THE POLITICAL VIA THE CINEMATIC: TRACING CHINA'S TRANSFORMATION TOWARD A GLOBALLY AMBITIOUS STATE

Tymoteusz Chajdas

University of California-Santa Barbara

Starting with a brief critical history of the Chinese film industry since the beginning of this century, this essay reviews the emergence of the cultural industries in China alongside globalizing forces as well as Chinese state policies, particularly Deng Xiaoping's far-reaching market-opening reforms. While interpreting Chinese global ambitions as represented through the prism of its national cinema, this paper asks: How are institutions and aesthetics interacting in ways that exhibit resonances and tensions between the cinematic and the political? It pays particular attention to the transformations in institutional conditions of cultural production and circulation. First, it shows how these changes were animated by globalizing forces, and how they were influenced by the Chinese state policy. Next, it tackles three Chinese films, Hero (2002), The Great Wall (2016), and Wolf Warrior II (2017), as distinct instances of Chinese cinematic production that represent a steady trajectory toward a more globalized posture of the Chinese state. This paper unveils how selected themes and aesthetics represent varying levels of the state's globalized posture and signal a transformation from a relatively national stance toward a more globally ambitious one that attempts to project national capability and power globally. This transformation mirrors the steady trajectory of China's increasing incorporation into the global capitalist economy.

Introduction

Prior to the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949, Chinese cinema has sometimes been described as both "pre-revolutionary" and "post-colonial,"[1] — that is, occupying a space defined by both creative experimentation and political tension. This paradox points to the constraints of the Chinese Communist Party (hereafter referred to as CCP) as well as to the orthodoxy of Kuomintang or the

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1   Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, *The Oxford History of World Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 409.

Chinese Nationalist Party. However, it also signals a unique set of characteristics that enlivened the canon of resistant films of the 1930s and 1940s to a celebratory status, which enriched Chinese cultural heritage and its national cinematic culture.

Following the first film screening in China in 1896, the development of the Chinese cinematic industry, which was then located in cosmopolitan Shanghai, was influenced by China's "reluctant encounter with the West and the 'modern'."[2] In the 1900s, Shanghai became an entrepôt, where filmmakers distributed foreign film to other major cities, including Beijing. As Chinese national cinema flourished, influenced by Japanese and German cultural products and, from the 1930s, by America, China's cinematic landscape would further reflect the tensions between state power, propaganda, creative energies and, eventually, the national project of marketization. All of these factors shaped the modern Chinese film industry.

This essay briefly describes the Chinese film industry since the beginning of the 1950s until the late 2000s, paying particular attention to transformations in institutional conditions of cultural production and circulation. In doing so, it reviews the emergence of Chinese cultural industries alongside globalizing forces and Chinese state policies, particularly Deng Xiaoping's far-reaching market-opening reforms. It then compares three Chinese films — *Hero* (2002), *The Great Wall* (2016), and *Wolf Warrior II* (2017) — each chosen based on the combination of high box office ranking, worldwide appeal, and international collaboration, to unveil how their themes and aesthetics signal a transition towards the more globalized posture of contemporary China.

Post-Socialist Film Industry

Modern Chinese film production has deep political and ideological undertones.[3] While this may be a well-known fact, it is necessary to consider how these ideological and political factors have been embedded in the state policies that shaped the cinematic landscape and the structure of the Chinese market. Film production is now considered to be one of the core "cultural markets" of the country. However, for a long time, film was considered a product of "the political, economic, military and cultural invasion of the West." [4] This reluctance toward the West stemmed from Chinese experience in the 19th century, when after a long period of isolationism, China faced colonial encroachment as well as political pressures from Western countries to allow foreign trade. Unable to stand up to Western nations, the period of 1839 and 1949 has been referred to as "the century of humiliation" for China.[5]

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2   Nowell-Smith, *The Oxford History*, 409.

3   Mary Lynne Calkins, "Censorship in Chinese Cinema," *Hastings Comm. & Ent. LJ* 21 (1998): 239.

4   Shujen Wang, *Framing Piracy: Globalization and Film Distribution in Greater China* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 61.

5   David Scott, *China and the International System, 1840-1949: Power, Presence, and Perceptions in a Century of Humiliation* (Albany, NY: Suny Press, 2008).

Undeniably, the political climate as well as the experience of national humiliation influenced the Chinese film industry. In fact, the CCP sought to nationalize it and utilize cinematic images as tools of propaganda. Beginning with the Communist takeover in 1949, the production, distribution, exhibition, and censorship of cinematic images were closely monitored and controlled by the Ministry of Propaganda and, later, by the Film Bureau of the Ministry of Culture. In 1951, all of the independent Shanghai films produced before 1949 were banned with the Motion Picture Act, which censored productions that hurt national interests and racial pride, violated official policy, disrupted official order, or disobeyed the government or law in any form. The act promoted moving pictures consistent with a national rhetoric that supported the socialist reconstruction of China through a particular representation of the lives of soldiers, workers, and peasants.[6]

With support from the Soviets, the Chinese film industry achieved technological self-sufficiency by establishing large feature film studios as well as smaller provincial facilities that produced newsreels and educational shorts, which signaled the growing ambition of the Chinese state as well as its commitment to furthering propaganda and the development of the Chinese creative industries. The 1960s brought difficult times to the Chinese film landscape, with widespread famine and the Cultural Revolution prompting further reforms in the industry. These transformations included banning movies which allegedly promoted bourgeois ideology, were not aligned with "revolutionary" ideals, or were labeled as "poisonous weeds" that were either withdrawn or displayed to the public for condemnation.[7] The Chinese film industry suffered a major blow since directors, writers, and actors had difficulties practicing their creative craft. Many of them were imprisoned or placed in labor camps.[8]

The production and dissemination of state propaganda had a negative impact on the development of Chinese cinema.[9] State-oriented productions tended to target large-scale events rather than actual audiences; a movie of that time, *Bridge (1949),* portrayed the Chinese Civil War. This tendency curtailed the people's enthusiasm for Chinese movies. Growing up in the 1950s and 1960s, a period of dramatic social transformations, directors such as Tian Zhuangzhuang, Zhang Yimou (*Hero*, *The Great Wall*), and Chen Kaige have generally been seen as the representatives of the Fifth Generation of Chinese filmmakers. Having attended the Beijing Film Academy, they were the first ones to veer away from national film constraints and policies as

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6   Nowell-Smith, *The Oxford History*, 694.
7   Ibid.
8   Daniel Robert Edwards, "Alternative Visions, Alternative Publics: Contemporary Independent Chinese Documentary as a Public Sphere" (Melbourne, Monash University, 2014), 92; Zhiwei Xiao and Yingjin Zhang, *Encyclopedia of Chinese Film* (Routledge, 2002), 27.
9   Jeremy Brown et al., *Visualizing Modern China: Image, History, and Memory, 1750–Present* (Washington DC: Lexington Books, 2014), 219.

they did not comply with an "unsteady diet of politicized and ritualized movies."[10] Instead, the new creative spirits of the Fifth Generation filmmakers of the mid-1980s "turned Chinese cinema on its head."[11] These productions were praised for their artistic achievements since their experimental form and aesthetics offered a radical break from the pedagogic traditions of the past. Unfortunately, many of the movies produced at the tie were intricate and geared towards a more educated audience. They performed quite poorly in the market, although they were creatively profitable some filmmakers who, thanks to their movies, progressed in the industry.[12]

The relatively poor performance of Fifth Generation films put increasing economic pressures on the Chinese cinema industry. During the 1980s, policies began to transition from a paradigm of planned economy to a more market-oriented one, which led to investments, by local media entrepreneurs, into the creative and cultural sectors. Chinese films would change yet again. These changes in the Chinese cultural production and circulation occurred at the same time as the country's economic take-off. Following the establishment of modern industries and world-class coal and textile production facilities in the mid-1980s, industrial reforms achieved success in many areas.[13] Deng Xiaoping's market reforms, along with his transformations of the agricultural sector, led to the "opening up" of the economy to foreign direct investment. The greater opening spurred an increase in selective privatization and entrepreneurship. In 1992, during the establishment of the socialist market economy announced at the Fourteenth National Congress of the CCP, it was proposed that China would develop its economic sectors. This rationale led to the substantial growth of private enterprises at a constant rate of more than 30 percent each year since the 1990s,[14] while private ownership grew three-fold.[15]

Deng Xiaoping's historic "Southern Turn" as well as the creation of special economic zones transformed Chinese society and, for the first time, placed culture "on the front lines of economic restructuring."[16] In *Postsocialist Modernity*, Jason McGrath compares this transformation to one in line with Theodor Adorno and Max

10   Paul Clark, "Reinventing China: The Fifth-Generation Filmmakers," *Modern Chinese Literature*, 1989, 121.

11   Ibid.

12   Ying Zhu, *Chinese Cinema during the Era of Reform: The Ingenuity of the System* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2003).

13   Barry J. Naughton, *The Chinese Economy: Transitions and Growth* (Cambridge, MA: MIT press, 2006).

14   Hongliang Zheng and Yang Yang, "Chinese Private Sector Development in the Past 30 Years: Retrospect and Prospect," *International House University of Nottingham, China Policy Institute*, 2009.

15   Yingyi Qian and Jinglian Wu, "China's Transition to a Market Economy," *How Far across the River*, 2003, 31–63.

16   Jason McGrath, *Postsocialist Modernity: Chinese Cinema, Literature, and Criticism in the Market Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 3.

Horkheimer's concept of "culture industry."[17] In their opinion, popular culture became reminiscent of factory production because of its reliance on the standardization of cultural products, such as film, print media, and radio. McGrath further suggests that works of art and cultural expression, along with high culture ideals, which were abandoned by intellectuals and artists following the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, have now become relatively autonomous. This implies that, under neoliberal logic and capitalist conditions, both high and popular culture became determined by the culture industry itself. This "relative autonomy," McGrath suggests, "can be simultaneously read as but an aspect of or appearance within an underlying transition from a state heteronomy to a market heteronomy."[18]

McGrath's commentary points to a shift from predominantly traditional filmmaking grounded in Chinese cultural logic to filmmaking with a more global stance that began to incorporate the logic of capital accumulation, free market economy, and the private sector. To him, the Chinese film industry resembles a case of complex negotiations between the "public" (referring to the control on behalf of the Chinese state) and the "private" (implying the ambitions within Chinese cultural industry) without complete privatization, as it occurred in much of the "Second World" following the post-Cold War logic. Interestingly, the notion of "post-socialist China" (or the post-socialist condition which China finds itself in) proves to be a useful analytical tool to further conceptualize modern Chinese society as suspended between the communist utopia promised by Maoism and the capitalist rhetoric of progress it is still driven by.[19] According to Michael Keane, a professor of Chinese Media and Communications, this very condition is illustrative of "the tension between public and private models of cultural management,"[20] which is fundamental to further understand the transformations in China's media industries. McGrath refers to these tensions as "rhetoric of transition," which he observes in the discursive production and the hegemonic position of the CCP. Without arguing for China's presumed Westernization, McGrath allows us to recognize the "transition to a market economy and consumer paradise."[21] Following his logic, this conditioned and, to some extent,

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17   Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno and Theodor W. Adorno, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture* (London: Psychology Press, 2001); Deborah Cook, *The Culture Industry Revisited: Theodor W. Adorno on Mass Culture* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1996); Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*, 2006, 41–72.

18   McGrath, *Postsocialist Modernity: Chinese Cinema, Literature, and Criticism in the Market Age*, 12.

19   Ibid., 205.

20   Michael Keane, "The Geographical Clustering of Chinese Media Production," in *Routledge Handbook of Chinese Media* (Abingdon, United Kingdom: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015), 341.

21   McGrath, *Postsocialist Modernity,* 205.

forced Chinese culture to "adjust to market conditions of one sort or another."[22]

Economic Unleashing

The post-socialist condition of the Chinese film industry, or rather the effects of socialist policies on cultures, society, and individuals in the wake of the economic opening, has become interwoven with the complex process of marketization that Chinese cultural industries have undergone with the increases in investment, production, and consumption of cultural products. Discussing the process of marketization, Darrell Davis, a professor of Visual Arts, suggested that the Chinese government strategically encouraged and promoted homemade media and cultural products with an incentive to align the national industry with "world standards."[23] In this context, based on relative increases in media production as well as the box office rates in China, marketization could be seen as a "balancing act between an open market and a planned economy."[24] In other words, the process itself became a strategic tool which aspired to "match Hollywood internationally while continuing to serve the Party at the national level," and "boost the quality and quantity of Chinese films, moving the People's Republic of China [hereafter referred to as PRC] steadily toward a major soft-power role in the international arena."[25]

This development exposes certain contradictions in the Chinese media industry. The generalized national aspiration to meet international markets and standards, for example, starkly contrasts the state's preoccupation with projecting national values, ideologies, and sentiments of national glory or national humiliation. This further demonstrates the complexity of contemporary Chinese film industry. Despite the fact that the Chinese state embraced market reforms in the 1970s, these reforms did not fully impact the cultural arena until the early 2000s. It was between 2002-2003 – one year after China's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) and just after the release of *Hero* (2002) – that the Chinese government implemented a wide range of reforms in its national film industry.

Split between the commercial potential that was heralded by China joining the WTO in 2001, the greater autonomy of some media outlets, and the remainders of state control,[26] the Chinese state decided to end the fifty-year monopoly of the national China Film Group (later transformed into China Film Corporation). Roughly during the same time, the reforms allowed for foreign film productions to establish partnerships with China. This was the beginning of an increasingly global film landscape. These developments, framed as the "going out" policy, encouraged Chinese film to "go global" due to large investments flooding the industry. The so-

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22   McGrath, *Postsocialist Modernity,* 131.

23   Darrell William Davis, "Market and Marketization in the China Film Business," *Cinema Journal* 49, no. 3 (2010): 122.

24   Ibid., 123–24.

25   Ibid.

26   Keane, "The Geographical Clustering," 341.

called Twelve-Year Plan established a new model of Chinese economic development. It was followed by the "Plan to Boost the Culture Industry," which made culture an important component of China's strategy for long-term economic growth. This shift prioritized the film sector along with other cultural sectors, such as publishing, animation, advertising, and entertainment. It aspired for the culture industry to grow at a double-digit rate and contribute to the country's GDP. [27]

Michael Keane claims that "China needed to adopt a global market perspective if it was to hold back the forces of globalization."[28] He suggests that the Chinese state attempted to create a more attractive global image "under the auspices of 'cultural soft power.'"[29] The Chinese state began to promote national culture and its industries by equating them with economic development and prosperity as well as a necessary component of the well-being of the socialist market economy. Furthermore, some have remarked that cultural industries became "an important channel for the satisfaction of people's diverse spiritual needs under the conditions of the social market economy," [30] which prompted the state to render cultural industries and cultural products as important vehicles of national and economic transformation.

The "economic unleashing" or opening-up of China's creative and cultural industries, along with the Chinese state's strategic incentives to utilize cultural sectors in the larger project of China's national renewal, renders the image of Chinese cinema industry as fragmented and conflictual – torn between the strong presence of the state but also driven by the increasingly neoliberal logics of global capital. McGrath describes it as "a world in fragments," which successfully captures "the differentiated, pluralized state of Chinese culture since the early 1990s," and the "impossibility of representing or narrating it in any way that can approach a tidy whole."[31] Furthermore, McGrath emphasizes that as a result of the advanced reform era, China lost a "master ideological signifier or overarching cultural fever," and instead, embraced the central cultural logic of the market. This does not necessarily point to a lack of direction of the industry. Rather, it could signal an alignment with the complex and disjunctive nature of modern neoliberal globalization. McGrath also suggests that the "marketization of culture emerges not just as a condition of production but as a historical horizon that is imagined and negotiated in diverse ways through individual works of art, new genres of entertainment cinema and popular literature."[32]

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27   Yu Hong, "Reading the Twelfth Five-Year Plan: China's Communication-Driven Mode of Economic Restructuring," *International Journal of Communication*, 2014.

28   Michael Keane, *Handbook of Cultural and Creative Industries in China* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2016), 4.

29   Ibid.

30   Ibid., 7.

31   McGrath, *Postsocialist Modernity*, 23.

32   Ibid., 24.

All of this points to a larger process of national imagining, which has recently begun to define the increasingly ambitious global stance of China. This stance has involved both international collaborations as well as the production of content, driven by capital logic, that captivated wider audiences. McGrath's remarks suggest that while some elements of state propaganda were replaced by marketization strategies that opened the Chinese film industry, what defined China's economic transformation was an assemblage of processes. Considering China's cinematic industries, these involved state policies directed at media sectors and less-controllable shifts enabled by increasing waves of globalization, including China's economic take-off following its key role in the global supply chains as well as its rapid urban revolution. Yomi Braester framed urbanism as integral to China's globalizing processes and cinema. To him, increased urbanization led to the formation of subjective experiences, which generated a new breed of filmmakers who began to confront "the same obstacles that architects know as planning in the face of power." This conditioned them to "think professionally and act politically at the same time."[33]

The unprecedented scale of the Chinese urban revolution should not be left unnoticed. Ranging from wide-spread socio-economic transformations to more subtle changes in people's experiences, the modern Chinese city became a site of cultural production,[34] which shaped a distinctively urban, and in some ways, global culture that included both state interventionism and increasingly transnational sentiments. This is best exemplified by the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), an ambitious China-backed initiative which attempts to revive the ancient Silk Routes through a series of massive infrastructure projects spanning much of Central Asia, Middle East, and Europe.

Although one may attribute this project to a more globalized posture of the Chinese state, the BRI offers an interesting comparison to the recent developments of Chinese cinematic industries. The infrastructural and progress-oriented preoccupation of the BRI and the Silk Routes revival parallels the complexity of the Chinese modern film landscape, which is caught in the deep cultural heritage of distinct film aesthetics, but simultaneously striving to re-align itself with international trends. Problematizing this dichotomy, Michael Curtin reminds us that the aesthetics of Chinese cinema "did not develop within the boundaries of a single state," but rather "operated transnationally for much of its history, gathering financing, talent, and audiences from such diverse locales as Shanghai, Hong Kong, Taipei and Singapore."[35] He employs the concept of media capital, which highlights the historical as well as contemporary "spatial dynamics of the transnational Chinese

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33   Yomi Braester, *Painting the City Red: Chinese Cinema and the Urban Contract* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 6.

34   Braester, *Painting the City Red: Chinese Cinema and the Urban Contract*; Thomas J. Campanella, *The Concrete Dragon: China's Urban Revolution and What It Means for the World* (San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books, 2012).

35   Yingjin Zhang, *A Companion to Chinese Cinema* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2012), 179.

cultural economy."[36]

By looking at Chinese media industries and tracing the geographical deployment of resources, talent, and products, Curtin suggests that shifts in creative activity have been conditioned (1) historically (due to the clustered nature of Chinese film) and (2) through their adaptation "to the pressures and opportunities posed by the latest wave of globalization."[37]

This condition is reflective of the current state of the Chinese film industry. Curtin's concept of media capital, therefore, proves to be a useful heuristic tool to invoke the spatial or geographical centers as well as the concentrations of resources, reputation, and talent. Media capitals have become the "sites of mediation where complex forces and flows interact," inclusive of capital accumulation, creative migration and sociocultural variation.[38] Given this, it is difficult, if not impossible, to determine whether globalizing forces or Chinese state policies should be seen as the predominant factor in the transformation of China's cultural production and circulation. However, one cannot disregard China's WTO accession in 2001, which marked the end of a predominantly national era and progressively equipped China with a more globalized posture, inclusive of its cultural and cinematic industries.

From *Hero* to *Wolf Warrior II*

These transitions, along with the inherent contradictions that accompany them, have not merely been reflected by economic indicators, but have also made their way into the aesthetics of many films representative of a transition toward a more globalized state posture. In other words, institutions and aesthetics began interacting in ways that exhibit resonances and tensions between the cinematic and the political. *Hero* (2002) by Zhang Yimou offers a starting point for this discussion. Released before the reform of China's cultural and creative industries, the film seems to herald the forthcoming shift to a more global posture of China while preserving some of the original and "authentic" flair of what was traditionally associated with Chinese cinema. Even though the paradigmatic approach of Chinese national cinema has thoroughly been problematized,[39] one can suggest that *Hero's* genre of *wuxia*, an aesthetic centered around fantastic stories, martial arts themes, and refined cinematography, renders the movie "typically" Chinese, perhaps in Edward Said's "oriental" sense. This has to do more with its surface-level and thematic presentation rather than what the movie actually represents.

In fact, many have claimed that as a record-breaking Chinese movie, *Hero* managed to successfully capture the attention of global audiences simply because of its "oriental" aesthetics associated with wuxia films. However, it should also be noted that *Hero's* success and incredible international box-office takings have

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36   Zhang, *A Companion*, 179.
37   Ibid.
38   Ibid., 9.
39   Yingjin Zhang, *Chinese National Cinema* (Routledge, 2004).

often been attributed to its popularity in the local market. Precisely for that reason, Miramax did not screen *Hero* until two years after its release in Asia to estimate the success and performance of the picture locally.[40] In this context, *Hero*, as a cultural production, managed to hijack the state propaganda to launch a large-scale commercial success. This has been caused by the fact that earlier productions of Zhang Yimou were frequently criticized by local critics for their strong reminiscence of Fifth Generation films. In their critiques, Chinese experts often claimed that Zhang's films catered to the "eyes of foreigners" because of their representation of China as a backward and anachronistic country.[41] While such criticism targeted certain aspects of Chinese society instead of praising China's national glory, *Hero* attempts to accomplish both. Disguised with sophisticated camera technique, philosophical richness, interlocking plot narratives, and accomplished cinematography, the movie reproduces the well-known theme of conflict and contradiction. Throughout the story, which follows Nameless' arrival at the Qin court, the tale touches upon a number of issues that represent Chinese traditional ideology and national identity.

Interestingly, the movie was recognized as a national success and a cultural symbol of national pride only once it received high praise internationally. This form of international acceptance seemed to solidify the ambitious trajectory of the Chinese movie industry. Fung and Chan suggest that this "second-level nationalism" demonstrates that the practices of forestalling dissent via enforced propaganda are no longer effective. This prompts Fung and Chan to suggest that the Chinese state's partnership with "private corporations to reinvent and reproduce the nationalistic ideology in cultural products" could be considered a viable solution for the Chinese film industry going forward.[42] While interpretations of *Hero* are extensive and vary significantly, the most pronounced representations of Chinese culture in the movie lie in the number of shifting perspectives and narratives, which constitute the main frame of the storyline as well as the theme of *Tianxia,* literally meaning "all under heaven," or "our land." In Zhang's film, the audience is exposed to multiple layers of the same story, which interlock elements of conspiracies, betrayal, and misinformation. These multiple narratives suggest analogies to the Chinese state, selective reading of history, surveillance, and thought management, as seen in the Chinese state propaganda apparatus. These multiple narratives become even more visible in the depiction of the First Emperor who, according to Partricia Buckley Ebrey, is credited for China's first Cultural Revolution. His portrayal in *Hero* recognizes conflicting narratives – narratives of his accomplishments and narratives of his brutality. [43]

40   Gary D. Rawnsley and Ming-Yeh T. Rawnsley, *Global Chinese Cinema: The Culture and Politics of'Hero'* (Abingdon, United Kingdom: Routledge, 2011), 203.

41   Rey Chow, *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1995), 155.

42   Rawnsley and Rawnsley, *Global Chinese Cinema: The Culture and Politics of'Hero'*, 209.

43   Ibid., 14.

Nationalism in *Hero* serves as a backdrop in the theme of *Tianxia*. The phrase itself appears numerously in the film. It implies a dual-ended logic: one being that violence must be dismissed if peace is to be restored and the other being that unification by force is necessary and should be supported in the name of universal peace. Although contradictory, this logic seems to unite, in *Hero*, the assassins and the King of Qin, who believe peace is the ultimate justification for their actions. Resonating with the Chinese view of world order, the motif of *Tianxia*, found in Chinese traditional cultural texts, implies a particular from of global aspirations. The importance of Chinese culture is displayed in multiple moments throughout the movie. However, the most pronounced instance is the scene in which the headmaster insists that his students practice the art of calligraphy when the school is under attack: "Their arrows might destroy our town and topple our kingdom, but they can never obliterate our culture." By referring to the cultivation of the ancient art of calligraphy, the headmaster's comment becomes a powerful signal of Chinese cultural nationalism that testifies to a strong sense of national identity and a more pronounced global posture of modern-day China.

Several years later, in 2016, Zhang Yimou directed a movie quite different from *Hero*: *The Great Wall*. Although the movie's box office ratings did not match the success of *Hero*, it is interesting to take it as an example of China's more "global" or "globalizing" posture. The movie itself tells the epic story of a quest for gunpowder during which a group of European mercenaries (Matt Damon plays one of the main protagonists) travels to China and battles alien monsters (Taotie) on the ethnic border created by the Great Wall. While *The Great Wall* has been criticized for putting form over substance, the movie visibly represents a transformation in the Chinese state's attitudes toward its own cultural industries. A collaboration with Western producers, cinematographers and screenwriters, *The Great Wall* does not only utilize American movie stars but also goes one step further in exotifying and Orientalizing its own culture through the use of colorful uniforms and fantastic costumes.

The use of the Great Wall as the movie's central point of departure – as a civilizational structure and icon symbolizing protectionism and inward-looking politics – may, to some, signify an attempt to breach national barriers and employ a more global posture. Additionally, one can suggest that the use of the legend of Taotie could portray certain reservations with regard to the increasingly global attitudes of modern China. Taotie, as a motif recurring in ancient Chinese mythology, is often characterized as a mythical creature that enjoys drinking and eating. Therefore, it is associated with gluttony, greed, and desire for wealth. In this context, since the entire plot of *The Great Wall* is centered around battling Taotie, one may suggest that it symbolizes national reservations towards the increasing forces of capitalist consumerism, neoliberalism, and marketization, all of which China has been subject to.

However, a Chinese production which is an epitome of a strongly globalized posture with even stronger nationalistic sentiments is Wu Jing's picture *Wolf Warrior II* (2017). The movie, the highest-grossing Chinese film ever released, tells the story of a Chinese soldier, Leng Feng (played by the director himself) who leaves to an African country on a special mission to protect medical aid workers from local rebels and vicious arms dealers. At first, the movie can strike as a hyper-inflated copy of

a typical American war-hero drama, where a white North American intervenes in a typically Middle Eastern country to bring peace and save the locals in the classical display of the proverbial "white man's burden." In the case of *Wolf Warrior II*, Chinese protagonists resemble the so-called "American war heroes" whose presence on the African continent is portrayed as supposedly mighty.

In fact, multiple scenes that involve announcements made by the soldiers or the locals along the lines of "it's okay, it's the Chinese," confirm that the Chinese are being portrayed as saviors. Some spectators might find these images rather surprising or intriguing, as would the entire plot, which projects an image of cutting-edge medical advancements made by a person named Dr. Chen; whose creations carry the promise of eradicating a deadly African virus that eerily resembles Ebola. *Wolf Warrior II* offers many representations, which many may find equally troubling. The uniformed representations of Africa (the country in which the plot takes place remains unnamed) as a site rife with incurable diseases, intolerable gang violence, civil war, and hungry savages is, for instance, highly problematic. However, what some might find even more shocking or horrifying is the frequent depiction of racial segregation between the Africans and the Chinese, which evoques images of colonial domination and imperial desires.

Yet, *Wolf Warrior II* also offers invaluable representations of the Chinese nationhood and its national power. The depictions of masculinity are countless and range from examples of excessive drinking, skillful fighting, and literal muscle flexing, which all project the power of the protagonist, who can be seen as a representation of Chinese domestic and international state power. In other words, such scenes correspond with a more figurative "muscle flexing," of which the Chinese state has been accused because of the Chinese BRI, the South China Sea issue, and the vast Chinese territorial footprint. China's global ambitions are clearly present throughout Wu Jing's movie, which incorporates elements of *Tianxia* as well as "win-win development" scenarios in the context of the neo-imperial presence of China in Africa. This aligns with Daniel Vukovich's concept of "Sinological Orientalism." In Vukovich's mind, China's "dysfunctional, neo-colonial relationship" with Western discourse prompted modern-day China, as the "Other," to reimagine and westernize itself.[44] Understanding that this complex set of developments achieves "neoliberal sameness" through greater inclusion and incorporation into the global capitalist economy, one can see explicit elements of this theme in *Wolf Warrior II.* This is particularly apparent in the context of the play on the theme of an "American war hero" movie and in certain representations of non-Western cultures that many Western movies and cultural practices have been employing quite frequently. By embracing the aesthetics of typified Western movie genres to project Chinese culture, the movie's aesthetics appear to speak of China's political transition toward a more globalized state.

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44   Daniel Vukovich, *China and Orientalism: Western Knowledge Production and the PRC*, vol. 5 (Abingdon, United Kingdom: Routledge, 2013), 2.

Conclusion

This essay briefly outlined the landscape of the Chinese film industry of the last century by concentrating on the transformations in institutional conditions of cultural production and circulation during the era. In doing so, it reviewed the emergence of the cultural industries side by side with globalizing forces and some of the Chinese state policy, particularly the economic and market-opening reforms. Through the analysis of the themes and aesthetics of three distinct Chinese films, namely *Hero* (2002), *The Great Wall* (2016), and *Wolf Warrior II* (2017), this essay argued for a linear transition to an increasingly global posture and attitude of the modern-day Chinese state. While examining the tensions and inherent contradictions between the national and global in both China's economic opening and in the complex processes of marketization and internationalization of cultural and creative industries, it is necessary to also consider the dichotomy of the political and the cinematic. That is, not focusing simply on how the former is capable of prompting the latter, but also on how the latter is capable of representing and signaling the former. Undoubtedly, Wu's highly successful production, *Wolf Warrior II*, testifies to a strong posture of the Chinese state globally, inclusive of its ambitious foreign policy. To a lesser extent, *The Great Wall* also embodies globalist sentiments, while *Hero*, despite its national and global success, has exhibited a less globalized posture overshadowed by critical representations of nationalism and nationhood.