How Not to Miss the Boat

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Across the world, cultural export, through film and music, had always been used by governments to create a positive image of their countries. For decades westerners knew about Thailand from the old musical, The King and I. James Hilton's Lost Horizon built the image of Shangrila as the world knows it today. Tourist arrivals in New Zealand increased by 50 percent after Lord of the Rings, and PSY's Gangnam Style reportedly increased the world's interest in Korea and its culture.

In such a context, Bhutan is an unexplored world of stories. The country's epics, mythology, history, and folklores hold potential for universal appreciation. Unfortunately, Bhutan's creative industry, as seen in its film sector, remains beleaguered. This article reflects on the industry, which is an opportunity missed but a potential to be tapped.

Using the Narrative of Film

The use of films and other cultural artefacts to infuse popular culture across the wider world has been part of the soft power strategy of countries in the West. Hollywood and the White House have worked together to export American values, ideals, and culture to the outside world. Films continue to be a handy public relations tool.

For example, the 1993 images of enraged Somali mobs dragging the battered bodies of two American soldiers through the city streets perhaps still hurt in the collective memory of the American people. It was a covert mission gone horribly wrong in the guerrilla-controlled streets of Mogadishu in Somalia.

So in 2000, when Ridley Scott started planning his would-be blockbuster, the Department of Defence provided extensive support to the film. This included Black Hawk helicopters, equipment, trained pilots, and Special Forces. There was one overriding agenda of the US government here-to paint the loss as a triumph of American ideals.

While Somali mobs wanted to kill every American soldier they could capture, naked street children in the film wave goodbye in gratitude to the retreating soldiers at the end of the film. Hollywood once again succeeded in writing a new narrative of the event that had gone awry for the American society.

Meanwhile, a brilliantly-made small-budget film had a huge advertising impact for the central Asian country of Kazakhstan. The 2006 comedy, Borat (full name-Borat! Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan), by Sacha Baron Cohen, increased tourist arrivals in Kazakhstan tenfold. The film has nothing to do with Kazakhstan. However, a fictitious Kazakh journalist, Borat Sagdiyev, travels to the US at the behest of the Kazakh Ministry of Information to make a documentary. The rest is an 84-minute comedy whose chief fodder is the decadence of American culture.

Indeed, big-time advertising firms know that movie marketing campaigns can sometimes yield the best results. The difficulty is to find a concept with such universal appeal. Does Bhutan have possibilities for such a grand appeal?

Bhutan is a Land of Stories

Bhutanese filmmakers, critics, and culture experts say Bhutan has the content and imagery to be a veritable story world. As a country that considers culture and tradition as the foundation of its existence, Bhutan has much to take advantage of. For example, it could use the visual media to promote its Buddhist folk culture, which has scope for universal appreciation. The country's epics, mythology, history, and the legends of *ngyagoes* (strongmen) could provide scope for larger-than-life stories.

"Bhutan has a thriving culture and pristine natural environment, and these elements provide filmmakers with a scenario that is unique from the rest of the world," says Thukten Yeshi, a filmmaker and cinema consultant who has been closely involved with the film sector. "This is where the real opportunity lies, because this unique story could mean a new cinematic form that Bhutan could export to the outside world."

The national film policy acknowledges that Bhutan has rich film content. With its distinct cultural heritage and a modernist interpretation of development and human wellbeing through the ideals of Gross National Happiness, Bhutan stands the chance to present a wonderful juxtaposition to what's happening elsewhere, especially in the developed nations. Cultural communication academics say values that are anchored in inherent human goodness and spontaneity have more or less disappeared from developed societies, and this is where Bhutan could reach out to the outside audience through the visual media.

Dorji Wangchuk, a PhD scholar at Macau University, feels that even on the technical level, a Buddhist perspective to storytelling could be explored as a fundamental technique.

"Modern cinema chiefly follows the hero's journey structure with a central good-versus-evil theme," he says. "Buddhism's non-dualistic principle does not see an extreme difference between good and bad. There are no heroes or villains. Everything is an interconnected phenomenon. These ideas could be tapped into for what could become a Buddhist film narrative-and Bhutan can take the lead in this development."

The State of the Film Sector

The reality, unfortunately, is contrary to what people could hope for. The Bhutanese film sector is in a shambles of sorts. Filmmakers say there is no industry as such, just a handful of disillusioned enthusiasts who have accidentally ventured into filmmaking looking for glamour and stardust that seem to elude them year in year out.

Bhutan's film sector is unorganised, adhoc, and meek. It's a ragtag industry that lacks professionalism and vision. The sector started informally in the 1990s with untrained hands occasionally churning out easy Bollywood imitations and slapstick comedies. By the turn of the new millennium, the sector looked fairly upbeat, and at its peak. From 2009 through 2013, it even produced some 30 films a year. However, production has dipped over the years as private investors pulled out because of poor returns. Some producers claim to have suffered heavy losses.

The government continued to show apathy towards the sector, often promising to do something but ultimately doing little. Meanwhile, musicians, singers, actors, directors, and extras started venturing out into more economically viable sectors. Some joined politics and others went abroad looking for work. A few hung on, hoping against hope.

The National Film Policy was finally out in 2013. It promised much, and excited many. Acknowledging challenges, it identified several remedial measures to promote the sector. It talked about, among other things, encouraging co-productions between foreign and Bhutanese filmmakers, supporting human resource development, improving the review and certification process, and establishing a film school. It also called for the establishment of a National Film Commission and a Film Development Fund. It promised incentives and foreign investment.

"International collaboration is an efficient way to improve filmmaking skills in Bhutan, to attract international investment in the film sector, and to open up foreign markets for Bhutanese films," states the policy. "Increasingly, film is seen as a cultural and economic asset. In most countries, this shift from a regulatory view towards a facilitating approach has led to the creation of central agencies that facilitate all aspects of film development, production, distribution, and regulation."

After a long wait, the Film Commission was established in 2018. The Commission members, most of whom are bureaucrats, recently visited Korea to learn from the many successes of the Korean Wave, called Hallyu in the native language. The film policy identifies three critical responsibilities for the Commission: Training and capacity development, ensuring sustainability of the film sector, and promotion and marketing of Bhutanese films.

"The Policy categorically states how Bhutanese films could be used to build Bhutan's image abroad," says Thukten Yeshi. "The belief systems, storytelling traditions, and many other aspects can be integrated into the conventions of filmmaking to create a unique film style for Bhutan. For instance, the concept of parables in Buddha's teachings can be applied to scene construction."

Meanwhile, a film complex is being built, thanks to a plot of land granted to the sector by His Majesty the King. The proposed four-storey complex will house colour grading and sound design studios on the ground floor, shops catering to film-related equipment on the first floor, classrooms, conference halls, and offices on the second floor, and film studios on the third floor. This is expected to help make the sector more professional.

Of Barriers and Barricades

Observers attribute the stagnation of the film sector to the disinterest of the authorities and the lack of political will and imagination within the government. The industry faces resource and investment constraints. There is a lack of professionalism in the industry because there are no film or drama schools, professional studios, or other related infrastructure. There is a general apathy for the modern arts, and unpredictable decisions of the review board have sent discouraging signals to potential filmmakers and producers.

Impediments to co-productions include tourist tariffs for foreign filmmakers, film being on the negative list of the Foreign Direct Investment policy, and complex processes of obtaining permits and access. There is excessive red tape and the Bhutan Filming Regulation is rather rigid and stringent. Filmmakers say if the country is serious about reaping the benefits of international filming projects, then a one-stop-shop for facilitating such projects is important. They say countries like Malaysia and New Zealand roll out red carpet facilities to foreign filmmakers, apart from providing cash rebates and other incentives.

The biggest barrier perhaps is poor access to finance. Banks are reluctant to fund uncertain project proposals and individuals with money are not interested in investing in the sector. It is a desperate effort trying to raise funds internally, say producers. One filmmaker, whose art film project required a substantial budget, had to find money from countries like Germany and Nepal.

Filmmakers feel the situation would improve if the proposed Film Development Fund could materialise. Others say private individuals with interest in the film sector, and who have the necessary resources, could start a public limited company. Such funds or public companies could invest in mega movies and seek partnership with producers abroad.

"If somebody has a great idea, we could examine its potential and look at the possibility of big companies like Druk Holding and Investments funding the project," says the Governor of the Royal Monetary Authority, Dasho Penjore. "Our filmmakers should make use of the potential our culture and tradition offers to seek partnership with international investors."

Dorji Wangchuk says the Royal University of Bhutan could establish a film institute within its ambit. "When I taught in Sherubtse, I encouraged students to organise film workshops and festivals, and some of their products were amazing," he says. "Few of them have made filmmaking their career from that experience. Given a choice, many would opt for something that is artistic over scientific endeavours or careers."

The Cultural Catch 22

As much as Bhutan's culture holds potential for a good film or a story, it has also been misinterpreted to stand in the way of creative projects. It has presented a Catch 22 of sorts. Overzealous and self-styled cultural custodians have baulked at what they think is transgression of the art. A case in point is Lama Khyentse Norbu's Hema Hema: Sing Me A Song While I Wait. The film was banned from being screened in Bhutan but it secured berths in prestigious international festivals as Locarno, Toronto, Busan, and London.

The Department of Culture cited inappropriate use of masks and other religious symbols in the film, although officials later clarified that the ban was imposed because the film's producers "had not followed the due process of law". Filmmakers say the ban seriously dampened their morale and caused psychological damage to the budding art film culture. They say it also sent wrong signals to potential producers and investors from abroad.

"The damage is huge because art films from Bhutan would be one potential export item as well as an instrument for Bhutan's soft power," says Dorji Wangchuk. "Also, it is one area where our people have ventured into-on their own-and have made tremendous contributions in terms of putting Bhutan on the map of the world cinema and documentary circuit. So, for whatever reason the film was banned, it was certainly a cold shower on creativity."

The fate of Bhutan's latest art film, The Red Phallus, by Tashi Gyeltshen, hangs on the balance with regard to its domestic premiere. The film has already created waves of its own recently by winning the Critic Award at the 2018 Busan International Film Festival in South Korea. Critics and art-house cinema lovers are heaping lavish praise on Tashi Gyeltshen's first feature-length work, and Asian Shadows has picked up international rights to the film.

However the national regulator, Bhutan InfoComm and Media Authority, is standing its ground. Officials say the ban on Hema Hema will not be lifted any time soon, and they will not tolerate anything that misinterprets or portrays in an inappropriate light the country's culture and traditions.

Bhutan Could Learn from Global Successes

Cultural communication academics say a society or a nation's culture -- as aggregated by its film and music industry -- has the ability to attract or co-opt, and this could strategically be positioned as soft power. For example, in 2010, realising Bhutan's appetite for Indian films and TV soaps, the Indian Council for Cultural Relations set up the Nehru-Wangchuck Cultural Centre as the Cultural Wing of the Embassy of India in Thimphu. Today, many Bhutanese visit the Centre to practice yoga, learn Indian classical musical instruments, and borrow books on India from its little library.

Bhutan's political leadership has talked about exerting soft power through the deepening of discourse on happiness on global fora. Couldn't film and media be strategically used for a similar purpose? Many countries have done that. Joshep Nye, who first coined the term "soft power" in 1990, identifies culture as one of the three broad categories of soft power in his 2004 book, Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics.

In fact, Bhutan's cultural appeal and attractiveness of its happiness brand -- two of the six parameters used to rank a country's soft power -- could be combined for better strategic positioning. Academics point out how the US uses Hollywood as its soft power to propagate American values, such as democracy and neo-liberalism, American lifestyles and the Disney culture, and even justify white supremacy.

"America has been using cinema to justify wars on foreign soils, or as efforts against global terrorism and illicit drug trade. Do you know that Hollywood even sits on federal government committees on foreign policy?" says Dorji Wangchuk. "Now, I am not condemning what other countries do. Every state is entitled to do what is best for its interest. What I am saying that we in Bhutan should do what needs to be done. As a country, we cannot compete in manufacturing or military. Our only strategy to boost our sovereignty and enhance our foreign policy globally is through soft power. And sovereignty, by the way, is still a work in progress. We must never let our guard down."

Others say Bhutan could look at how Korea developed its film and pop industry. Indeed, South Korea's success in creating Hallyu or the "Korean Wave" by spreading its culture far and wide has been admired even by US presidents. Anthony Faiola of The Washington Post says the spread of Korean entertainment helped in the global sale surge of goods and services such as food, clothing, and Korean language.

Bhutanese youth are no strangers to Korean culture. They have had exposure to Korean TV dramas and pop music. Indeed, the first-ever K-pop concert in Thimphu in June 2017 drew more than 10,000 people, mostly youth, who watched five Korean bands belt out numbers familiar to them. The crowd went into a frenzy when the stars greeted them in Dzongkha (national language).

Today, the South Korean government uses the Korean Wave as a soft power tool to engage young people around the world. Several studies acknowledge the influence of culture and tradition for South Korea's generally positive perception around the world. A 2013 Financial Times article reported that Korean cultural exports had risen to USD 4.2 billion in 2011. At a joint press conference in 2013, talking about how Korean culture was sweeping up people around the world, the former US President Barack Obama said his daughters had taught him a "pretty good Gangnam Style".

Selling Brand Bhutan Through Films

Many films have inadvertently helped countries reap huge benefits though. Lord of the Rings, Borat, and Twilight are among the recent examples of how films shot in specific locations have turned those places into tourist hotspots. Writing for Forbes, Carol Pinchefsky says since the release of the first of the Lord of the Rings trilogy in 2001, New Zealand is more known among foreigners as a country where their favourite film was shot. The country has recorded a 50 percent increase in tourist arrivals since the release of the film. Like Bhutan, tourism is New Zealand's second biggest industry.

The film Borat-despite sparking several controversies and facing legal actions-did one thing: It firmly placed Kazakhstan on the world map. In April 2012, the Kazakh Foreign Minister said the film hugely boosted tourism in the country. "I am grateful to Borat for helping attract tourists to Kazakhstan," Minister Yerzhan Kazykhanov told BBC. Just six years ago, in 2006, the Kazakh authorities had banned the film and threatened to sue Sacha Baron Cohen for its negative depiction of the country. Similarly, the Twilight series made the tiny Washington town of Forks into a tourist hub almost overnight.

Bhutan could benefit immensely from similar projects, say filmmakers. International filmmakers say Bhutan is a cinematic paradise. Its pristine environment and scenic beauty complement the country's rich culture and tradition.

A former Buddhist monk and filmmaker from Australia, Greg Sneddon, who shot Arrows of the Thunder Dragon in Bhutan, told The Sydney Morning Herald that Bhutan's beauty is simply striking. "Wherever I went, I thought if you point a camera at anything-the light, the mountains, the trees-it is just right for a film."

It would help if Bhutan's policymakers and regulators also understood this fact.

Watching the Phallus Go Up

In Lama Khyentse Norbu's Travellers and Magicians, a 2003 feature film that firmly put Bhutan on the world cinema map, the America-bound hero Dhendup misses the only bus to Thimphu because of a minor distraction. On the way to the nearest road head from his remote village, he stops to watch the fascinating ritual of hanging wooden phalluses from the four eaves of a newly built home. As a result, he misses the bus and never makes it to America, where he had dreamt of working in apple orchards and making it big in life.

Bhutan's film sector has been like Dhendup. There have been distractions and false promises. It has perhaps been a victim of its own trappings -- the major one being the lack of courage and imagination.