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Experiencing “Internationalized precarity” in inter-Asian film production: A case study of *Seediq Bale*

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ABSTRACT

Seediq Bale, one of the most expensive and most successful inter-Asian co-productions in Taiwanese film history, received attention locally and internationally for its cinematic quality and theme. During the film’s production, Taiwanese, Japanese, South Korean, and ethnically Korean Chinese crewmembers worked together. How did these film workers experience precarity in the highly international and cross-border production of *Seediq Bale*? Based on the author’s on-site participant observation and interviews with film workers between 2009 and 2011, the current study explains the ways in which crewmembers experience precarity—such as insecurity in border-crossing and networking—in the labor process of a Taiwan-based inter-Asian film production. The article explores the international dimensions of precarious labor, or “internationalized precarity,” in the film’s production, evidenced by the heavily freelance- and network-based work and by how film workers cope. This research contributes to media production studies vis-à-vis labor studies by demonstrating how precarity is intensified and negotiated in an internationalized, precarious production site in Asia.

1. Introduction

On an early afternoon in the extraordinarily hot summer of 2009, which was recorded one of the hottest days in recent years in Taiwan, it was 39 °C. We were filming *Seediq Bale* on a film set in Linkou, Xinbei City, Taiwan. Obviously, everybody was exhausted by the weather. It had been a long day, but nothing unusual for a day of shooting; we’d started to settle down by 6 a.m., after our usual one-hour trip to the location. However, it was rather unusual because of what happened on the set—where I, as a Chinese interpreter, felt totally caught in the middle. The argument was not unexpected. We knew of conflicts and uneasiness even before the crank-in day, but as foreign employees in this project, we wanted to carry on and pretend as if everything were fine, at least on the surface. In reality, tensions were just under the surface, and discussed within each group, but waiting for the “right” moment to emerge—like this morning. We were wearing our personas like the warriors in our movie wear their tattoos.

After what happened on this brutally hot morning, Qu, a Korean-Chinese worker, came to tell me that the Taiwanese crewmembers do not appreciate that the Korean-Chinese staff had even come here, despite the risk involved, whereas Korean staff came to me to lament how Taiwanese workers treat them and point out that it’s unfair. They wondered aloud if they should have felt this way straight from the beginning, with the visa issue, and asked rhetorically, “Do you think we got off on the wrong foot?” I tried to find a middle ground, to resolve these conflicts between workers, but I could not answer this question and just said “it will get better.” I

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sensed how they felt, but I did not help my colleagues much. I tentatively concluded that working behind the scenes may be a privilege—and that I may become a “warrior.”

—author’s field notes, at a Linkou film set, July 2009

This scene, in a small city near Taipei, the capital city of Taiwan, illustrates the ways in which film crews experience tension and conflict in film production. The Taiwanese movie *Warriors of the Rainbow: Seediq Bale* (hereafter referred to as *Seediq Bale*) presents an exceptional case of ongoing transformation in the border-crossing inter-Asian film production scene and, more importantly, represents a turning point in Taiwanese film history (Lee, D.M., 2012). Film workers from Taiwan, China, South Korea, and Japan wished to work together and to benefit from the international experience; thus, the nature of creative labor, “precarity”—uncertain, unpredictable, and risky labor (Kalleberg, 2009)—was at play. While research shows successful cases and representations of inter-Asian film production (DeBoer, 2014; Otmazgin & Ben-Ari, 2012; Wasko & Erickson, 2007), and the finished product of a film is well understood in terms of representation, style, aesthetics, and reception (Allen, 1993; Aumont, Bergala, Marie, & Vernet; Teo, 2013), less understood are the labor processes of cultural production (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2010), particularly in the case of Asia. To this end, we should ask: How do practices of film workers from different countries manifest in the production site? And, in turn: How is their labor shaped by the nature of international and border-crossing film production?

In answering these questions, this article looks at the ways in which the international dimensions of precarious labor, termed “internationalized precarity,” are generated within project-based, network-based, freelance-heavy fields such as film production through a case study of *Seediq Bale*. The 2011 film portrays the Wushe Incident, an uprising of Taiwanese aborigines, led by Mona Rudao, against the Japanese colonizers in 1930. In the film’s production, four groups of film crews—namely, Taiwanese, Japanese, South Koreans (hereafter referred to as Koreans), and ethnic Koreans in China (*Chaoxianzu* or, hereafter, Korean-Chinese)—were recruited. I, as a native of South Korea, was fortunate to work with the film as a Chinese-Korean interpreter and on the Korean visual effects team. In addition, through the production department of the film production company, I had the opportunity to conduct an ethnography that included on-site participant observation and in-depth interviews with 34 crew members over several stays in Taiwan between 2009 and 2011.

This article focuses on a case study of a Taiwan-based inter-Asian media production, closely examining the labor processes and conditions of internationalized precarity performed by Taiwanese, Japanese, Korean, and Korean-Chinese film workers in Taiwan. In doing so, it contributes to research on the international dimension of a labor process of media production (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2010; Paterson, Lee, Saha, & Zoellner, 2016). Sociologists and media, communication, and cultural studies scholars alike recognize the importance of developing scholarship on media production (Cohen, 2012; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2010), but ethnographic works on the film industry are still lacking compared to those on the television industry (Mayer, Banks, & Caldwell, 2009: 4). In recent years, production studies have increasingly explored spaces, experiences, practices, and surroundings of production (Banks, Conor, & Mayer, 2015). While attention to a “new” production studies in media production is increasing, scholarship on the international dimensions of production studies is lacking (Paterson et al., 2016). In the same vein, little attention has been paid to the context of Asia; thus, this study is important in that it advances knowledge around the international dimensions of film production, particularly within an Asian context. Although its focus is on a single case, this study has both international and intranational dimensions as it centers on the experiences of film workers from different countries and, importantly, illuminates a precarious labor within international film production.

To explore this issue, I begin with an overview of existing literature connecting precarious labor practices in film production to internationalized precarity. Next, I describe my research sites and present ethnographic and interview data on the labor process in the production of *Seediq Bale*. I analyze how film workers experience and deal with their internationalized precarious labor processes and environments.

2. From precarious labor to internationalized precarity in production studies

Since a relative dearth of studies on the conditions of cultural labor in media production has been pointed out (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2010; Murdock, 2003), production studies have entered into a new phase of focusing more on different aspects and characteristics of both inside and outside production—such as labor, precarity, and border-crossing—with empirically rich data. However, the primary focus in studies of film and television production is still largely on English-speaking contexts (Banks et al., 2015; Mayer et al., 2009). To this effect, research on media industry production has shown that labor processes and conditions are an important area of investigation of and about the industry (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2010).

As is the case in other media industries, labor is precarious in the film industry (Banks & Hesmondhalgh, 2009; Blair, Culkin, & Randle, 2003; Kennedy, 2010). The precarity of cultural labor is discursively characterized by the type of labor market it falls into—project-based work (Banks & Hesmondhalgh, 2009)—and the operation of cultural labor through network-based employment (Lee, 2011). These characteristics are interrelated. First, film industries worldwide are project-based, as is much cultural production (Blair et al., 2003). The freelance nature of such project-based work enables its laborers to be highly mobile, shifting into “new and different formations” from one project to the next (Miller, 2016: 153). The labor conditions in the industry are shaped by a “culture of uncertainty and lack of security” (Beck, 2003: 6). Second, informal relationships between previous and current colleagues potentially lead to future projects and are continuously important for film workers. Informal, interpersonal social networks play a significant role in acquiring information about potential jobs in the industry and securing positions (Blair, Grey, & Randle, 2001; Blair et al., 2003; Christopherson, 2002; Randle & Culkin, 2000). As such, the labor conditions of the film industry epitomize precarious labor and are embedded in the interplay between project-based work, employment networks, and temporary but “freely” mobile jobs.

How, then, do film workers manage the precarious labor of producing a film? On the one hand, the temporary nature of project-

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