

Chollywooding and Pandering:
The Present and Future of Sino-Hollywood Negotiation
by

Mengyu Chen

East Asian Studies
Duke University

Date: _____

Approved:

Guo-Juin Hong, Supervisor

Prasenjit Duara

Ralph Litzinger

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts
in East Asian Studies
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

The relationship between China and Hollywood has been a contested subject as a result of complicated historical trajectories. Whether during the Republican era or during the post-1994 period when Hollywood films were reimported to the Chinese market, Hollywood's "dominance" seems to be the prevailing narrative, a narrative that describes one party's (Hollywood's) position of dominance over the other (the Chinese market). From the perspective of marketization, Hollywood and the Chinese film industry are entangled in an intense competition. From the perspective of culturalization, though, such a black and white binary is not entirely applicable, because culture itself is always undergoing continuous negotiation and reformulation. This thesis takes two recent Chinese films—*Wolf Warrior II* (Wu Jing, 2017) and *The Great Wall* (Zhang Yimou, 2016)—as my case studies to discuss two of the major forms of representation in the current Sino-Hollywood relationship, namely: "chollywooding" and "pandering." I seek to highlight the dynamics of cultural negotiation and accommodation occurring between the two parties. Inspired by Prasenjit Duara's concept of "circulatory history," I challenge the idea of the "exclusiveness" of Hollywood, or the stationariness of any cultural form. I argue that *Wolf Warrior II* represents a new cultural space—a "Chollywood cinema" (that is, "Hollywood cinema with Chinese characteristics") that combines Hollywood filmmaking techniques with

Chinese ideology. I show that, while Chollywood cinema is particularly appealing to Chinese audiences, it is viewed much less favorably by overseas viewers. By contrast, *The Great Wall* employs a strategy of pandering that is less successful in terms of both its domestic and international receptions because it deviates from both “Hollywood” and “Chollywood/Chinese” ideologies. The aim of this thesis is twofold. On the one hand, I demonstrate that, from a cultural standpoint, the Sino-Hollywood relationship must be characterized as one of “negotiation”: both parties are not simply in a competitive relationship but also a collaborative one, whether they wish to be or not. This reveals a dynamic global-local interplay between “chollywooding” and “pandering.” On the other hand, the growing popularity and success of “Chollywood cinema” indicates how “chollywooding” will take on an increasingly significant role in reformulating Sino-Hollywood negotiation in the foreseeable future.

Dedication

To my mother Lianhua Wang, who constantly shows her support and love; and to the memory of my father, Lingjun Chen, who continues to inspire me every single day.

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1. Introduction

On November 12, 1994, the film *The Fugitive*, imported by China Film Group Corporation, was released in Shanghai, Tianjin, Beijing, Zhengzhou, Chongqing, and Guangzhou, symbolizing the first shot that imported Hollywood blockbusters had fired since the CCP officially banned Hollywood films in mainland China in 1950. The first round of screenings was held in these six cities over one week, and the film gained significant commercial success. Audience numbers reached 1.39 million and box-office revenue totaled 11.27 million yuan (RMB).¹ *The Fugitive* also set off a wave of Chinese audiences seeking to watch Hollywood blockbusters, which directly resulted in increased ticket prices. In 1994, the average ticket price for a Chinese movie was about 6 yuan, but the highest price for a ticket to see *The Fugitive* was 15 yuan. The first imported Hollywood film of the CCP era not only amazed audiences with its engaging storyline and pictures, but also prompted Chinese filmmakers to pay more attention to the film-industry technology behind it.² In Ying Zhu's account, imported Hollywood films of that

¹ Baidu (2018), "1994nian, zhengban haolaiwu dapian laidao zhongguo" "1994年，正版好莱坞大片来到中国" (In 1994, the authentic Hollywood blockbusters came to China). *Baidu* [online] Available at:

<https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1616893423650738768&wfr=spider&for=pc> [accessed 10 March, 2022]

² Baidu (2020), "1994nian diyibu yinjin guonei de meiguodapian, dailaile zenyang de yingxiang? ni hai jidema" "1994年第一部引进国内的美国大片，带来了怎样的影响？你还记得吗" (the first imported American blockbusters in 1994, what was its influence? Do you still remember). *Baidu* [online] Available at:

<https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1673569855807184305&wfr=spider&for=pc> [accessed 10 March, 2022]

period generated huge revenues, instantly restored Chinese audiences' theatergoing habit, and subsequently revitalized China's domestic film production.³

Although 1994 was a major year in the history of the Chinese film industry because of the unbanning of imported Hollywood cinema under the CCP, this was actually not the first time that Sino-Hollywood negotiation had occurred in modern Chinese history. Ying Zhu has provided a comprehensive study of the history of the Sino-Hollywood relationship in her article "The Sino-Hollywood Relationship – Then and Now," in which she analyzes Sino-Hollywood negotiation in terms of two historical categories: the Republican era and the post-1995 period.⁴ In tracing the history of Chinese cinema, 1896 and 1903 are two dates that we should not neglect: the former marks the debut of motion pictures in China, and the latter is the first time that a Chinese merchant screened films that he had brought back from the U.S. and Europe, at a teahouse in Beijing.⁵ These dates suggest that the origin of Chinese cinema was largely influenced by the West and by global trends. As Hollywood films became the prototype for narrative film in the early twentieth century, Chinese cinema in its early stages fell into a predicament. In Zhu's words, the demand for Hollywood imports not only drove the rapid expansion of theaters in China, but also induced those theaters either to sign

³ Zhu, Ying. "The Sino-Hollywood Relationship—Then and Now." *Weber- The Contemporary West*, Spring/Summer 2015, 33.

⁴ I appreciate Zhu's work for providing a chronological framework for the Sino-Hollywood relationship in modern Chinese history.

⁵ Zhu, 26–34.

exclusive contracts with Hollywood distributors or to purchase films as they became available.⁶ The relative weakness of such companies in competing with Hollywood forced some sectors of the emerging Chinese film industry to consolidate their capital and recourses. As a result, Mingxing, Dazhonghua-Baihe, and Tianyi emerged as China's film industry "big three" during the 1920s.

The shadow of Hollywood had not lifted, however. Although the big three enjoyed great commercial success during the second half of the 1920s, many of their productions emulated Hollywood's integrated studio system.⁷ Such a phenomenon points to Noel Burch's description of early Chinese cinema as "a hybrid text enslaved by American cinema. The formative period of Chinese cinema is characterized by infantile dependence and mimicry."⁸ Zhen Zhang, however, disagrees with Burch, and points out that the success of Chinese films in the 1920s was also due to "the thematic and stylistic obsession with traditional arts and the propensity for theatrical adaptations along with the tendency to address certain modern issues."⁹ Many of the Chinese films of the 1930s were socially conscious melodramas. But the influence of Hollywood was still immense during the Republican era: statistics reveal that Hollywood films comprised 92% of all

⁶ Ibid. 27

⁷ Zhu, 28.

⁸ Noel Burch's argument can be found in Zhen Zhang, "Teahouse, Shadowplay, Bricolage: 'Laborer's Love' and the Question of Early Chinese Cinema," 39.

⁹ Zhang, Zhen, "Teahouse, Shadowplay, Bricolage: 'Laborer's Love' and the Question of Early Chinese Cinema," *Cinema and Urban Culture in Shanghai, 1922-1943*, edited by Yingjin Zhang, Stanford University Press, 1999

screenings by 1946.¹⁰ Although the KMT was very sensitive to negative images of China that could be found in Hollywood films, after they had put the concept of “national image” on the political agenda, the KMT still ensured the dominance of Hollywood films because of its policy of cooperation with the United States. This was due to their common national interests, especially during World War II, when Japan was their common enemy.¹¹ It was the defeat of the KMT in the following civil war (1946–49) that eventually ended of the first round of Sino-Hollywood negotiation.

Thus, the first time that China encountered Hollywood can be summarized as a dynamic process of stimulation, emulation, and innovation, but also compromise. While Hollywood dominated the Chinese market from a statistical point of view, it also simultaneously spurred the development of native film studios and the rise of socialist melodrama. Further, even though the opening of the domestic film market to Hollywood appeared to be a submissive compromise on the part of the KMT, it also nevertheless reveals hints of Sino-Hollywood cooperation: the film *The Good Earth*, which eventually passed the Chinese censors after revisions, can be perceived as an artifact of cultural communication and political negotiation.¹² In other words, from the perspective of marketization, Hollywood seemed to dominate the Chinese market

¹⁰ Zhu, 30.

¹¹ Zhu, Ying. "The Battle of Images: Cultural diplomacy and Sino–Hollywood negotiation." In *Soft Power with Chinese Characteristics*, pp. 100-116. Routledge, 2019.

¹² Ibid. 107.

during the Republican period; from the perspective of culturalization, though, it never actually did so completely.

The second round of Sino-Hollywood negotiation occurred after 1994, when China hoped to bring film audiences back to theaters in order to revitalize its film industry. Ying Zhu suggests that during the first several years after 1994 China's selection of Hollywood imports mostly stemmed from economic interests rather than ideological concerns, so that *Natural Born Killers* (Oliver Stone, 1995), *Broken Arrow* (John Woo, 1995), *Twister* (Jan De Bont, 1997), and the extremely popular *Titanic* (James Cameron, 1997) were shown on Chinese screens.¹³ The popularity of Hollywood cinema once again aroused China's interest, as it impinged upon the market of domestic Chinese films and had the potential to endanger the Party's mission of safeguarding China's image on the screen. In this case, the Chinese government deployed several strategies to mitigate the dominance of Hollywood over the ongoing internal cultural negotiation. Zhu notes, for example, that one strategy was to schedule the releases of U.S. films belonging to the same genres on the same dates in order to limit their total receipts, as happened with *The Dark Knight Rises* (Christopher Nolan, 2012) and *The Amazing Spider-Man* (Marc Webb, 2012).¹⁴ Another strategy was to inscribe Sino-Hollywood negotiation into co-productions in order to promote potential global markets

¹³ Zhu, Ying. "The Battle of Images: Cultural diplomacy and Sino-Hollywood negotiation." In *Soft Power with Chinese Characteristics*, pp. 100-116. Routledge, 2019.

¹⁴ Zhu, Ying. "The Sino-Hollywood Relationship—." *Weber- The Contemporary West*, Spring/Summer 2015, 33

and, in ideological terms, the Chinese state's soft power.¹⁵ This may explain why in recent years we have seen not only "classical Hollywood films" like *Avatar* (James Cameron, 2009) and *The Avengers* (Joss Whedon, 2012) and its sequels but have also witnessed the release of *The Great Wall* (Zhang Yimou, 2016)—a Sino-Hollywood co-production—and *Wolf Warrior II* (Wu Jing, 2017) —in my interpretations, a Hollywood film with Chinese characteristics.

When describing the two rounds of Sino-Hollywood negotiation, Zhu articulates the unsettled nature and complexity of the dynamic process between the two parties:

"Hollywood has been a regular fixture in China ever since, spurring simultaneous rejection, repulsion, admiration, emulation, competition and coercion. Rejection and repulsion for perceived offenses against China's image, admiration and emulation for the sheer allure and market prowess of Hollywood pictures, competition and coercion for Hollywood's global dominance and, lately, a new determination to draft Hollywood into the service of promoting China's global image."¹⁶

However, Zhu somehow acquiesces to the dominance of Hollywood over China during their negotiation, as she concludes in her article that Hollywood has played the dominant role in both the Republican era and the ongoing post-1995 period. But my question is the following: Is such dominance clear in a dynamic and evolving negotiation? Is "dominance" the right term to position one over the other in what may be a circulatory process? It is certainly true that Hollywood films have had a significant impact on both Chinese film markets and film productions, but does this necessarily

¹⁵ Zhu, Ying. "The Battle of Images: Cultural diplomacy and Sino-Hollywood negotiation." In *Soft Power with Chinese Characteristics*, pp. 100-116. Routledge, 2019, 109.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 114.

demonstrate the hegemony of Hollywood cinema during its negotiation with China? If it does, how should we explain the phenomenon of Sino-Hollywood co-productions (like *The Great Wall*) and the emergence of “Hollywood films with Chinese characteristics” (like *Wolf Warrior II*)? How should we explain the strategy of pandering that Hollywood has deployed in order to expand its potential audiences in China? Last not but least, how should we understand Sino-Hollywood negotiation beyond the framework of a black and white binary?

Before getting into these questions, let us take a look at how previous scholars have sought to describe the formula of Sino-Hollywood negotiation. As discussed, even if Ying Zhu acknowledges the dynamism and elements of interplay of the Sino-Hollywood negotiation, she still draws a clear distinction between the two parties, positioning one (Hollywood) over the other (China). Like Zhu, Dai Jinhua, a well-known contemporary Chinese film scholar from Beijing University, also highlights the dichotomy between “China” and “Hollywood,” arguing that Chinese cinema should have different values than Hollywood cinema. If Chinese film seeks only to replicate Hollywood codes, it will never surpass Hollywood cinema.¹⁷ In both Zhu’s and Dai’s analyses, the Sino-Hollywood relationship is contentious and culturally exclusive: one has to compete with the other in order to take the initiative and “dominate” the

¹⁷ Dai, Jinhua, “zhongguo dianying yinggai yongyou yu haolaiwu butong de jiazhi” “中国电影应该拥有与好莱坞不同的价值” (Chinese films should have different values from Hollywood cinema) interviewed by *China Youth Daily*, 18 September 2008, <https://3g.163.com/money/article/4M419RMT00251RJ2.html>

negotiation. However, such a narrative of competition may be challenged by the work of Wendy Su, whose *China's Encounter with Global Hollywood: Cultural Policy and the Film Industry, 1994–2013* is “the first systematic investigation of the contemporary encounter between mainland China and global Hollywood, as well as the impact of this encounter on China’s project to modernize its film industry.”¹⁸ Unlike Zhu and Dai, Su argues that the Chinese government is engaged in an “alliance” and a “tug-of-war” with global capital, and specifically the Hollywood film industry. This engagement eventually opens up the possibility of “new transnational third cultures” through the hybridization of Hollywood models and local cultures.¹⁹ The concept of “third cultures” is also used by Enrique Lightsey Guerrero, who adopts Homi Bhaba’s concept of the “third space” to describe the mutual understanding, respect, and open communication of the Sino-Hollywood negotiation. This eventually results in the creation of a new Hollywood empire that is not only facilitated through Chinese help, but also is blended with Chinese cultures.²⁰ While Zhu and Dai recognize the cultural hegemony of Hollywood in the Chinese market, Su and Guerrero provide us with a new perspective through which to view the Sino-Hollywood negotiation, through a lens of mutual development and the possibility of a new cultural space. More specifically, Su and Guerrero direct us

¹⁸ Su, Wendy. *China's Encounter with Global Hollywood: Cultural Policy and the Film Industry, 1994–2013*. University Press of Kentucky, 2016.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

²⁰ Guerrero, Enrique Lightsey. "Cultural Trade within the Sino-Hollywood Landscape: Culture Creation and the Expansion of Empire." (MA Thesis, The University of Texas at Austin, 2020)

to rethink the model of Hollywood cinema, as the opening of a third cultural space may also entail the emergence of the Hollywood film with Chinese characteristics through the Sino-Hollywood interplay.

Building on the above, this thesis seeks to analyze the Sino-Hollywood negotiation by looking specifically at *The Great Wall* (Zhang Yimou, 2016) and *Wolf Warrior II* (Wu Jing, 2017), to reveal that such negotiation is an evolving process that is comprised of stimulation, emulation, and assimilation, but not, in the contemporary era, necessarily domination. My analysis revolves around these two films, which demonstrate the dynamics of Sino-Hollywood co-production and assimilation, because they enable us to rediscover the continuous dynamism of the negotiation between the two parties. More specifically, my analysis is motivated by two things:

1) The emergence of *The Great Wall* and *Wolf Warrior II* reflects the emergence of a new wave of Sino-Hollywood co-operation, which Zhewen Song describes in her article "The Chinese Image in Sino-Hollywood Co-Produced Blockbusters During the Era of Globalization." *The Great Wall* was produced to "pander to the Chinese market by inserting more Chinese features in blockbusters to take advantage of the booming Chinese market," while *Wolf Warrior II* represents China's ambition to "promote China's national identity as soft power via media platforms across the world."²¹ These two films

²¹ Song, Zhewen. "The Chinese Image in Sino-Hollywood Co-Produced Blockbusters During the Era of Globalization." (Thesis, Georgia State University, 2017)

demonstrate that the Sino-Hollywood negotiation is never a one-way street, but is instead composed of different but mutually-inclusive paths.

2) The theory of “circulatory history” proposed by Prasenjit Duara can help to reshape our understanding of a particular subject (in this case, the Sino-Hollywood negotiation). In Duara’s account, a circulatory process occurs when certain subjects “emerge in one form in place A, flowing to many places, B, C, etc., where they interact with other local and translocal forces and reemerge in place A, though often recognized as something else or sometimes misrecognized as the same.”²² By using this notion, we may gain a better understanding of the global-local interplay of the Sino-Hollywood negotiation, and the possibility of the new cultural space that has been proposed by both Su and Guerrero.

In the next chapter, on *Wolf Warrior II*, I will analyze the filmic text, China’s diplomatic ideology in the current era, intellectual debates on the definition of film categories, and domestic and global receptions of the film, in order to explore the hypothesis of the “third cultural space.” The central argument is that *Wolf Warrior II* can be seen as a Hollywood film with Chinese characteristics or, in other words, “Chollywood cinema,” as it reveals simultaneous convergences and divergences with conventional Hollywood cinema. (This concept will be further explored as well.) The

²² Duara, Prasenjit. “Presidential Address: The Art of Convergent Comparison- Case Studies from China and India,” 843.

making of *Wolf Warrior II* symbolizes the emergence of a new cultural space that is composed of both Hollywood and Chinese ideologies. *The Great Wall* represents another path of Sino-Hollywood negotiation. As I will show, *The Great Wall* symbolizes the mutual compromise and pandering of both China and Hollywood as it blends “Chinese cultures” with a traditional Hollywood filmmaking framework. However, such a strategy of pandering was not viewed favorably by the public: *The Great Wall* bombed at the box office in China, and it also stirred up controversies around the “white protagonists” among film critics overseas. By comparing the receptions of *The Great Wall* and *Wolf Warrior II*, I aim to show two things:

1) That the domestic failure of *The Great Wall* shows that Chinese audiences expect more from a Hollywood-framework film. What Chinese audiences are indeed happy to see from a Hollywood film is a Chinese “superhero” (rather than a foreign one) who displays Chinese nationalism and who demonstrates Chinese power, like the hero in *Wolf Warrior II*.

2) That even though *The Great Wall* was less successful than *Wolf Warrior II*, the pandering strategy that it employs still represents an alternative path in the Sino-Hollywood negotiation, because the process of negotiation is also about constant accommodation. By putting the two films together, this thesis argues that the Sino-Hollywood relationship in the current era should be described as a continuous negotiation instead of strictly in terms of competition. Moreover, the emergence of

“Chollywood cinema” — a new cultural space that we have never encountered before — can also enrich our imagination of circulatory trajectories in the future of the Sino-Hollywood relationship.

2. *Wolf Warrior II*: The Debut of “Chollywood Cinema”

In July 2017, *Wolf Warrior II* was released in mainland China, gaining enormous national attention to go along with its \$870 million box office receipts. The movie tells the story of a nationalist “superhero” rescuing his fellow nationals overseas and demonstrates a muscular and robust Chinese national identity in the neo-colonial era. Following the events of *Wolf Warrior I*, Leng Feng, the main character who used to serve in Chinese special-ops teams, leaves for Africa to wander the rest of his life. During his adventure in Africa, he happens to discover a clue about the disappearance of his fiancée, Long Xiaoyun, who is thought to have been kidnapped during her mission. At the same time, he and his friends are attacked by a local force that seeks to overthrow the government of an unnamed African nation. This turbulence puts Leng Feng, Chinese nationals overseas, and African workers in a Chinese company in a dangerous position, and they plan their escape from the civil war. While Leng Feng himself is able to escape the situation easily since he is a military veteran, he eventually decides to stay in order to protect all the Chinese nationals who are caught in the civil war and get them back home. While protecting his fellow nationals and his international companions, Leng Feng fights the leader of the rebellion, Big Daddy. During his confrontation with the local force, he faces multiple life-threatening dangers. Eventually, Leng Feng beats Big Daddy, and after learning that his fiancée’s kidnapping was organized by Big Daddy, he angrily kills him. Thus, Leng Feng saves all of his companions and gets them back to the

UN camps. The film concludes happily with his nationalistic performance and the news that his fiancée is still alive.

While *Wolf Warrior II* was a groundbreaking success in domestic markets, there is in fact a considerable difference between its national and global receptions. Of its total box office, 99.7% is from the Chinese market, with only 0.3% coming from overseas markets (mainly in North America).²³ At a first glance, this enormous disparity could seem like a strange cultural phenomenon, because *Wolf Warrior II* might be seen as a classical Hollywood film in terms of its filmic technique and aesthetic grammar. For example, according to Jie Zhang, a contemporary Chinese film scholar, "*Wolf Warrior II* employed prominent Hollywood talent, including Joe and Anthony Russo as consultants, Sam Hargrave (of *Captain America: Civil War*) as student director, and Joseph Trapanese (*Tron: Legacy*) as composer."²⁴ The "Hollywood crew" of *Wolf Warrior II* shows that the director and star Wu Jing intended his movie to be "Hollywood" from the very beginning. Further, *Wolf Warrior II* conforms strictly to the filmic techniques of "a classical Hollywood film" as defined by David Bordwell, who outlines the five characteristics of a classical Hollywood film: 1) a goal-oriented hero; 2) the appeal to principles of unity and realism' 3) the functions of temporal and spatial coherence; 4) the

²³ Hou, Mengyao. "Discussion on the Cultural Confidence of Chinese Films: Taking the Movie *Wolf Warriors II* as an example," *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research*, volume 341, 2019, 346.

²⁴ Zhang, Jie. "The *Wolf Warriors* Films: A Single Spark. A Prairie Fire?" *History and Society*, volume 17, No.2, 2018, 130.

centrality of the invisible observer; and 5) the arbitrariness of closure.²⁵ Now, since *Wolf Warrior II* is a Hollywood-style blockbuster—a mode of film production that has long been perceived as a “Western” cultural product—why did it encounter such indifference among Western audiences? After all, the huge national success of *Wolf Warrior II* at least suggests that it is not a “low-quality” movie. Is there a specific cultural code that is appealing to Chinese audiences but alienating to Western ones, even though it is a “Western”-style film? In other words, can we say that even though *Wolf Warrior II* employs the techniques of classical Hollywood cinema, it is not *the* “Hollywood cinema” in an ideological sense? Finally, what kind of message does *Wolf Warrior II* have to offer in shaping our perceptions of Sino-Hollywood negotiation in the contemporary world?

To address these questions, in this chapter I will take *Wolf Warrior II* as a case study to analyze how Sino-Hollywood negotiation may be occurring in the current age. Two scholars in particular have inspired me in terms of methodology: Prasenjit Duara, who has suggested a theory of “circulatory history,” and Lydia Liu, who proposed the idea of “translingual practice”. Building on their ideas, I argue that *Wolf Warrior II* opens the possibility of a new cultural space—a Chollywood Cinema (Chinese-Hollywood Cinema) that emerges in a theoretical sense as an effect of Sino-Hollywood negotiation. By “Chollywood,” I principally mean that *Wolf Warrior II* has a Hollywood formal framework (a superhero setting and narrative) but is instilled with a specifically Chinese

²⁵ Bordwell, David. “Classical Hollywood cinema: Narrational principles and procedures.” (1986)

cultural and political ideology. More specifically, the movement of Hollywood cinema could be better understood with reference to Duara's metaphoric use of the "ocean." In Duara's account, a circulatory process occurs when certain subjects "emerge in one form in place A, flowing to many places, B, C, etc., where they interact with other local and translocal forces and reemerge in place A, though often recognized as something else or sometimes misrecognized as the same."²⁶ In the case of *Wolf Warrior II*, "Hollywood Cinema," as is generally agreed, originates from the West, which can be seen as "A." It then flows to place B—let's say, the Chinese cultural context—to influence the creation of *Wolf Warrior II*. However, as a product of the cultural interaction between A and B, *Wolf Warrior II*, although it strongly embodies elements from A, cannot be reduced to either A or B. Rather, it is formed within a context of "AB," even though it is often misrecognized as an "A-contextualized" or a "B-contextualized" subject. In other words, *Wolf Warrior II* can be understood as an "AB-contextualized Hollywood film," or a "Chollywood" film, which results in the film's inadaptability among Western audiences as they stick unconsciously to their A-contextualized mode of Hollywood cinema. Finally, through the travels of Hollywood cinema, we can also address the invariance of our identification of specific types, genres, and kinds of film. Lydia Liu has argued that

²⁶ Duara, Prasenjit "Presidential Address: The Art of Convergent Comparison- Case Studies from China and India," 843.

as words travel, the invention of new meanings also occurs.²⁷ It is important to note that in previous scholarship, Zhewen Song has proposed a similar term — “Chinawood” — to characterize one direction of the Sino-Hollywood negotiation.²⁸ Unlike Song, who perceives “Chinawood” as a rising film industry, I seek rather to identify “Chollywood” as an emerging cultural phenomenon that is cultivated in the course of the Sino-Hollywood negotiation. It is more like a “third space” that emerges from Sino-Hollywood cultural interaction. In other words, my focus is on the perspective of culturalization, rather than that of marketization.

In the following sections, I will first discuss the practicability of the circulation of films by looking at Andrew Higson’s discussion of what a “national cinema” is. Then I will move to a discussion of *Wolf Warrior II* and analyze both its convergences with and its divergences from the “A-contextualized Hollywood cinema” in order to demonstrate how and why it is “AB-contextualized.” As I acknowledge that the classification of films is profoundly influenced and shaped by capital and market systems, my aim in this chapter is not to claim the birth of a new definition of film that could march straight into current markets and reformulate the structures of the film industry as an entity. Instead, I seek to reveal a cultural dynamism in the new chapter of our global history that is

²⁷ See Lydia Liu’s article “Injury: Incriminating Words and Imperial Power” from *Words in Motion: Toward a Global Lexicon*, edited by Carol Gluck and Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing. Durham: Duke University Press, 2009.

²⁸ Song, 69-87

characterized by the diaspora of popular culture, which eventually facilitates the formation of a new cultural space in the Sino-Hollywood negotiation.

2.1 The Identification of Film Modes

In contemporary scholarship, the discourse of “nation” or “nationalism” as representing a unitary consciousness or identity has been subjected to various intellectual critiques. Benedict Anderson has proposed that “nation” is an imagined concept and space in his masterpiece *Imagined Communities*.²⁹ Prasenjit Duara challenges the dominant narrative of “linear history,” in which “the nation emerges as the subject of History just as History emerges as the ground, the mode of being, of the nation.”³⁰ In fact, the scholarly redefinition of “the nation” has not been confined only to historical studies but has also extended to the sphere of popular cultures. In “The Concept of National Cinema,” in which he adopts the conventional narrative of “nation,” Andrew Higson argues that a national cinema includes the following characteristics: 1) a national film industry; 2) a reflection and construction of national character in films; 3) an effort to counter foreign domination of the domestic film market; and 4) an art cinema.³¹

Although Higson lays out the fundamental principles of his conception of “national cinema,” he nevertheless limits his discussion of “national films” only to films that are

²⁹ Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities*. United Kingdom: Verso, 2006.

³⁰ Duara, Prasenjit. *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China*, University of Chicago Press, 1995, 6.

³¹ Higson, Andrew. “The Concept of National Cinema,” *Screen*, Volume 30, Issue 4, Autumn 1989, 36–47.

produced within national boundaries. In other words, national cinema here seems like a local and culturally exclusive product that is not situated within transnational contexts and dialogues. If we follow Higson's logic of national cinema, how would we define *Wolf Warrior II* in terms of its "nationality"? It certainly could be a "national film," as it constructs a cultural artifact—the main character Leng Feng who represents the national identity—and the film is produced by a Chinese company. But it is not an art cinema, and nor does it have the explicit intention of countering foreign domination of the domestic film market. The concept of a national cinema in such an understanding means that a film that is produced within a nation can be removed from the category of "national cinema."

Realizing the inadequacy of his arguments in defining national cinema, in his later article "The Limiting Imagination of National Cinema," Higson acknowledges that in his previous work he had assumed that national identity and tradition are fully formed and fixed in place, and that he had taken borders for granted and assumed that those borders are effective in containing political and economic developments, cultural practice, and identity. He also acknowledges that borders are in fact always permeable and that there is a considerable degree of movement across them. Hence, modern cultural formations are invariably hybrid and impure.³² Higson's renewed perspective

³² Higson, Andrew. "The Limiting Imagination of National Cinema," *Cinema and Nation*, edited by Mette Hjort and Scott Mackenzie (Published by Routledge, 2000)

complicates and reformulates the definition of national cinema, as looking at “the nation” solely from a geographical and exclusive perspective proves to be limited due to cultural dynamism. Furthermore, Higson also hints that there may never be any satisfactory arbitrary definition of a cinema, regardless of its forms of production or expression. The significance of “the national” rests more upon its directive that we think in such terms, and such a mode of cinema, in a transnational context. A conventional view of “national cinema” can possibly tell us about a film’s origins, but it is far from elucidating its various destinations. In other words, instead of establishing a dichotomy between localization and globalization, it is more reasonable and scholarly to perceive a particular national cinema as a global cinema, since localization fuels globalization while simultaneously, globalization obscures and re-imagines localization.

2.2 *Wolf Warrior II* as “Chollywood Cinema”

Having described the flaw of a particular arbitrary definition of a cinematic mode, let us turn to *Wolf Warrior II* to analyze its interaction with conventional perceptions of Hollywood cinema (that is, the A-contextualized Hollywood cinema). As discussed, the aesthetic grammar of A-contextualized Hollywood cinema derives mostly from its filmic construction of an undefeated superhero. But the narrative grammar of such cinema is not simply about a superhero in general; it is about an “American superhero” specifically. In Dai Jinhua’s account, Hollywood cinema is highly politicized

in the sense that it has shaped the American national imagination. It has also contributed to the building of nationalism and cultivated national spirit in the U.S. Here, a Hollywood film can be seen as a philosophy, an art, or both.³³ In this case, the A-contextualized Hollywood cinema can only recognize an American superhero. This may help to explain why *Wolf Warrior II* was not accepted in the Western film market, since it constructs a Chinese superhero, not an American one.

However, if the director, Wu Jing, was so dedicated to the idea of shooting a Hollywood film, why didn't he follow the ideology of the A-contextualized film strictly, in order to gain both domestic and international popularity? Also, how is such an AB-contextualized Hollywood film influenced by the characteristics of B (that is, the Chinese cultural context)? I argue that the strategic mingling of A and B has much to do with the Chinese nation's efforts to shift its national narrative, from "China as a victim" to "China as a superpower" in a new global age. More specifically, it represents China's efforts to enhance its "soft power" in the international sphere—a concept that has been developed by Joseph Nye, who defines it as a kind of power in which "the universalism of a country's culture and its ability to establish a set of favorable rules and institutions that govern areas of international activity are critical sources of power."³⁴ Such a mission is

³³ Dai, Jinhua. "renlei de beiju jiu zaiyu meiyounen yuanyiting guolai ren de jianyi, suoyi wo bu jianyi" "人类的悲剧就在于没有人愿意听过来人的建议，所以我不建议了"(The tragedy of human beings is that nobody is willing to take the advises from experienced people, so I offer no advices anymore), interviewed by qdailycom, 02 March, 2018. https://www.sohu.com/a/224709656_268920

³⁴ This concept is introduced and discussed in Song's article, 25.

particularly important to contemporary China; in Ying Zhu's words, "China's rising power is reshaping the global economic and political landscape, and the goal of enhancing China's 'soft power' has been at the heart of China's efforts to shape international perceptions so that the world is more welcoming and less fearful of China."³⁵ In this context, the emergence of a film like *Wolf Warrior II* not only symbolizes China's "farewell" to the past, but it also declares a "new China" in the current international political scene.

Before the sense of urgency to change the forms of national discourse emerged in China, a national narrative of China as a victim had been adopted by the Chinese Communist Party for since the early 1990s in order to cultivate nationalism and to legitimize the party's political ideology. According to Wang Zheng, for example, after the 1989 Tiananmen Square Incident, in which the Communist Party jettisoned its communist ideology and destroyed its popularity among the public because it killed students who protested for democracy in front of Tiananmen Square, the country rapidly adjusted its dominant narrative of nationalist discourse from "China as a victor," which had been in place since 1949 when the CCP took power, to "China as a victim."³⁶ Chinese education began to emphasize foreign powers' brutality and China's past misery, forcing many Chinese to "confront the foreign atrocities and Chinese suffering

³⁵ Edney, Kingsley. Rosen, Stanley. Zhu, Ying. "Introduction." In *Soft Power with Chinese Characteristics*, Routledge, 2019, 100–116.

³⁶ Zheng, Wang. *Never Forget National Humiliation: Historical Memory in Chinese Politics and Foreign Relations*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012.

that occurred during the century of humiliation.” This shift of narrative also produced the so-called “patriotic education campaign,” which was implemented in 1992. This campaign made contemporary Chinese history a required core course in high school. This did not only take place in the political realm; the narrative of “China as a victim” has also been deployed in the Chinese film industry when it treats nationalistic subjects. In 2009, the Chinese blockbuster *City of Life and Death (Nanjing! Nanjing!)* was released in mainland China, stirring enormous public expressions of emotion in contemporary Chinese society. In Dai Jinhua’s account, the movie directly engaged with issues of historical trauma (the Nanjing Massacre), the politics of memory, and the recuperation of humanity in the Chinese context.³⁷ The “victim” narrative is undoubtedly the key to understanding the explosive public reactions that surrounded the film.

However, even though the “China as a victim” narrative was dominant for decades, recently we have seen another round of shifting narrative that moves from “China as a victim” to “China as a protector” of its citizens, while China’s Belt and Road Initiative has expanded the country’s global impact to an unprecedented degree. Perhaps no other films have done as well as Wu Jing’s *Wolf Warriors II* in terms of representing this transition in national narratives. According to Jie Zhang, the *Wolf Warrior* films “refreshingly capture” a new, muscular iteration of China’s self-narrative

³⁷ Dai, Jinhua, *After the Post-Cold War: The Future of Chinese History*, edited by Lisa Rofel (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

that constructs China not only as militarily capable but also as diplomatically successful.”³⁸ The undefeated “superhero” Leng Feng can be regarded as the incarnation of a powerful Chinese nation, who is able to rescue his overseas Chinese companions and his Third World friends from a desperate situation. In *Wolf Warrior II*, various scenes highlight the power of the Chinese nation. In one scene, the captain of a Chinese naval vessel says “Stand down! We are Chinese!” In another, the “villain” of this film states, “China is a permanent member of the UN Security Council and I need them on my side if I’m to take political power.”

The emphasis on China’s position in the UN and in global affairs is not a coincidence. In Evan Osnos’ account, “China has never seen such a moment, when its pursuit of a larger role in the world coincides with America’s pursuit of a smaller one.”³⁹ Osnos’ point in terms of international relations is also embraced by Jie Zhang, who suggests further that when Trump withdrew from the TPP and reduced US contributions to the UN, China seized the opportunity to replace America as a superpower and a “savior” in order to spread its influence globally, particularly in the Third World.⁴⁰ The triangular relationship between China, the US, and Africa has also been described by many Chinese scholars as a sign of China’s humanitarian intent and the US’ irresponsibility in global affairs. In *Wolf Warrior II*, when an American doctor,

³⁸ Zhang, “The Wolf Warriors Films: A Single Spark. A Prairie Fire?” 128.

³⁹ Osnos, Evan. “Making China Great Again.” *New Yorker*, vol.93, no. 43, 08 Jan.2018, 36–45.

⁴⁰ Zhang, “The Wolf Warriors Films: A Single Spark. A Prairie Fire?” 128.

Rachael, says to Leng Feng that they should turn to the US consulate for help because it is the safest place in the world, Leng Feng tells her that when he arrived here, all the warships belonging to other nations have already left. In Wan Qionghua's interpretation, while Rachel expects the US to rescue her, her nation has actually abandoned her. The suggested irony here is that even if America possesses the most powerful economy and the strongest military, it does not make the safety of its nationals the highest consideration, which is in sharp contrast to China.⁴¹ Although the US is not explicitly denounced in this scene, it is implicitly demeaned through its comparison to China with regard to the role of savior and the ideology of humanitarianism. The African setting of the film is another demonstration of China's determination and ambition in geopolitics. In Stephen Teo's analysis, this touches on Chinese geopolitical strategy and its development policy—the "One Belt, One Road" initiative, which offers aid, construction assistance, opportunities for trade, and political friendship to a strategic array of underdeveloped and developing countries in Southeast Asia, South Asia, Central Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. Leng Feng is undoubtedly a rhetorical representation of Chinese involvement in these regions.⁴² Echoing Teo, Cai Zhiguo also argues that the role settings in *Wolf Warrior II* represent a typical "superhero mindset"

⁴¹ Wan, Qionghua, Sun, Chengcheng, "Shuangchong shiye xia de zhongguo nanxing qizhi: yi zhanlang 2 wei li" (Chinese Masculinity in Dual Perspective, with *Wolf Warrior II* as an Example), *Journal of China Women's University*, No.4, Aug. 2018, 47–51.

⁴² Teo, Stephen. "The Chinese film market and the *Wolf Warriors 2* phenomenon," *Screen* 60:2, Summer 2019. 322-331

that is deployed by China in order to display its muscular involvement with and benign intentions toward Africa. In Cai's account, the savior in this film is Leng Feng, with the Chinese nation behind him, who rescues different groups of people, including an American doctor who has been assigned to Africa, Chinese people overseas, and African workers in a Chinese factory. The opposite side is represented by the evil European mercenaries as well as the unnamed African government and its army. It is interesting to note that even the opposing side in this conflict still displays a certain degree of friendship and respect to the Chinese nation, as we can see from the scene in which the villain acknowledges China's presence and influence in the UN Security Council.⁴³ In general, *Wolf Warrior II* contributes to rebuilding the national narrative in China by incorporating scenes that demonstrate the ideology of China's "One Belt, One Road" initiative and China's ambition of replacing America as the "savior" of the Third World.⁴⁴

Thus, the flow of A-contextualized Hollywood cinema has provided a kind of "technical support" to director Wu Jing, which he utilizes in a specific "B" cultural context to develop an AB-contextualized Hollywood cinema, a film that cultivates the

⁴³ Cai, Zhiguo, Zhang, Zheng, "Leixing dianying de qianguhua yu minzuzhuyi qinggan de qihe – dui zhanlang 2 reying de chuanboxue jixi" (Strengthening of Genre Film and the Convergence of Nationalisms: – Analyzing *Wolf Warrior II* from the Perspective of Media Studies), *South China Forum*, 2017/05, 36–40.

⁴⁴ I specifically see the change of national discourse as a cultural phenomenon that can be described as "B-contextualized." I have suggested a clear definition of what is A-contextualized (the classical Hollywood cinema mode that portrays an American hero), what is B-contextualized (the shifting national narrative from "China as a victim" to "China as a superpower," which provides a framework in which to build a robust nation identity), and what is AB-contextualized (a film that uses A's filmic techniques but instills them with B's cultural ideology).

image of a Chinese national superhero. Although Wu Jing may not realize that he is recoding classical Hollywood cinema, in one interview, he responded angrily to critics to his film, saying, “why can America build a national superhero through cinema, but China can’t?”⁴⁵ Wu Jing’s reaction suggests, first, that public perceptions of Hollywood cinema has remained at the stage of the conventional A-contextualized one, in which audiences are accustomed to an American superhero. So, when a Chinese superhero emerges from this mode of film, audiences find it hard to accept and embrace. Second, Wu Jing has produced, either consciously or unconsciously, a different kind of Hollywood film (which I call “AB-contextualized Hollywood cinema” or Chollywood cinema) in order to reconstruct China’s national narrative and identity.

2.3 Chollywooding: A New Negotiation

So far, I have been addressing the concept of “Hollywood cinema,” as such a unitary identification has restricted our ability to imagine a new cultural space—namely, the Chollywood film—that has been formed in the course of cultural circulation between China and the US. In fact, the exclusivity of the ideology of the “Hollywood film” as a static cultural representation and identity is not only embraced by Western audiences—specifically, those who express indifference to *Wolf Warrior II*—but also by Chinese filmgoers and intellectuals. In other words, the global circulation of Hollywood cinema

⁴⁵ Wu, Jing. “dui de piaoliang! Wujing zai zhanlang 2 caifanghui shang kuangdui jizhe tichu de wunao wenti” “惹的漂亮！吴京在战狼2采访会上狂怼记者提出的无脑问题” (Nice strike back! Wu Jing was mad at the brainless questions raised by reporters at the *Wolf Warrior II* interview), video by Sina, 02 August, 2017. <http://video.sina.com.cn/p/mobile/doc/2017-08-02/205566778565.html?display=0>

has still not been widely recognized. In a Chinese context, *Wolf Warrior II* is seen as more of a “theme film” (*zhuxuanlv dianying*, 主旋律电影) than a “Hollywood film,” not simply because of the powerful national image that it portrays, but also because of hostility toward Hollywood productions. Deng Xiaoping once gave a specific definition of a “theme film” in the Chinese context: “any film that advocates for the True, the Good, and the Beautiful (*zhen, shan, mei*, 真, 善, 美) can be regarded as a theme film.”⁴⁶ Pu Weiguo points out that the definition of a “theme film” in the Chinese film industry is that it is dedicated to promoting socialism, national unity, and social progress. More importantly, it has served to arouse nationalism and collectivism among the masses.”⁴⁷ Whether we regard *Wolf Warrior II* as a Hollywood film or, in the Chinese context, a theme film, it is true that a hostile dichotomy has been established between these two conventional concepts. More specifically, a theme film is a “politically correct” one in China, and “Hollywood cinema” is only a technical model that one can refer to when producing films. In this case, the cultural diaspora has been somewhat limited in the Chinese context.

One important reason behind Chinese people’s recognition of “Hollywood cinema” as a Western cultural product is the persistence of a Cold War mentality, which has been pointed out by Dai Jinhua. In Dai’s account, as the only surviving socialist

⁴⁶ This concept has been used in mainland China since 1987.

⁴⁷ Pu, Weiguo. “Research on Aesthetic Characteristics of the Current Thematic Movie,” (MA Thesis, East China Normal University 2011)

power after the Cold War, China still adopts a mentality that divides the world between “East and West”, “justice and injustice,” and “good and evil.”⁴⁸ If we follow Dai’s logic, we get a sense of the conflict between “theme film” and “Hollywood film” in the case of *Wolf Warrior II*. However, even though Dai recognizes the Cold War mentality that still survives in contemporary Chinese cultural industries, she still accepts it to a certain degree. In one interview, Dai stresses that Chinese cinema should have different values than Hollywood cinema. If Chinese film only seeks to replicate the Hollywood code, it will never surpass Hollywood cinema.⁴⁹ Following Dai’s analysis, *Wolf Warrior II* would likely be a good challenge to Hollywood cinema, but it would definitely not fit comfortably into Hollywood ideology, since the Sino-Hollywood relationship is doomed to be antagonistic and competitive.

The struggle over the embracing of “Hollywood” in China is also connected with its complicated cultural identifications. In other words, what is “Hollywood” anyway? How shall we characterize it? Is it solely a form of cultural competition and imperialism? Answering these questions would be a first step before we address the problem of how *Wolf Warrior II* has negotiated the Sino-Hollywood relationship. In “Cultural Trade within the Sino-Hollywood Landscape,” Enrique Lightsey Guerrero refers to Thomas

⁴⁸ Dai, Jinhua. “wenhua quanqiu hua yuedengyu meiguohua” “文化全球化约等于美国化” (Cultural globalization is Americanization), *Moveable Type*, 25 April, 2019. <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/g12BH9iDCu99q-ifYr6Tyw>

⁴⁹ Dai, Jinhua, “zhongguo dianying yinggai yongyou yu haolaiwu butong de jiazhi” “中国电影应该拥有与好莱坞不同的价值” (Chinese films should have different values from Hollywood cinema) interviewed by *China Youth Daily*, 18 September 2008, <https://3g.163.com/money/article/4M419RMT00251RJ2.html>

Schatz's description of "Hollywood" as "both a location and an ideal, a culture and a system" that has paved the way for commercial filmmaking across the globe.⁵⁰ Building upon Schatz's argument, Guerrero interprets "Hollywood" not only as a system, or a location, but also as a hub of cultural production that is able to expand its cultural-imperialist activities and to produce "third spaces worldwide."⁵¹ The multi-layered identifications of "Hollywood" that Guerrero describes can, in a sense, "justify" why scholars like Dai Jinhua are "unfriendly" toward Hollywood films, as "Hollywood" can be perceived as a form of cultural imperialism emanating from the West. However, what Guerrero accentuates is that Hollywood also represents a possibility of "producing a new space worldwide" through its cultural travels. This is what the emergence of a film like *Wolf Warrior II* has shown us, though not explicitly.

Thus, *Wolf Warrior II* conveys two messages in terms of the contemporary Sino-Hollywood negotiation. First, *Wolf Warrior II* as a specific film entity marks the beginning of a reformulation of our perception of conventional Hollywood cinema, as the superhero protagonist doesn't necessarily have to be an American; instead, it can also be a Chinese hero. Second, *Wolf Warrior II* as an ideological phenomenon reminds us that the Sino-Hollywood negotiation is not exclusively a competitive relationship, and it is never simply a black and white binary. Sino-Hollywood cooperation could

⁵⁰ Guerrero, 17.

⁵¹ Ibid, 16.

potentially be realized in the form of “Chollywood cinema,” a new cultural space that is defined by the combination of Hollywood filmmaking technique and Chinese ideologies. (In the case of *Wolf Warrior II*, the ideology is Chinese nationalism.) Certainly, “Chollywood cinema” is not the only way to characterize the Sino-Hollywood negotiation. In the next chapter, I will trace another path, through a study of *The Great Wall*, which was released a year before *Wolf Warrior II*.

3. *The Great Wall*: Another Form of Sino-Hollywood Negotiation

Zhang Yimou's *The Great Wall* provides an interesting contrast to *Wolf Warrior II*. While both are considered to fit the mode of production of Hollywood cinema, *The Great Wall* was actually a box office bomb because of its high production and marketing costs, even though it achieved \$335 million worldwide in receipts. At the time of writing, statistics from Douban, one of China's largest social networking sites, show that *The Great Wall* only scores 4.9 out of 10, compared to the 7.1 of *Wolf Warrior II*.⁵² Moreover, *The Great Wall* stirred up significant controversies and even dissatisfaction among its audience: One especially harsh Chinese netizen expressed his resentment of the film by saying "Zhang Yimou is dead."⁵³ These negative domestic responses actually reveal the fervent expectations that Chinese audiences had before the film was released. Statistics show that "The Great Wall quickly racked up more than 130,000 fans on Weibo and the Chinese trailer was shared more than 400,000 times in less than 24 hours."⁵⁴ When Zhang Yimou was interviewed by CCTV about his newly released film, he stated that his original ambition had been to make a Chinese blockbuster that employed Hollywood

⁵² The rating could be found on Douban:

<https://movie.douban.com/subject/6982558/mobile?from=sogousearch>

⁵³ Sohu. (2016). "Zhang Yimou yisi? qishi guangping changcheng hai buneng fouding zhewei daoyan""张艺谋已死? 其实光凭长城还不能否定这位导演" (Zhang Yimou "is dead?" You can't deny him just because of the failure of *The Great Wall*) *Sohu*, [online] Available at: https://www.sohu.com/a/121998441_508313 [accessed 10 March. 2022]

⁵⁴ BBC. (2016). *The Great Wall: Is Matt Damon 'Whitewashing' or Good Business?* *BBC*, [online] Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-35811111> [accessed 08 March.2022].

technique to tell a Chinese story and to promote Chinese culture.⁵⁵ To achieve his goal, Zhang recruited a production team that had collectively achieved 103 Oscar nominations, and also incorporated many Chinese elements in the film — the setting of the Great Wall, the Taotie monster (an ancient Chinese mythological creature), gunpowder (one of the Four Great Inventions of China), and the representation of a Five Animal Play (*wuqinxi*, 五禽戏) through the five different armies in this film.

Zhang Yimou’s ambition to produce a Hollywood-style Chinese cinema is not strange in the context of the contemporary Chinese film industry. In *Postsocialist Modernity: Chinese Cinema, Literature, and Criticism in the Market Age*, Jason McGrath outlines the historical development of mainland China’s national cinema. , He points out that the development of mainland China’s national cinema can be summarized as developing from a domestic cinema of commercial entertainment from the 1920s to the 1940s, to the “totalitarian” cinema of the 1950s-80s, to a mixture of these two types together with art cinema since the mid- to late 1980s. In the late 1990s, in order to compete with the cultural hegemony of Hollywood cinema, we also see the emergence of *hesuipian* (贺岁片, that is, New Year’s celebration films) as a new model for a Chinese national cinema that still operated in terms of an agenda set by Hollywood.⁵⁶ Feng

⁵⁵ CCTV. (2017). Yangshi zhuanfang Zhangyimou, jiemi Changcheng paishe beihou naxie shier! “Interview with Zhang Yimou to Reveal the Secrets behind the Making of ‘The Great Wall.’” CCTV [online] Available at: <http://tv.cctv.com/2017/06/26/ARTIqjLMEccgZclucHrhtygL170626.shtml> [accessed 08 March.2022].

⁵⁶ McGrath, Jason. *Postsocialist Modernity: Chinese Cinema, Literature, and Criticism in the Market Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 170–171.

Xiaogang, one of China's most well-known directors, established himself as the most commercially successful mainland China filmmakers through his three *hesuipian*, *Jiafang yifang* (*The Dream Factory*, 1997), *Bujian busan* (*Be There or Be Square*, 1998) and *Meiwan meiliao* (*Sorry Baby*, 1999).⁵⁷

Feng Xiaogang's success shows that a Hollywood-style cinema can work in the Chinese market if it is entertaining enough. However, the *hesuipian* formula doesn't necessarily apply to Zhang Yimou's ambition in producing *The Great Wall*. From the aforementioned interview with Zhang, we know that he was seeking to promote Chinese culture through the medium of Hollywood filmmaking technique. So, does Zhang's ambition to produce a "less entertaining" Chinese Hollywood cinema account for the failure of *The Great Wall*, not only at the box office, but also in terms of reputation? Given Chinese audiences' high expectations of this film when it was released, what actually disappointed those audiences when the film was finally shown to them? Further, neither *Wolf Warrior II* nor *The Great Wall* are considered to be "entertaining" films, yet they received completely different domestic receptions. If, as I argued in the previous chapter, *Wolf Warrior II* should be recognized as a "Chollywood film" that employs Hollywood technique to produce a Chinese hero who serves contemporary nationalism, then what about *The Great Wall*? Does its deviation from the ideology of Chollywood cinema account for the criticisms it faced from Chinese

⁵⁷ Ibid.172

audiences? Finally, how does *The Great Wall* reflect the landscape of Sino-Hollywood negotiation beyond the creation of a new cultural space, as showcased by *Wolf Warrior II*? Does its existence somehow entail an alternative approach to the negotiation, even though it is less successful? To address these questions, in this chapter I will undertake a textual analysis of *The Great Wall* in order to demonstrate the presence of a filmic ideology that is different from that found in *Wolf Warrior II*. My aims in this chapter are:

1) To identify another complicated path of the Sino-Hollywood negotiation, which is represented by the strategy of pandering and compromise in this relationship; and

2) To argue, through a textual analysis of *The Great Wall*, that the domestic failure of this film is not necessarily due to the incoherent logic of the plot (which many viewers have pointed out); rather, its “ideology” (placing a Western hero in a Chinese context and over-pandering to a Western mindset) is the major factor that accounts for the controversies. Further, while *The Great Wall* is not the “Chollywood cinema” that I described in the previous chapter, by comparing it to *Wolf Warrior II*, we might hypothesize that the ideology of Chollywood cinema might become more expansive in the Chinese market of the future, and that the Sino-Hollywood negotiation is continuously reformulated.

3.1 The Great Wall: A Less Emotionally Resonant Film

The differences between Feng Xiaogang's *hesuipian* and Zhang Yimou's *The Great Wall* can lead us to an investigation of the function of popular media: in what way, and how, does popular media serve the public? In *Popular Media, Social Emotion and Public Discourse in Contemporary China*, Shuyu Kong analyzes the debate over the value of popular media in China. On the one hand, she introduces the work of Neil Postman, who warns in *Amusing Ourselves to Death* that junk entertainment, a culture of triviality, and overwhelming amounts of useless information are replacing serious thinking and becoming new agents of oppression. But "people will love the oppression, and adore the technologies that undo our capabilities to think."⁵⁸ On the other hand, Kong suggests that Postman's theory may not apply to the Chinese context, by including the words of a Chinese netizen who argues that, in China, entertainment is actually a very serious business and that anti-entertainment campaigns are really just an excuse to prevent serious public discourse.⁵⁹ But how could entertainment or popular media in China be a serious business? To answer this question, we must analyze the film in its social and cultural context. In fact, answering this question requires two steps, because we need to figure out both the general "function" of popular media in practice and how it actually "functions" in a Chinese context. Kong states that "popular culture and mass media are

⁵⁸ Kong, Shuyu. *Popular Media, Social Emotion and Public Discourse in Contemporary China*. (New York: Routledge, 2014), 1.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

forms of social communication, and their meaning is largely realized in this process of social interchange.”⁶⁰ Kong adopts Lawrence Grossberg’s concept of “affective relationships” and argues that “the terrain of commercial popular culture is the primary space where affective relationships are articulated; and the consumer industries increasingly appeal not only to ideological consensus, but to the contemporary structures of affective needs and investments.”⁶¹ Thus, the affective relationship serves as a catalyst that engages audiences with the media context, facilitating social interchange.

The “affective relationship” that is encoded in the logic of many Chinese films provides a way to approach the hypothesis that only entertaining films (such as *hesui pian*) can possibly succeed in China. Such an approach tightens connections between films and their audiences by constructing a filmic grammar of emotionality and sentimentality. It is interesting to note that while Feng Xiaogang made his reputation on the basis of three groundbreakingly successful *hesui pian*, he also displays a mastery of sentimental construction in his other films. Kong specifically discusses the movie *Aftershock*, also directed by Feng Xiaogang, which provides a sentimental reconstruction of the family/home from the 1976 Tangshan and 2008 Sichuan earthquakes, with the aim of triggering the expression of public opinion and social emotion. According to Kong,

⁶⁰ Ibid., 12.

⁶¹ Ibid., 13.

“Feng Xiaogang’s sentimental construction is not an isolated case in contemporary Chinese film and popular culture. In fact, Chinese writers, artists and intellectuals had long used the affective power of the family to articulate their visions of society.”⁶²

Drawing on Grossberg’s concept and Kong’s argument, we might conclude that, in contemporary China, the “affective relationship” (or in other words, sentimental construction and an emotional approach) has been a strategy that some Chinese artists adopt in order to engage their audiences with the artistic work and its social context. Kong highlights the sentimental reconstruction of the family and home. In our case studies, the affective power is not confined to the sphere of the family. For example, in *Wolf Warrior II*, we have seen how nationalism orchestrates the film’s theme. It is important to note that since the sense of nationality emerged in the late 19th century in China, it has been integrated with a strong sense of emotionality. John Fitzgerald argues that because of the “three humiliations” that the Qing dynasty endured in the mid- to late nineteenth century (military defeats in 1860 to Britain, in 1884 to the combined forces of Britain and France, and in 1894 to Japan), “the idea of a national awakening promised a day of historical redemption when the country would finally shake off the shackles of foreign imperialism and domestic feudalism and stand wealthy, strong, and

⁶² Ibid.13

proud as an independent state.”⁶³ The hopefulness associated with this has been represented in the cultural medium since the early twentieth century. Fitzgerald also points out that “nationalist ethics and fiction favored a particular narrative form in China, climaxing at the moment the people awaken to the nature of their captivity and discover a ‘way out.’”⁶⁴ Such a narrative structure is not limited to the genre of the novel, but also extends to the products of mass culture, like films. As we can tell from *Wolf Warrior II*, Leng Feng as “Captain China” is a culturally nationalistic figure that opens a path for reclaiming the Chinese nation. The contrast between a “powerful Chinese” and an “irresponsible Western” in *Wolf Warrior II* also demonstrates the ideology and emotionality of an “anti-imperialism” that, in Fitzgerald’s words, “gives shape to the people of New China.”

3.2 Remapping the Failure: Textual or Ideological?

However, in the case of *The Great Wall*, Chinese audiences may not be emotionally engaged because Chinese nationalism does not figure throughout the whole film text. *The Great Wall* begins with a combination of a textual description of the Great Wall and a cinematic technique (computer-generated images) that renders the Wall as mysterious, legendary, and impeccable (see Figure 1).⁶⁵ But this formidable image of China and its

⁶³ Fitzgerald, John. *Awakening China: Politics, Culture, and Class in the Nationalist Revolution*. (Stanford University Press, 1996), 48.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁶⁵ Figure 1,2,4,5,6 all come from *The Great Wall*. Directed by Zhang Yimou, 2016. Film is also uploaded by Iqiyi, (https://www.iqiyi.com/v_19rracztc.html)

glorious culture proves to be only temporary. It is not ideologically consistent with the rest of the film.



Figure 1: The grand depiction of the Great Wall in the opening scene

In the immediately following scene, the protagonist, William Garin, a European mercenary (played by Matt Damon), and his companion Pedro Tovar appear on the screen. They are fleeing from the attacks of Hill tribes on their way to search for the “black powder,” that is, gunpowder. Eventually, they arrive at the Wall and are imprisoned by the Nameless Order. At that point the story devolves into a fairly standard “classical Hollywood cinema” logic, in which William Garin is portrayed as a goal-oriented hero who helps the Nameless Order to prevent the threat from the Taotie monsters: the plot revolves around the Nameless Order defending the Great Wall from the invasion of the Taotie. After General Shao (the commander of the Nameless Order) is killed by Taotie and Commander Lin Mae (played by Jing Tian, a well-known Chinese actress) succeeds him in the position, William Garin is moved by the courage and trust

that were displayed by the Chinese armies. Although his companion, Pedro Tovar, tries to steal the black powder from the Chinese and run away (he is recaptured), William dedicates himself to helping the Chinese to eliminate the threat of the Taotie because he places the interest of the collective over his own self-interest. He demonstrates his amazing battle skills and eventually cooperates with Commander Lin to kill the Taotie and the rest of the invading horde. The story ends with William returning home and choosing to take Tovar with him instead of a reward of black powder, with Commander Lin standing on the Wall watching him leave, with complicated emotions.

In contrast to *Wolf Warrior II*, which constructs a Chinese superhero who rescues his international fellows (especially ones from the Third World), *The Great Wall's* narrative is reversed: the Chinese people (the Chinese armies) are the ones who are “rescued” and a Westerner is the savior. The fact that the protagonist of the film is white has aroused controversies. Many Western film critics accuse the film of engaging in “whitewashing” and being based on the White Savior narrative through the establishment of William Garin as the hero.⁶⁶ Ann Hornaday, a movie critic for *The Washington Post* refutes this point by arguing that even though the character of Garin is heroic, his heroism is really just a foil for revealing the superior principles and courage

⁶⁶ BBC. (2016). The Great Wall: Is Matt Damon 'Whitewashing' or Good Business? *BBC*, [online] Available at: [The Great Wall: Is Matt Damon 'whitewashing' or good business? - BBC News](https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-45444444) [accessed 08 March.2022].

of his Chinese allies.⁶⁷ Many scenes in the film, however, emphasize the superiority of the white protagonist. For example, when William Garin is asked by General Shao to show the Chinese soldiers his skill at archery, he is initially mocked by the Chinese commander who feels that he is afraid to do so (see Figure 2). However, shortly after he is mocked, William demonstrates his outstanding skills, winning applause from the crowd of Chinese soldiers. The reversal here not only accentuates William Garin's outstanding skill, but also makes the Chinese soldiers look insolent and disrespectful. Zhang Yimou does create a formula of Sino-Western exchange here, but he does it in a way that glorifies the "West" and demeans "China."



Figure 2: William Garin and his friend are teased by Chinese soldiers

⁶⁷ Ann Hornaday. "'The Great Wall,' Matt Damon and Hollywood's Delicate Dance with China." *Washington Post*. [online] Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/the-great-wall-matt-damon-and-hollywoods-delicate-dance-with-china/2017/02/16/ddac0b7e-f464-11e6-8d72-263470bf0401_story.html [accessed 08 March.2022].

This represents a striking contrast with the discourse of Sino-Western interaction in *Wolf Warrior II*. Besides the rescue scenes that portray Leng Feng as a Chinese superhero, in previous scenes we also see how he displays his masculinity during a beach soccer competition (see Figure 3). Placing the two scenes in *The Great Wall* and *Wolf Warrior II* together allows us to recognize the hero in two different spatialities: a Western hero among Chinese, and a Chinese one among Westerners.



Figure 3: Leng Feng is flexing his muscle during a beach soccer competition with his international fellows

In fact, the superiority of William Garin over Chinese soldiers is also established in the battle scene. When Peng Yong, a soldier in the Bear Troop, is too afraid to fight the horde of Taotie, it is William who encourages him and convinces him to step up (see Figure 4). Different shots establish the comparison between the two faces: one is intimidated while the other is resolute. We see that Peng Yong eventually joins the fight,

which almost gets him being killed, but he is saved by William. The physical and mental strength that William demonstrates here, if it does not establish him as a White Savior for all, at least makes him Peng Yong's White Savior."



(a)



(b)

Figure 4: (a) Peng Yong shows his intimidation of joining the war; (b) William Garin is acting like a white savior to encourage and push Peng to join the battle

Others may argue that I am unfairly vilifying the representation of Chinese soldiers, since they do demonstrate courage and principles from the very beginning. In

the first battle with Taotie in the film, William is stunned and amazed by how organized the Chinese soldiers are (see Figure 5).



(a)



(b)

Figure 5: (a) William Garin and his friend are amazed by the well-equipped and organized Chinese armies; (b) the depiction of Chinese armies

When the war first breaks out, the female soldiers in the blue armour fearlessly jump into the battle, wrestling with the horde of Taotie with lances (see Figure 6).



Figure 6: Chinese female soldiers show their bravery in battling the horde of Tao Tie but are eventually killed

It is a touching scene, especially when we see that the female soldiers are so relentless and brave, and most of them eventually die in the battle. However, does this narrative choice function as a compliment to the Chinese army? The review of the movie in *The Hollywood Reporter* stated that this scene reveals the “lack of logic in the film”: the female soldiers bungee-jumping down the wall to spear the beasts is completely unnecessary because the Chinese armies already have cannons and other artillery.⁶⁸ Yet such “failures of logic” is not the main reason for the domestic failure of *The Great Wall*. In *Wolf Warrior II*, we can also detect a lack of logic in several scenes. For instance, in one scene, Leng Feng, disregarding his identity as a military man, kills the boss of a real estate company who confronts his comrade’s family. Leng Feng is then sent to a military

⁶⁸ Tsui, Clarence (2016). “‘The Great Wall’ (‘Chang Cheng’): Film Review.” *The Hollywood Reporter*, [online] Available at: <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-reviews/great-wall-review-956341/> [accessed 08 March.2022].

prison for two years and discharged from the Chinese army (this also explains why Leng Feng eventually goes to Africa). The only justification for Leng Feng's impulsiveness is his compassion for his comrade's family, especially given the context that his comrade had sacrificed himself for Leng earlier. It remains a logical issue of narrative that a military veteran would kill a civilian for personal reasons in contemporary Chinese society.

Thus, cinematic logic is not what accounts for the huge disparities in the domestic popularity of the two films. My analysis so far has, in a sense, shown that Chinese audiences have a "double-standard" in evaluating a Hollywood-like film where a Sino-Western interaction is represented. Do Chinese audiences feel uncomfortable with Western characters? Yes, but also no. It is important to note that before *The Great Wall* was released, Chinese audiences were really excited to watch Matt Damon in the film. One netizen predicted that the "influence of Matt Damon (playing William Garin)" would be a "positive factor" that helped the movie to succeed.⁶⁹ Another netizen even suggested that Matt Damon could be part of the Terracotta army when she uploaded a photoshopped picture of Damon (see Figure 7)

⁶⁹ BBC. (2016). The Great Wall: Is Matt Damon 'Whitewashing' or Good Business? *BBC*, [online] Available at: [The Great Wall: Is Matt Damon 'whitewashing' or good business? - BBC News](#) [accessed 08 March.2022].

online.⁷⁰



Figure 7: The photoshopped Chinese Terracotta army with Matt Damon's face

The assimilation of Matt Damon with the Chinese Terracotta army strongly suggests that this superstar was expected to do well in terms of his performance; yet it is also a sign of Chinese audiences' sinocentric understanding of Western identity in Chinese-produced Hollywood films. Westerners can only be either the villain (like Big Daddy in *Wolf Warriors II*), or a minor character that provides the trigger for the heroism and significance of the Chinese main character (like how the Western is "imagined" in *Wolf Warrior II*). Although Zhang Yimou spoke out to defend *The Great Wall* against

⁷⁰ Ibid.

charges of whitewashing, the box office rendered his efforts futile.⁷¹ To most Chinese audiences, Matt Damon is acceptable, but William Garin is intolerable.

3.3 Pandering: Tricky for Now, Risky for the Future

The Great Wall is consequently a culturally and ideologically contested film in terms of its “Chinese” and “Hollywood” characteristics. It certainly departs from the concept of “Chollywood cinema”: it only deploys the Hollywood mode of production mode but fails to incorporate a Chinese nationalist ideology. However, its differences from *Wolf Warrior II* remind us that the Sino-Hollywood negotiation can also take place through pandering. Amy Qin of *The New York Times* points out that “pandering” has historically been a fairly common Hollywood tactic to expand its audiences.⁷² In her account, casting Matt Damon in *The Great Wall* is an attempt to pander to viewers outside China.⁷³ This market-oriented mindset is not unusual. *Wolf Warrior II* can serve as a counter-example: even though it was a huge domestic success, its international recognition has been much less successful. In an interview about his intentions in casting Matt Damon in the film, Zhang Yimou claimed: “The way the market is right now, we can’t make an internationally successful film on our own. If we didn’t have Matt Damon,

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Qin, Amy. (2017). Pander or Diversify? Hollywood Courts China With ‘The Great Wall’ *New York Times*, [online] Available at: [Pander or Diversify? Hollywood Courts China With ‘The Great Wall’ - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/08/movies/pander-or-diversify-hollywood-courts-china-with-the-great-wall.html) [accessed 08 March.2022].

⁷³ Ibid.

if we didn't speak English in the film, then it would just be a purely Chinese film."⁷⁴

Inferring from what Zhang says, "pandering" can be a tactic to achieve Sino-Hollywood cooperation by neutralizing both the Hollywood elements and the Chinese elements.

Zhang's intention was very different from Wu Jing's ambition in producing *Wolf Warrior II*, because Wu was very concerned to construct a Chinese hero who represented the rising power of China and who served the heightened nationalism of contemporary China.

To a certain degree, Zhang achieved his goal, and pandering does indeed facilitate Sino-Hollywood cooperation as it signifies China's initiative in moving into transcultural interaction. Ying Zhu points out that the making of *The Great Wall* symbolizes "a new co-production model matching Chinese investment and talent with major Hollywood stars, unlike the old co-production model with Hollywood investment and cheap Chinese labor."⁷⁵ It is a major development in the Sino-Hollywood relationship. Mac Sullivan also recognizes that *The Great Wall* demonstrates that Chinese companies are investing heavily in Hollywood and that the creation of this film involves crossing the trans-Pacific media barrier.⁷⁶ Further, instead of deepening cultural conflicts and exclusion, *The Great Wall* demonstrates an on-screen cultural trade—a point that has

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Zhu, Ying. "The Battle of Images: Cultural diplomacy and Sino-Hollywood negotiation." In *Soft Power with Chinese Characteristics* (Routledge, 2019), 109.

⁷⁶ Sullivan, Mac. (2017) "The Great Wall: Matt Damon, Zhang Yimou, Edward Zwick, and...Dragons?" *Film Criticism*. Volume 41, Issue 3, [online] Available at: [The Great Wall: Matt Damon, Zhang Yimou, Edward Zwick and...Dragons? \(umich.edu\)](https://www.umich.edu/~criticism/41-3/sullivan-the-great-wall-matt-damon-zhang-yimou-edward-zwick-and-dragons/) [accessed 08 March.2022].

also been made by Enrique Lightsey Guerrero. More specifically, Guerrero refers to the concept of “talent exchange” to describe how in *The Great Wall* we see Matt Damon cast as the leading actor by Chinese production companies in order to generate more international appeal.⁷⁷ Although the film eventually bombed at the box office, both domestically and around the world, such a strategic move, in Guerrero’s words, shows that China is “vacillating through Hollywood’s imperial waters to gain global influence, expand global brand and cultural recognition.”⁷⁸ Overall, *The Great Wall* does leave a footprint in the continuous Sino-Hollywood negotiation by the means of cultural trade. Regardless of how much this film is criticized, we cannot deny its significance in shaping our perception of the Sino-Hollywood relationship.

However, the overall negative reception of *The Great Wall* does reveal the downside of pandering, which raises concerns over the sustainability of such a strategy and leads us to wonder what kind of Sino-Hollywood negotiation would be more acceptable to Chinese audiences in the future. Aynne Kokas points out that “the initial responses to the trailer for *The Great Wall* signal that a lot of Sino-US co-productions may have a lot of success in one market and may not meet expectations in the other.”⁷⁹ For example, even beyond failing to form an affective relationship with its Chinese

⁷⁷ Guerrero, 43.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 21.

⁷⁹ Qin, Amy. (2017). “Pander or Diversify? Hollywood Courts China With ‘The Great Wall.’” *New York Times*, [online] Available at: [Pander or Diversify? Hollywood Courts China With ‘The Great Wall’ - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/07/arts/television/pander-or-diversify-hollywood-courts-china-with-the-great-wall.html) [accessed 08 March. 2022].

audiences, *The Great Wall* is also too “Westernized” because it has to “pander” as well to the international market. As Zhewen Song says, “Despite being surrounded by more than a dozen Chinese film stars and idols, Matt Damon’s character is still the only one portrayed with depth and narrative complexity, compared with the Chinese characters.”⁸⁰ The reason is that the film has to be presented with English dialogue in order to serve global (and especially American) audiences. Further, Song points out that “Hollywood’s experience in the global market outweighs Zhang’s pursuit of an artistic presentation of ancient Chinese culture and Zhang’s influence on the filmmaking process as director was limited by the presence of other Hollywood talents in the creative team.”⁸¹ The logic behind this, according to Song, is that in a profit-driven industry, it is always the party who understands and controls the market that holds decisive power. Thus, the Chinese elements in *The Great Wall* are compromised to accommodate the interpretations of the Hollywood talents involved, who are targeting the global market.⁸² The limitation of Chinese creativity also reduced the space for promoting Chinese nationalism, a strategy of market-appeal that is showcased in *Wolf Warrior II*. With this in mind, it is no surprise that *The Great Wall* would fail in its domestic market, since the pandering to the international market eclipses its Chineseness to a significant degree. Even more frustrating is that the strategy of

⁸⁰ Song, 64.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 68.

pandering alienates not only Chinese audiences, but also Western ones. One of the major criticisms the film faced was that: “the scenes of Matt Damon leading a Chinese army into battle seemed like yet another instance of Hollywood’s ‘white savior’ complex and its repeated whitewashing, the practice of casting white actors in roles originally conceived as Asian (or nonwhite).”⁸³ Such a critique reveals that the pandering in *The Great Wall* is poorly done, since by casting a white actor, it becomes inscribed into a “complex web of racial sensitivities in the U.S.”⁸⁴ The failure to appeal either to domestic or to international audiences puts “pandering” in a difficult position when considering its sustainability in the future of the Sino-Hollywood negotiation.

In sum, by comparing *Wolf Warrior II* and *The Great Wall*, we are able to recognize that Western audiences are still accustomed to seeing “their Hollywood” as being shared with the Chinese one. When *Wolf Warrior II* as a Hollywood film attempts to rewrite the code of a superhero, Western audiences are reluctant to see a protagonist replaced by a Chinese one who promotes Chinese power and nationalism. Similarly, even though Zhang Yimou has “pandered” to the global market by casting Matt Damon in a story set in a Chinese context in *The Great Wall*, Western audiences still criticize such moves as “unnecessary” because of their forms of cultural understanding and recognition. The established dichotomy between “Hollywood” and “the rest” is, to a

⁸³ Qin, Amy. (2017). “Pander or Diversify? Hollywood Courts China With ‘The Great Wall.’” *New York Times*, [online] Available at: [Pander or Diversify? Hollywood Courts China With ‘The Great Wall’ - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/07/movies/pander-or-diversify-hollywood-courts-china-with-the-great-wall.html) [accessed 08 March. 2022].

⁸⁴ Ibid.

certain degree, an unavoidable cultural barrier, as Chinese scholars like Dai Jinhua and Ying Zhu also recognize that the Sino-Hollywood relationship is contentious and competitive.

Yet negotiation itself is a process of making things compatible. It is characterized by both inclusiveness and exclusiveness. That is, both competition and collaboration (voluntary or not) are inseparable elements in the process of cultural accommodation. For Chinese audiences, the success of *Wolf Warrior II* and the failure of *The Great Wall* suggest that they are not hostile to Hollywood filmmaking as such; instead, they no longer wish to see “Hollywood” in their own domestic cultural sphere as an exotic cultural phenomenon that continuously exerts American cultural supremacy and ideologies. When Wu Jing presented “Chollywood cinema” to them, they responded with incredible support that eventually made *Wolf Warrior II* one of the most popular films in Chinese history. As pandering is overshadowed by Chollywooding, we might imagine that the momentum of such a cultural development could possibly reshape the Sino-Hollywood negotiation in the future.

4. Conclusion

In this thesis, I have identified two expressions of the Sino-Hollywood negotiation in the current era—“Chollywooding” and “pandering”—in order to discuss the phenomenon of transcultural interplay and circulation. By characterizing the Sino-Hollywood relationship as a negotiation, I seek to show that such interaction is a constantly evolving and circulatory process instead of simply a dichotomous competition. As discussed, even though statistics suggest that Hollywood dominated the Chinese film market during the Republican era, this so-called “cultural imperialism” nevertheless spurred the domestic development of native film studios and the rise of socialist melodrama in China. From a cultural perspective, this facilitated and led to innovation in the Chinese film industry, even though compromise was also an important component in this relationship. Similarly, when Hollywood re-entered China after 1994, we not only saw co-productions by the two parties that involved the strategy of pandering, but also witness how China took the initiative to employ Hollywood filmmaking technique to produce its own ideological films, namely, what I call Chollywood cinema. I have sought to reorient the consideration of the Sino-Hollywood relationship from a black and white binary toward seeing it as a cultural negotiation that comprises not only competition but collaboration as well.

Whether such cultural collaboration is voluntary or successful at the box office is not the major concern of this argument. For example, in Chapter One, I analyzed *Wolf*

Warrior II (Wu Jing, 2017) in order to describe the emergence of a new cultural space, the Chollywood cinema that has been cultivated through the Sino-Hollywood interplay. By Chollywood cinema, I intend to identify a rising cultural and cinematic phenomenon that resulted in a film that combined Hollywood filmmaking technique with Chinese nationalistic ideologies. Unlike previous Hollywood blockbusters, whose superheroes were always American, *Wolf Warrior II* put forward a Chinese superhero to demonstrate metaphorically the rising power of China on the global stage and to stimulate Chinese nationalism among its intended domestic audiences. It was definitely not a voluntary cultural collaboration between the U.S. and China; even though the film enjoyed huge domestic success, its overseas reception was comprised mostly of criticism and controversies. But I emphasize that *Wolf Warrior II* still somehow represents a path for the Sino-Hollywood negotiation, since it shows how China can take the initiative to produce its own “Hollywood” cinema and enhance its soft power and global influence. Chollywood cinema may not be embraced by the world in this specific moment, but it opens up possibilities for future trajectories in this relationship of negotiation.

In order to identify an alternative path to “Chollywood cinema” in the Sino-Hollywood negotiation, in Chapter Two I analyzed *The Great Wall* (Zhang Yimou, 2016) in order to explore how cultural trade is represented in this film by the strategy of pandering by both parties. As discussed, the domestic failure of *The Great Wall* is not necessarily the result of the weakness of the plot; rather, it suggests that Chinese

audiences are reluctant to embrace a “white savior” in stories about China. Such a mindset anticipates China’s ambition to reformulate the dynamics of the Sino-Hollywood negotiation, and consequently paved the way for the emergence and success of *Wolf Warrior II* a year later. Further, the pandering strategy that is employed by both China and Hollywood in this film might be perceived as a sign of cultural exchange and collaboration, as both parties seek to expand their own cultural influence and vocabularies through mutual collaboration. Although pandering appears to annoy audiences in both markets, its significance for the Sino-Hollywood relationship should not be erased, as its very existence represents a global-local dialect and the vitality of transcultural communication. In other words, the “effort” might be seen as more important than the “result” in our understanding of Sino-Hollywood negotiation. One thing we should be aware of, though, is that the failure of *The Great Wall* reveals that “pandering” doesn’t necessarily suit the tastes of contemporary Chinese audiences. The sustainability of “pandering” in the future in the Chinese market is in question, especially with the emergence of a more favorable cultural artifact, the Chollywood film.

In summary, this thesis is merely *one* exploration of Sino-Hollywood negotiation in modern Chinese history, particularly in the twenty-first century. Instead of seeking to locate the “point” that the Sino-Hollywood relationship has reached, I prefer to probe the “movement” that has distributed things from place to place, as Prasenjit Duara does when he introduces the concept of “circulatory history.” Certainly, there are more and

different issues that could be addressed: how other Sino-Hollywood co-produced films are shown and what they could entail; how Sino-Hollywood negotiation has been or could be expressed by other forms; how both parties are entangled in political and economic conflicts that constantly shape and reshape the Sino-Hollywood relationship, and how both film industries are consequently reformulated. Nevertheless, the aim of this thesis is to accentuate and recapture the dynamism of a process of accommodation and negotiation.

So, can we say anything about the future of the Sino-Hollywood negotiation?

During the Chinese National Holiday in 2021, a nationalistic blockbuster called *The Battle at Lake Changjin* was released, which traces the story of the People's Volunteer Army of China as it entered North Korea during the Korean War. The box office receipts of this film eventually surpassed those of *Wolf Warrior II* and it now ranks as the most profitable film Chinese history (with US\$913 million in receipts).⁸⁵ However, like the case of *Wolf Warrior II*, more than 99% of its receipts come from the Chinese domestic market.⁸⁶ Also, the production of epic battle scenes and the nationalistic Chinese hero and ideologies nevertheless suggest that it can be characterized as a "Chollywood film." And this case may provide us with a hint of, and a way of imagining, the future direction of the Sino-Hollywood negotiation, especially in light of the fact that the sequel

⁸⁵ Statistics posted by *Box Office Mojo*: <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/releasegroup/gr3283177989/>

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

to *The Battle at Lake Changjin* was just released in the 2022 Chinese New Year.

Chollywood cinema is, consequently, gaining some momentum in reformulating the future of the Sino-Hollywood negotiation, at least in the Chinese market.

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