 2011; Wright 2016). The original Malayalam *Drishyam*, based on the screenplay by Jeethu Joseph, is equally inspired by cinema, so it is interesting that in a film so enmeshed in the transformation of cinematic narratives, Jeethu Joseph insists that his film was not poached from the novel or film versions of *The Devotion of Suspect X*, despite its strong resemblance.

Sam Quah's film pays homage to films and television from all over the world. As in *Drishyam*, Weijie is able to evade the police because, as he frequently comments in the film, "After you watch 1000 movies, you'll realize that in this world nothing is impossible." The opening scene of the film sees Weijie in a café recounting a favorite moment to the owner and another customer, under the disparaging eye of the local corrupt cop. In the scene Weijie narrates he is depicted in prison, having paid a worker to smuggle him out by burying him with a dead man and return later to rescue him from the coffin. After the prison officials have buried the coffin and left, he lights a match, only to reveal that he is in the coffin with the very person who was supposed to come rescue him. His friends hate the story, exclaiming that it was "a shitty ending." Weijie complains that they don't understand good art, exclaiming: "Have you heard of Hitchcock? That's real excitement." The scene he had just narrated is a retelling of a story from the television series *The Alfred Hitchcock Hour*, titled "Final Escape." It was episode 18 of the second season, originally airing in 1964, and then remade in the mid-1980s.²¹ But the two friends are not savvy enough for this reference and the discussion turns to the use of montage and then to the film *Shawshank Redemption*. When Weijie asks why they like the film, his friend repeats a line from the film, "Freedom! Give me freedom!" After that Weijie recites a few lines from the film, telling his friends how beautiful they are in an episode that both demonstrates his familiarity with film texts, and foreshadows the ending of this story.

Director Sam Quah does not limit his intertextual references of films to plot and line readings. The reference to *Shawshank Redemption* returns at the very end of the film, when Weijie has confessed to the crime and actually ends up in prison. The final scene of *Sheep Without A Shepherd* is filmed with high crane shots, showing large vistas of the prison yard and sweeping from prisoner to prisoner before landing on Weijie. The visual language is a direct referent to the cinematography in *Shawshank Redemption*. Weijie loves films from everywhere, not only Hollywood but across world cinema. His whole plot to evade capture is conceived of as a montage, the word he defines for his friends in this opening scene. His understanding of montage comes not only from general film knowledge, but also from a specific film, *Montage* (Jeong Geun-seop 2013), a South Korean film, remade in China as *The Guilty Ones* in 2019, that tells the story of a woman's attempt to avenge her daughter's death by recreating a 15-year-old kidnapping in a plot to frame the original kidnapper, since the statute of limitations has expired. In fact, it is the record of his having watched this film, combined with a recollection of Weijie's catchphrase, "if you've seen 1000 films nothing is impossible," that tips the police off to Weijie's plot.

It is tempting to read the ending of *Sheep Without A Shepherd* in the way earlier critics tended to read American revisions of French films, those were seen as watered down or somehow inferior because of the changes made for the market in the US. Chinese films could similarly be read as inferior because of the changes necessary for the film to be shown in Mainland theaters. In this case, we might think of the film director as existing in a velvet prison, in which he understands the constraints of mass market films in China and is able to build an artful ending despite them. We might even read the ending reference to *Shawshank Redemption* that then reminds us of the first scene in which Weijie's friend shouts "Freedom, give me freedom!" as a plea for change, leaving aside Quah's remarks in *The Beijing News* quoted earlier. Continuing the allusion from the first scene of the film, Weijie said that his favorite line from *Shawshank Redemption* was, "The prison walls are really interesting, first you hate them, then you get used to them, and finally you come to rely upon them." Perhaps Quah was able to rely on those walls to provide an ending that can be seen as more than a simple conciliatory move to get the film released in the PRC market. It is in the context of comparative

²¹Critics of Chinese film have discussed homages to Hitchcock in independent cinema at length (Marchetti and Lu 2018; Silbergeld 2004).

analysis of Inter-Asian film, situated in the global framework of networked cinemas, that this reading becomes visible. This issue is dedicated to the methodology of China India studies, but China India studies have been born in the context of the “worlding” of academic inquiry, as world literature, global history, and global cinema are the academic fashion de jour. In this essay, I have used the China India comparison as a starting point to begin tracing cross-pollination of narratives throughout Asia – South, Southeast, and East Asia are all represented here – to find that filmmakers in Asia find myriad sources of inspiration and their fans reward their experiments by flocking to cinemas to watch these films.

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