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PAULO ROBERTO TADEU MENECELLI FILHO

CHINA AND THE CINEMA:  
SOFT POWER, STRATEGIC NARRATIVES,  
AND RELATIONS WITH THE UNITED STATES

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PAULO ROBERTO TADEU MENECELLI FILHO

CHINA AND THE CINEMA:

soft power, strategic narratives, and relations with the United States

Ph.D. Dissertation submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of International Relations in the line of research on International and Comparative Politics from the Graduate Institute of International Relations of the University of Brasilia.

Supervisor: Professor Dr. Danielly Silva Ramos

Co-supervisor: Professor Dr. Cecília Antakly de Mello

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and “China and Global Governance.” I authored papers related to this dissertation and engaged in discussions about them with Chinese professors and colleagues from over 15 different countries. I extend my gratitude to the CSC, the Chinese Embassy in Brazil, and the professors and colleagues at BFSU for this opportunity.

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*Film industries are considered to be market-based and profit-driven entertainment enterprises, especially Hollywood. Yet they are never purely entertainment businesses for they can never escape the constraints of the respective political structures, ideological and cultural value systems in which they are situated. Nor can they be free from the conditions of diplomatic relations and geopolitics. Both Hollywood and Chinawood are often caught in between these tumultuous relationships.*

Su, Wendy. 2022. "The Hollywood–Chinawood Relationship: Continuities and Changes." In *The Routledge Companion to Media Industries*, edited by Paul McDonald. Abingdon; New York: Routledge.

*We live in a visual age. Images shape international events and our understanding of them. Photographs, cinema and television influence how we view and approach phenomena as diverse as war, humanitarian disasters, protest movements, financial crises and election campaigns.*

Bleiker, Roland. 2018. "Mapping visual global politics." In *Visual Global Politics*, edited by Roland Bleiker. Abingdon; New York: Routledge.

*We will stay firmly rooted in Chinese culture. We will collect and refine the defining symbols and best elements of Chinese culture and showcase them to the world. We will accelerate the development of China's discourse and narrative systems, better tell China's stories, make China's voice heard, and present a China that is credible, appealing, and respectable. We will strengthen our international communications capabilities, make our communications more effective, and strive to strengthen China's voice in international affairs so it is commensurate with our composite national strength and international status. We will deepen exchanges and mutual learning with other civilizations and better present Chinese culture to the world.*

Xi, Jinping. 2022. Speech at the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China. October 16, 2022.

## ABSTRACT

This dissertation aims to explore the relationship between China's growing global influence and its use of films as soft power tools to disseminate strategic narratives and improve its international image. Starting from the premise that Chinese policymakers and strategists are fully aware of the need of fostering positive global perceptions while mitigating negative reactions to the country's expanding military and economic prowess, this study investigates the three primary strategies employed by China to enhance its international image through films: 1) leveraging the importance of the Chinese film market and China's position in Hollywood, which results in an increasing number of Hollywood movies tailored to the Chinese audience and censors, as Hollywood becomes increasingly dependent on China, both in terms of investments in Hollywood studios and box-office revenue; 2) absorbing Hollywood talent and resources to create Chinese stories rather than Hollywood stories with token Chinese elements in a new co-production model; and 3) creating Chinese global blockbusters, directly disseminating China's strategic narratives to international audiences. Adopting a poststructuralist perspective which considers that visual images are political forces, that shape both international events and our comprehension of them, and paying special attention to Chinese International Relations scholars debating these issues, this research incorporates a mixed-method approach. By combining quantitative and qualitative analyses and conducting semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, the study offers comprehensive insights into the dynamics of soft power projection and strategic narratives dissemination through cinema. The findings of this research reveal a notable exception in the case of China-United States, where China's growing prominence results in both increased dissemination of its narratives and heightened resistance to its influence, consequently diminishing the effectiveness of its soft power through cinematic means. However, beyond this specific context, a clear pattern emerges: China's rising power correlates with an amplified capacity to shape strategic narratives in films, thereby augmenting its soft power and facilitating the realization of Chinese foreign policy goals. Ultimately, this dissertation sheds light on the multifaceted interplay between China's evolving global status, its cinematic soft power endeavors, and the varying impacts on the international community. By gaining a deeper understanding of these complex interactions, policymakers and scholars can better grasp the broader implications of China's soft power strategies on the global stage.

**Keywords:** China; cinema; soft power; strategic narratives; United States.



## A China e o cinema: *soft power*, narrativas estratégicas e relações com os Estados Unidos

### RESUMO

Esta dissertação tem como objetivo explorar a relação entre a crescente influência global da China e o uso de filmes como ferramentas de *soft power* para disseminar narrativas estratégicas e aprimorar sua imagem internacional. Partindo da premissa de que os formuladores de políticas e estrategistas chineses estão plenamente conscientes da necessidade de fomentar percepções globais positivas, ao mesmo tempo em que mitigam reações negativas ao crescente poder militar e econômico do país, este estudo investiga as três principais estratégias utilizadas pela China para aprimorar sua imagem internacional através do cinema: 1) aproveitar a importância do mercado cinematográfico chinês e a posição da China em Hollywood, o que resulta em um aumento de filmes de Hollywood adaptados ao público e à censura chinesa, uma vez que Hollywood se torna cada vez mais dependente da China, tanto em termos de investimentos em estúdios em Hollywood quanto em receitas de bilheteria; 2) absorver talentos e recursos de Hollywood para criar histórias chinesas, em vez de histórias de Hollywood com elementos chineses superficiais, em um novo modelo de coprodução; e 3) criar superproduções chinesas com alcance global, visando à disseminação direta das narrativas estratégicas da China para audiências internacionais. Adotando uma perspectiva pós-estruturalista que considera as imagens visuais como forças políticas que moldam tanto eventos internacionais quanto nossa compreensão sobre acerca eles, e dedicando especial atenção aos debates entre estudiosos chineses de Relações Internacionais sobre essas questões, esta pesquisa incorpora uma abordagem de método misto. Ao combinar análises quantitativas e qualitativas e conduzir entrevistas semiestruturadas com participantes relevantes nessas dinâmicas, o estudo oferece percepções abrangentes sobre a dinâmica da projeção do *soft power* e a disseminação de narrativas estratégicas através do cinema. Os resultados desta pesquisa revelam uma exceção notável no caso das relações China-Estados Unidos, onde a crescente proeminência da China resulta tanto em maior disseminação de suas narrativas quanto em maior resistência à sua influência, diminuindo conseqüentemente a eficácia de seu *soft power* através do cinema nesse contexto específico. No entanto, além dessa situação particular, emerge das análises um claro padrão: o poder crescente da China está correlacionado a uma capacidade ampliada de moldar narrativas estratégicas em filmes, aumentando assim seu *soft power* e facilitando a concretização de seus objetivos de política externa. Em última análise, esta dissertação lança luz sobre a interação multifacetada entre o *status* global em evolução da China, suas iniciativas de *soft power* no cinema e os impactos diversos na comunidade internacional. Ao obter uma compreensão mais profunda dessas interações complexas, formuladores de políticas e pessoas pesquisadoras podem compreender melhor as amplas implicações das estratégias de *soft power* da China no cenário global.

**Palavras-chave:** China; cinema; *soft power*; narrativas estratégicas; Estados Unidos.

## LIST OF FIGURES

<b>Figure 1:</b> Chinese poster of <i>Mulan</i> .....	<b>141</b>
<b>Figure 2:</b> A Fujian <i>tulou</i> in East China's Fujian Province.....	<b>147</b>
<b>Figure 3:</b> A poster of <i>Mulan</i> depicting the villain, Bori Khan.....	<b>148</b>
<b>Figure 4:</b> Chinese poster of <i>The Great Wall</i> .....	<b>221</b>
<b>Figure 5:</b> <i>The Great Wall</i> and China's military might.....	<b>223</b>
<b>Figure 6:</b> The monster Tao Tie climbs the Great Wall.....	<b>227</b>
<b>Figure 7:</b> <i>Barbie</i> and the supposed representation of the nine-dash line map.....	<b>278</b>
<b>Figure 8:</b> The muscular Leng Feng in <i>Wolf Warrior 2</i> .....	<b>328</b>
<b>Figure 9:</b> Big Daddy and Leng Feng fighting at the end of <i>Wolf Warrior 2</i> .....	<b>331</b>
<b>Figure 10:</b> Chinese flag saves the day in <i>Wolf Warrior 2</i> .....	<b>335</b>

## LIST OF TABLES

<b>Table 1:</b> Structure of the Chinese Cinematic Field.....	<b>51</b>
<b>Table 2:</b> Types of Sino-Foreign Co-productions.....	<b>160</b>
<b>Table 3:</b> Sino-Foreign Film Co-Production Agreements in the History of Chinese Cinema...	<b>171</b>
<b>Table 4:</b> Main Characteristics of Pre-1949 Chinese Cinema according to Hu (2003).....	<b>238</b>
<b>Table 5:</b> <i>Phases and key issues of Pre-1949 Chinese Cinema according to Zhang (2004) .....</i>	<b>240</b>

## CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	13
CHAPTER 1 – CINEMA, INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, AND CHINA: THEORETICAL-METHODOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES.....	22
1.1. Culture, China, and International Relations Theories.....	24
1.2. Cinema and International Relations: a brief history.....	39
1.3. The use of cinema for political purposes: theoretical and methodological considerations.....	55
CHAPTER 2 – HOLLYWOOD MADE FOR CHINA: HOLLYWOOD MOVIE TAILOR-MADE FOR THE CHINESE MARKET.....	83
2.1. The first scenes of the China-Hollywood relations.....	88
2.1.1. <i>Chinese Republican Era, Yellow Scare in the U.S., and China-Humiliating Films</i> .....	88
2.1.2. <i>The rise of the Communist Party of China to power and the post-1949 detachment from Hollywood</i> .....	93
2.1.3. <i>Movie market reforms in China and the rapprochement with Hollywood in the 1990s</i> .....	97
2.2. Building the World’s Largest Film Market: China-Hollywood Relations Post-2001.....	108
2.2.1. <i>The expansion of the China-Hollywood relationship</i> .....	108
2.2.2. <i>China-Hollywood Golden age</i> .....	115
2.2.3. <i>End of Honeymoon?</i> .....	124
2.3. An analysis of <i>Mulan</i> (2020).....	135
2.3.1. <i>History and contextualization of Mulan</i> .....	135
2.3.2. <i>Mulan: the film</i> .....	140
2.3.3. <i>Possible lessons from Mulan for the future of China-Hollywood relations</i> .....	153
CHAPTER 3 – CHINA-U.S. CO-PRODUCTIONS: ABSORBING HOLLYWOOD TALENTS TO MAKE CHINESE STORIES.....	156
3.1. Co-production in China: Models, Reasons, and History.....	157
3.1.1. <i>Co-productions: definitions and formats</i> .....	158
3.1.2. <i>The reasons for co-producing</i> .....	164
3.1.3. <i>A brief historical overview of co-productions in China</i> .....	170
3.2. Ups and downs of the model: China-Hollywood recent co-productions.....	180
3.2.1. <i>The promised land</i> .....	181
3.2.2. <i>The failures and challenges</i> .....	194
3.2.3. <i>Other possibilities for co-productions</i> .....	203
3.3. An analysis of <i>The Great Wall</i> (2016).....	213
3.3.1. <i>History and Contextualization of The Great Wall</i> .....	213
3.3.2. <i>The Great Wall: the film</i> .....	220
3.3.3. <i>Possible Lessons from The Great Wall for the Future of China-Hollywood Relations</i> .....	231
CHAPTER 4 – CHINESE BLOCKBUSTERS: PROJECTING CHINA’S STORIES WELL.....	234
4.1. A brief history of Chinese Cinema.....	236
4.1.1. <i>The first years of Cinema in China</i> .....	237
4.1.2. <i>The Fifth Generation and the Chinese Cinema on the Global Stage</i> .....	244
4.1.3. <i>Recent changes in Chinese cinema: The Sixth Generation and Beyond</i> .....	256
4.2. Telling China’s Stories on the Silver Screen: Chinese Soft Power Through Movies.....	271

4.2.1. <i>Main-Melody Film: Singing China's (Communist Party's) Histories</i> .....	272
4.2.2. <i>Military-themed Main-Melody Film: Telling Patriotic Tales</i> .....	284
4.2.3. <i>A Future with Chinese Characteristics: The Case of Chinese Sci-Fi Films</i> .....	298
4.3. <i>An analysis of Wolf Warrior 2 (2017)</i> .....	314
4.3.1. <i>History and Contextualization of Wolf Warrior 2</i> .....	315
4.3.2. <i>Wolf Warrior 2: the film</i> .....	326
4.3.3. <i>Possible lessons from Wolf Warrior 2 for the future of Chinese film diplomacy</i> .....	340
CONCLUSION .....	345
REFERENCES .....	360
FILMS MENTIONED IN THE DISSERTATION .....	376

## INTRODUCTION

In February 2019, Wang Xiaohui, the executive deputy director of the Chinese Central Propaganda Department and then-director of the Chinese National Film Bureau, expressed China's aspirations to become a "strong film power" similar to the United States of America (U.S.) by 2035 (R. Davis 2019). The Film Bureau, a significant governmental body overseeing the film industry in China, gained prominence with its elevation to the State Council level, signifying increased oversight (Kokas 2020a). Despite China's status as a great film power, Wang acknowledged that considerable progress is needed to reach the level of the U.S., particularly in terms of international film influence. In 2018, U.S. films generated \$2.8 billion in Chinese markets, while Chinese films earned only "a few tens of millions" in American markets (R. Davis 2019).

Wang emphasized the need for Chinese films to earn a respected place in the world, given China's global standing. However, he identified the primary challenge as the quality of Chinese films, indicating that the ability to tell compelling stories is far from the standards set by Hollywood or Bollywood (R. Davis 2019). To achieve the goal of becoming a strong film power, Wang suggested producing at least 100 films annually that exceed \$15 million in overseas earnings, with a focus on realistic subjects that resonate with "the Chinese Dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" and convey "patriotic plots" (R. Davis 2019). Furthermore, Wang emphasized the importance of conveying clear ideological messages in films while adhering to the principles of China's political system, making it essential for filmmakers to avoid challenging the country's political ideology (R. Davis 2019).

Wang's speech highlights the increasing importance the Chinese government places on cinema as a powerful tool to help achieve China's strategic goals. As emphasized by Wang Wen, a professor and executive dean of the Chongyang Institute for Financial Studies at Renmin University of China, "Movies will become important variables during the rise of China's national power, and will drive the further enhancement of its intelligent technology, urban development, modern culture, social operations, economic forms, and soft power" (W. Wang 2021).

This recognition of cinema's significance is closely tied to China's broader foreign policy objective of expanding its cultural presence worldwide. President Xi Jinping further emphasized this cultural expansion during his speech at the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in October 2022. He stressed, "We will stay firmly rooted in Chinese

culture. We will collect and refine the defining symbols and best elements of Chinese culture and showcase them to the world. We will accelerate the development of China's discourse and narrative systems, better tell China's stories, make China's voice heard, and present a China that is credible, appealing, and respectable" (Xi 2022).

As I already did in my Master's thesis (Menechelli 2018), this study starts from the premise that Chinese politicians and strategists are fully aware of the need to encourage positive perceptions about China while minimizing negative responses to the country's increasing military power and economic influence (Edney, Rosen, and Zhu 2020a). That is why soft power – “the ability to affect others and obtain preferred outcomes by attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or payment” (Nye 2021, 10) – “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” (Edney, Rosen, and Zhu 2020a, 1).

China is not only seeking to improve its soft power but doing so enthusiastically. As stated by Rana Mitter, there is in China an “almost obsessive concern” with developing soft power (Mitter 2020, 5). This sentiment is echoed by Ying Zhu, who emphasized that “[u]nder President Xi Jinping's leadership, China is desperately seeking soft power – ‘soft power’ being the *au courant* term (the term that Xi himself uses) for an older idea about using cultural sex appeal to win friends and influence people” (Zhu 2020, 100). This emphasis on soft power is particularly relevant because, as highlighted by Joseph Nye, “In today's world, the most compelling story transmitted and accelerated via cyberspace triumphs as the ability to disseminate the story and shape people's perceptions becomes ever more crucial” (Nye 2020, xix). According to the professor, who coined the term soft power in 1990, China's decision to invest more in soft power is a smart strategy because as “a country's hard economic and military power grow, it may frighten its neighbors but can soften its image by attraction” (Nye 2020, xx). Thus, China's leaders remain steadfast in their determination to present a more favorable image of the country to the international community (Nye 2020).

An exemplar of this approach is evident in the Resolution of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee on the Major Achievements and Historical Experience of the Party over the Past Century, which states:

We have accelerated work to strengthen our international communication capacity, with the goal of telling well China's stories and the Party's stories, making China's voice heard, and promoting exchanges and mutual learning between civilizations. Our cultural soft power and the appeal of Chinese culture have increased significantly (The State Council of the People's Republic of China 2021).

Actions to shape China's international image encompass various fronts, with cinema emerging as one of the most influential channels. Since 2016, China boasts the largest number of movie theaters worldwide (PWC 2017), and by 2020, it had become the planet's largest film market, leaving observers in awe (W. Wang 2021). Realizing the immense potential of this market, China has increasingly harnessed the power of cinema to disseminate its strategic narratives or, as expressed by Xi Jinping, to "tell China's stories well" (Xi 2017).

Strategic narratives, as elucidated by Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle (2013), serve as a means for political actors to construct shared meanings of the past, present, and future of international politics, thereby influencing the conduct of domestic and international actors. These narratives function as a tool for political actors to extend their influence, manage expectations, and shape the discursive landscape in which they operate, with the ultimate objective of influencing the behavior of others – an objective that aligns precisely with China's pursuit of soft power initiatives.

The strategies employed by China to disseminate its strategic narratives through films are multifaceted, and in this dissertation, I will focus on three of them, which I found to be the most representative based on the literary review. The first strategy centers on leveraging the importance of the Chinese film market and China's position in Hollywood. This involves the increasing production of Hollywood movies tailored to the Chinese audience and censors, as Hollywood becomes increasingly dependent on China, both in terms of investments in Hollywood studios and box-office revenue. Some examples of this trend include Oriental DreamWorks, a joint venture established in Shanghai in 2012 (Shambaugh 2013), followed by Dalian Wanda Group's acquisitions of AMC Entertainment in 2012 (Kokas 2017) and Legendary Entertainment in 2016 (Landreth et al. 2016). Moreover, continuous cooperation between Disney, China's Ministry of Culture, and Shanghai Media Group has been aimed at developing the Chinese animation industry and creating films for global audiences (Thussu 2017). Hollywood's increasing reliance on the Chinese market has made major studios cautious in approving films that could be problematic for China, given that Hollywood's blockbuster model depends on successful performance in large markets like China (Daly 2018). Consequently, recent Hollywood movies have notably lacked Chinese villains, as studios fear potential repercussions and the loss of a crucial income source from the Chinese market (A. Qin and Carlsen 2018).

The second strategy involves absorbing Hollywood talent and resources to create Chinese stories rather than Hollywood stories with token Chinese elements in a new co-production model. This approach matches Chinese investment and talent with major Hollywood



stars, as seen in movies like *The Great Wall* (2016), the largest Sino-American co-production to date. While some attempts on this front faced criticism and challenges, recent successes like *The Meg* (2018) and *Over the Moon* (2021) indicate progress in the co-production realm.

The third strategy involves creating Chinese global blockbusters that showcase China's action heroes and Mandarin-speaking characters. *Wolf Warrior 2* (2017) serves as a prime example, becoming the most-watched Chinese movie in history at the time, portraying China's grandeur in Africa and its emerging international power (Zhu 2020). Films like *The Wandering Earth* (2019), *The Eight Hundred* (2020), and *The Battle at Lake Changjin* (2021) have also made significant strides in presenting China as a leader of the future and introducing new narratives about the Second World War and the Korean War (Frater 2019; Mitter 2020; Rifkin 2021; Y. Wang 2022).

These strategies not only strengthen China's film industry but also contribute to promoting the Chinese Dream on a global scale (Rosen 2017). Nevertheless, the increasing acquisition of American studios and theaters by Chinese companies has sparked debates about national security and propaganda concerns (Zhu 2020). The evolving Sino-Hollywood relations reflect the changing power dynamic between China and the U.S., as China transitions from an interested apprentice to a significant partner and competitor, seeking market share and cultural influence (Kokas 2017; Zhu 2020; Su 2022a). Understanding these dynamics is essential for comprehending the current relationship between Hollywood and the Chinese film industry.

In this sense, this dissertation aims to answer the following question: What is the relationship between China's rising power and its capacity to use films as soft power tools to disseminate its strategic narratives?

The central argument of the research is that as China's power increases, so does its ability to promote its strategic narratives through cinema, strengthening Chinese soft power and, thereby, contributing to the country's foreign policy goals. The research acknowledges the counterargument that China's rise in power may increase resistance and hinder its ability to disseminate its strategic narratives through films, particularly in relations with the United States. Or, as stated by Wendy Su (2022a, 343): "Hollywood's hunger for the Chinese market and capital was met halfway with Chinawood's 'going out' strategy to promote Chinese cultural soft power," but this "bargain began to collapse ... as China defied the United States' expectation, and the Trump administration radically reversed U.S. foreign policy toward China." This argument and counterargument will be further explored throughout this dissertation.

The general objective of this dissertation is to understand the relationship between China's rising power and its utilization of films as soft power tools to disseminate strategic

narratives. Additionally, the following specific objectives will guide this research:

1. To critically analyze the International Relations literature, focusing on Chinese authors, to explore the interconnections between culture, particularly films, and foreign policy.
2. To assess the impact of Hollywood films tailored to cater to Chinese audiences and censors in facilitating China's dissemination of strategic narratives, bolstering its soft power, and advancing its foreign policy objectives.
3. To investigate the role of film co-productions between China and the United States in supporting China's efforts to disseminate strategic narratives, strengthen soft power, and achieve foreign policy goals.
4. To examine how Chinese blockbusters contribute to disseminating strategic narratives, reinforcing China's soft power, and realizing its foreign policy objectives.

In this broader context, to answer the research questions and to achieve the proposed objectives, the structure of this dissertation needed to deal with these diverse but interrelated topics. To that end, I adopted the following research design.

In addition to this introduction and the conclusion, this work will consist of 4 chapters. In Chapter 1, I put forward the theoretical-methodological framework of this research, examining how the International Relations literature discusses the interrelations between culture in general – and films in particular – and foreign policy, paying special attention to Chinese authors who increasingly “publish in English so that they can communicate directly with their counterparts in other parts of the world, especially in the West” (Y. Qin 2020a, 151). The remaining three chapters are related to the three most relevant strategies that China has been employing to improve its international image through films: Hollywood movies increasingly tailored to China (Chapter 2); co-productions between China and the U.S. (Chapter 3); and the Chinese global blockbusters (Chapter 4). In each of these chapters, one film was analyzed, totaling three films. In Chapter 2, to understand the dynamics of Hollywood films made to please China's audience and government, I analyzed the film *Mulan* (2020), “a movie about how much Hollywood needs China” (Kokas 2020b). In Chapter 3, to investigate Sino-American co-productions, I analyzed the film *The Great Wall* (2016) – “Chinese cinema's most thorough-going example of dialogue with Hollywood” (X. Zhou 2017, 115). In Chapter 4, to research Chinese blockbusters, I analyzed the film *Wolf Warrior 2* (2017) – one of the most-watched Chinese movies in history (Rosen 2018), which became so representative of this new moment of the Chinese foreign policy that the term “Wolf Warrior Diplomacy” has been increasingly used to describe China's diplomacy (Westcott and Jiang 2020; *Global Times* 2020; Martin 2021).

When justifying the selection of films included in the book *From Fu Manchu to Kung Fu Panda: Images of China in American Film*, Greene (2014, 14) explained that “to a large extent, the focus of this study – the changing perceptions of China and what they say about America – has determined the choice of films explored.” In this dissertation, I employ a similar rationale by carefully selecting films that I deem most emblematic of each process under analysis. While this introduction provides preliminary remarks, the significance of each film will be more comprehensively explored in their respective chapters.

This dissertation will adopt a poststructuralist perspective that understands that language has political power because it is through discourse that subjects, objects, actors, identities, and national interests are constructed and represented (Weldes 1999; Hansen 2020). To achieve its aims, a mixed-method approach will be employed, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative aspects. Quantitative data, such as movie budgets, box office performance, and investments, will be analyzed alongside qualitative examinations of films and relevant discourses from authorities, agents, and stakeholders. The primary objective is to identify and analyze the key strategic narratives propagated through these films and their broader implications for foreign policy.

Furthermore, to gain a comprehensive perspective on the topics explored in this dissertation, I conducted three semi-structured interviews with individuals closely involved in soft power, China-Hollywood relations, and Chinese cinema. The interviewees included Joseph Nye, the Harvard Professor who coined the term “soft power” in 1990 and authored the book *Soft Power and Great-Power Competition: Shifting Sands in the Balance of Power Between the United States and China* (2023); James Tager, Deputy Director of Free Expression Research and Policy at PEN America and author of the report *Made in Hollywood, Censored by Beijing*, which examines how Beijing’s censors have influenced Hollywood and the global film industry; and Dede Nickerson, a U.S. executive who has been living in China for over 25 years and has been a leading pioneer in China’s film industry, with experience in studio management, production strategy, and acquisitions in China. Dede Nickerson was introduced to me by Dorinda (Dinda) Elliott, Executive Director of the Fairbank Center and Harvard China Fund. These interviews provide valuable insights and enrich the overall understanding of the subject matter.

In terms of the time frame, the study will primarily focus on the twenty-first century, starting from China’s entrance into the World Trade Organization in 2001. This date marks a significant milestone, as it intensified the legal pressures for the opening and globalization of the Chinese film industry (Kokas 2017; Zhu 2020). However, to provide contextual

understanding, I also delved further back in time and explored the historical developments of both Chinese and Hollywood cinema. This broader historical context contributes to a comprehensive analysis of the subject matter at hand.

Thus, the goal is, through this path, to reach a broader understanding of the use of cinema as instruments of soft power by China, and the interaction of these dynamics with Chinese foreign policy through strategic narratives. With that, this research also aims to contribute not only to the expansion of knowledge about China's soft power but as well as to the recognition and understanding of policies and strategies that different countries can implement to adapt themselves in their relations with China better.

This dissertation offers several contributions and originalities. Firstly, it integrates cinema, soft power, and strategic narratives providing a fresh perspective that goes beyond traditional approaches based on confrontation and power dynamics. Incorporating elements of Media Studies, it broadens the scope of analysis in International Relations, offering a more comprehensive understanding of the role of culture in shaping International Relations. Unlike previous research in communication and cinema, this work not only identifies the contents of the films but also analyzes how China's relations with the world, particularly with the U.S., are portrayed in them. This analysis represents a significant contribution to the field of International Relations, as it sheds light on how China wants to be perceived in the international arena, the strategic narratives it promotes, and how it uses soft power to achieve its goals.

Another contribution of this work is its implications for Chinese foreign policy. By analyzing the production, promotion, and reception of Chinese films abroad, this dissertation provides insights into challenges and opportunities for Chinese foreign policy. It can inform policy decisions by identifying which aspects of Chinese culture and narratives resonate with audiences in different parts of the world and how to leverage soft power to achieve foreign policy objectives.

Moreover, as this research comes from a Brazilian perspective, it offers a unique viewpoint on China-U.S. relations, two of Brazil's most important partners. By highlighting the role of visual images in shaping international events and public perception, this dissertation shows how the cinematic dynamics between China and the U.S. can influence how people in Brazil see these countries and the world. This perspective adds an important dimension to the study of China-U.S. relations and offers new insights into how these relations affect countries beyond the immediate participants.

Finally, this dissertation emphasizes the potential of culture to foster connections between people, making a valuable contribution to the field of International Relations. By going

beyond conventional notions of power and national security, it provides a more nuanced understanding of how cultural exchanges can promote mutual understanding and cooperation among countries. In this regard, the research aligns with the extensive literature on the significance of culture in International Relations, which can facilitate mutual understanding (Cummings 2003), bridge differences, and open new channels of communication (Goff 2020). Culture acts as “The Friendly Persuader,” enabling actors to influence the international environment in their favor, promoting the export of their ways of life, beliefs, and art (Cull 2019). It also serves as “The Humanizing Factor,” holding the potential to transform societies (Schneider 2010).

This approach also seeks to broaden the scope of International Relations by acknowledging its historical Eurocentrism, which originated from the dominance of Western perspectives during its development. Buzan and Acharya (2021) argue that Western history and political theory were treated as synonymous with world history and theory in the discipline. Consequently, pre-modern Western thinkers like Thucydides, Hobbes, and Machiavelli heavily influenced contemporary Western IR theorizing, resulting in the dominance of Westphalian sovereignty, anarchy, and the balance of power. Engaging in dialogue with other cultures and worldviews can make International Relations more comprehensive, incorporating diverse perspectives and historical forms of statehood and international order-building, such as empires or universal peace (Buzan and Acharya 2021).

One illustrative example is Qin Yaqing’s relational theory, which emphasizes the significance of cultural elements in analyzing global events. Unlike Western rationalism, which prioritizes individual self-interest, Chinese society places prominence on relationality (Y. Qin 2018). Chinese relationality focuses on the relationships between things and individuals, drawing from Confucianism’s principles of self-existence and coexistence, self-identity and social relations, and self-interest and collective interests. In his relational theory, Qin Yaqing incorporates the dialectical conceptions of Chinese *zhongyong* (yin-yang), emphasizing harmony between opposing forces. These forces are interconnected, creating a coevolutionary harmony, contrasting with the Hegelian dialectic prevalent in Western thought, which perceives a conflict between opposing poles (Y. Qin 2018).

Considering that the discipline of International Relations has predominantly relied on Western perspectives, which posit that International Relations are anarchic and must be governed to prevent descending into a state of nature and chaos, encountering alternative worldviews that emphasize harmony might evoke feelings of unfamiliarity and mistrust. However, it is precisely in these instances that elevating culture to the core of the discussion

becomes crucial. Doing so enables us to demonstrate the existence of diverse perspectives in understanding the world and International Relations, thereby fostering the development of a more inclusive and harmonious discipline and global community.

Roland Bleiker (2018) stated that visual images are political forces, that shape both international events and our comprehension of them. Hence, researching more deeply those cultural aspects and understanding which cultural representations were chosen, by whom, for what purpose, and how they were received, can help the analysis of the use of films as an important tool in China's dispute for global power.

## **CHAPTER 1 – CINEMA, INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, AND CHINA: THEORETICAL-METHODOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES**

What are the interactions between culture and International Relations? How is power exercised internationally through films? How to analyze the project and the actions of this specific type of Chinese soft power in its international relations? The main objective of this chapter is to investigate the way in which the main scholars of International Relations interpret the role culture and cinema play as features of the field. For that, I will provide a brief history of the use of cinema as an instrument of power in the foreign policy of States, and make clear some theoretical and methodological considerations. Throughout this path, a special focus will be given to China, through research into the discussions of Chinese and foreign theorists on the Chinese strategy of using cinema as soft power tools to promote its strategic narratives at the international level.

This dissertation seeks to highlight the importance of culture for the analysis of world politics, as it provides different perspectives and worldviews, essential in the path of a more diverse discipline, or what Barry Buzan and Amitav Acharya (2021) call Global IR. In this sense, I will adopt Joseph Nye's concept of soft power – “the ability to affect others and obtain preferred outcomes by attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or payment” (Nye 2021, 10). Nevertheless, I will add to soft power some considerations made by the poststructuralist perspectives of IR, highlighting that it is possible to construct explanations of world politics that do not fit the positivist definition – which demands clear answers to falsifiable hypotheses, with evident causality between dependent and independent variables. Thus, this dissertation will assume a more reflexive approach, “much ‘softer,’ requiring putting forward meaningful questions, setting out systematic ideas, and developing a set of concepts and categories for the production of abstract and general knowledge” (Y. Qin 2018, 6). And it will also dialogue with Qin Yaqing's ideas about how to construct a more inclusive and less “Waltzianized” theory of IR, considering culture as an important element (Y. Qin 2020a).

Another essential concept I will utilize is strategic narratives. According to Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle (2013, 3), “Strategic narratives are a means for political actors to construct a shared understanding of the past, present, and future of international politics to influence the behavior of domestic and international actors.” In this context, as the authors explain, “Strategic narratives serve as a tool for political actors to extend their influence, manage expectations, and shape the discursive environment in which they operate”

(Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle 2013, 3). This concept will add depth to the notion of soft power – the authors also argue that “Strategic narrative *is* soft power in the 21st century” (Roselle, Miskimmon, and O’Loughlin 2014, 71 emphasis on the original). As I explore in this chapter, the concept of strategic narratives has interesting connections to discussions about the collective construction of knowledge in a society, which is also present in poststructuralism and Qin Yaqing’s relational theory, both of which are referenced in this dissertation. It also enables us to address matters related to the level of analysis and the effects and impacts of soft power, which will also be examined in this chapter.

In addition to the concepts of soft power and strategic narratives, I will also incorporate the notion of the creative economy, which is essential for capturing the economic dimension of these initiatives. Economic resources play a significant role in these dynamics, as I will highlight. In this matter, it is important to underscore that it is quite difficult to clearly establish the boundaries in the relationship between the film industry and the government. Usually, the State establishes guidelines and directions for the film industry to follow. Government agents may also hold important positions in the film industry. Even so, there is a certain degree of autonomy for private actors in the film industry, which varies from country to country. It is, of course, possible to say that Hollywood films are also influenced by government decisions, as I will point out below. However, as Terry Flew (2016) put it, in the case of the Hollywood film industry, the perceived desire to entertain the masses, avoiding overt political messages, is part of the global appeal of these contents, even if it is possible to find, without much difficulty, considerable relationships between major U.S. entertainment conglomerates and U.S. government agencies such as the Department of State and the Department of Commerce. Aynne Kokas (2019a) also emphasized this point, saying that Washington is far from having the level of influence that China’s government has over national film studios – nor does it demand as much credit for Hollywood successes. Consequently, as it is not easy to indicate with the required degree of certainty all the variables and causal relationships that exist in the process, it is almost impossible to research these dynamics assuming a positivist perspective, because “they strive to find the causal relations that ‘rule’ world politics, working with dependent and independent variables” (Hansen 2020, 178). Once again, this is one of the reasons for the adoption, in this research, of a poststructuralist perspective.

Regardless of the situation, the scenario described in the previous paragraph changes a lot when considering the Chinese case. That is because, in China, the government has the final word on everything that is filmed, produced, and exhibited in the country. This is not to say that there is no autonomy for private entities: films are also produced by private companies and are



filmed by directors who are not part of the Communist Party of China. Regardless of this, it is possible to draw a clearer parallel between government guidelines and the films produced, precisely because of the greater control exercised by the Chinese government. As will be seen, this model is not necessarily new: the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (U.S.S.R) has already used cinema as a means of propagating its policies, and China itself has also experimented with State-led use of films with similar objectives throughout its history. What perhaps distinguishes this new Chinese model is the attempt to use this heavily State-controlled cinema abroad, for soft power purposes. I will debate throughout this dissertation whether this model can be successful.

To begin this journey, the following section will discuss the importance of the study of culture in International Relations, especially highlighting Chinese perspectives on the subject.

### **1.1. Culture, China, and International Relations Theories**

In March 2019, I had the opportunity to attend my first international conference, the annual meeting of the International Studies Association (ISA), which took place in Toronto, Canada. I was going to present a work related to this dissertation, so I prepared the presentation in the same format I had used at events in Brazil: with a preamble about the importance of studying culture in International Relations. However, after attending two roundtables on pop culture and IR, I decided to withdraw the introduction from my presentation, as I realized that this debate was already well-established in that environment.

This dissertation, nevertheless, begins with a theoretical chapter, and with a first section talking precisely about the importance of studying culture in IR. Two were the reasons that led me to this option. The first is that it is a dissertation made at a Brazilian university and, as highlighted by Antônio Carlos Lessa (2012), the field of study of the cultural dimension of International Relations, despite being old and well-provided abroad, was little developed in Brazil, a scenario that is beginning to change, following the profile that Brazil assumes in contemporary international politics. Even abroad, where in some instances this debate seems outdated, and “one might even argue that there now exists a sub-(inter-)discipline of Popular Culture and World Politics (PCWP)” (Weldes and Rowley 2015, 12) – as the anecdote about the ISA 2019 meeting demonstrates –, there is also another side. Parts of the so-called “mainstream IR’ (but only quite narrowly construed and mostly North American) still

implicitly or explicitly insist that popular culture is not worthy of scholarly IR attention, perhaps because it is seen as ‘low’ politics, domestic politics, or not political at all” (Weldes and Rowley 2015, 12). Hence, I will begin this chapter exactly with this discussion, at the same time as I endorse the wish of professors Jutta Weldes and Christina Rowley (2015, 24): “We hope for the day when we no longer need to explain or justify how and why popular culture is relevant to world politics and can just get on with studying it.”

The second reason is that there has been a growing commitment on the part of several academics, many of them Chinese, in the sense that there is a need for a growing appreciation of culture in IR, which could lead to theoretical innovations that are increasingly necessary for the field of studies, especially in these highly globalized and integrated times that we live in (Y. Qin 2020a; Amitav Acharya 2014). An example of this can be seen in the book *Re-Imagining International Relations: World Orders in the Thought and Practice of Indian, Chinese, and Islamic Civilizations*, by Barry Buzan and Amitav Acharya, published in December 2021. According to the authors, it is not controversial that modern IR grew and developed precisely in the period when a small group of mainly Western powers, plus Russia and Japan, dominated world politics, being largely shaped by this experience. Thus, “much of its thinking rests on the assumption that in all the ways that matter, Western history more or less is world history. It is a story, and a way of thinking, told by the winners, and that is the basis for the potent charge of Eurocentrism made against it” (Buzan and Acharya 2021, 1 emphasis on the original). The authors argue that if we want to build a more properly global IR discipline, or what they call Global IR, we need to consider other histories and ways of thinking about IR that have been erased by the Western domain (Buzan and Acharya 2021). The authors also stressed that the period of Western rule is now coming to an end, and other countries with different histories are re-emerging as the center of wealth, power, and cultural authority. In this process, these countries bring their own histories, concepts, and ways of thinking to the contemporary practice and analysis of IR. These marginalized histories and ways of understanding are therefore being reinserted into the contemporary world order, with China, India, and the Islamic world at the forefront (Buzan and Acharya 2021).

The authors further wrote that, despite being an oversimplification, it still remains largely true that contemporary mainstream IR theory is still not much more than an abstraction of Western history mixed with Western political theory, both classical and contemporary. Realism is an abstraction of eighteenth-century European balance-of-power behavior; Liberalism, of nineteenth and twentieth-century Western intergovernmental organizations and political economy; Marxism, of another branch of European political economy and historical

sociology of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; the English School, of the diplomatic behavior of the European nineteenth century and of the European legal tradition; and Constructivism, of western philosophical knowledge. Because IR emerged when the West almost literally either ruled or dominated the world, they were largely built on the assumption that Western history and political theory were world history and political theory. Now that these conditions are coming to an end, IR urgently needs to deal with a much more pluralistic world, in which modernized cultures additional to the Western are increasingly stronger, both materially and ideationally (Buzan and Acharya 2021).

In this sense, the authors proposed to work with the idea of world order. Defined as the “concept held by a region or civilization about the nature of just arrangements and the distribution of power thought to be applicable to the entire world” (Kissinger 2014, 9), world order “gives a central place to the diffusion of cultures, ideas, and innovation that no serious student of IR should ignore” (Buzan and Acharya 2021, 10). More than about power and “just arrangements,” world order is about identities and interactions, how a civilization sees itself as a distinct entity, and how it interacts both with others seen as “civilized” and with “barbarians” (Buzan and Acharya 2021).

Therefore, studying how classical civilizations understood the world order can aid to amplify IR, helping to comprehend, and if necessary, question, the domain of certain central ideas that claim to be universal and that have been largely taken for granted by IR. Moreover, the study of these civilizations can help to discover neglected or forgotten practices, processes, and ideas, which have been ignored or little studied, but which are fundamental to grasping how the world works, in the present, in the past, and in the future, being the Chinese concept of *Tianxia* a good example (Buzan and Acharya 2021). At the same time, knowing these ideas and practices enriches the IR repertoire of theories and methods. The authors underlined that “IR is not just about relationships of power and wealth. It is also about the flow of ideas and innovations” (Buzan and Acharya 2021, 9–10). And thus, studying IR from a historical-civilizational perspective can open the door to a greater understanding of relationships based on the creation and diffusion of ideas and innovations.

The authors recognized that this is a very ambitious effort. But they stated:

(...) we take hope from the substantial role that pre-modern Western thinkers from Thucydides and Plato to Hobbes and Machiavelli play in contemporary Western IR theorizing, which if nothing else shows that the past remains active in the present in terms of both practice and theory. The same could be said for the role of Confucius and the other sages in Chinese, and Kautilya in Indian, thinking about world order (Buzan and Acharya 2021, 11–12).

They highlighted that there is even a growing literature, particularly in China, that draws on Chinese history and political theory to think about IR (Buzan and Acharya 2021). According to the authors, it is possible to “use this literature to gain insights into not only how non-Western political histories and political theories might be brought into contemporary IR but also how they actually already are being brought in” (Buzan and Acharya 2021, 11).

This dissertation fully agrees with the analyzes made by Buzan and Acharya, and, therefore, this section will seek to dialogue precisely with this literature that has been produced in China.

One of the authors who has debated these issues most passionately is Qin Yaqing, a professor at China Foreign Affairs University. He starts his book *A Relational Theory of World Politics* with a beautiful poem by Su Shi (1037-1101), a well-known Chinese poet: “I see a range from one side and a peak from another / I have different views from above or below, from far or near / I fail to get the true face of Mount Lushan / Simply because inside the mountain I myself stand.” (Y. Qin 2018, ix). Then, he states that, just as a person on a mountain cannot see the whole mountain, every social scientist is an observer who is located within society and can only see one side of that society at a time. Hence, a different perspective is significant, as it allows people to see an image that they would not see from other angles. That is exactly why culture is so important: it provides different angles of observation and different perspectives for understanding.

Qin (2018) defined culture as the shared background knowledge of a community and highlights the importance of exploring cultural resources for innovations in social theories since it is this shared knowledge that provides different angles for observing social facts. He highlighted that cultural influence is not linear or causes direct causality, but it influences the mentalities, ways of thinking and doing, and the worldview of knowledge producers who are members of a certain cultural community (Y. Qin 2018).

Qin Yaqing’s book has as its central argument the need to consider cultural elements in the analysis of any event in world politics. According to the scholar, when observing the elements of traditional Chinese culture, one will notice that, unlike the West, which values rationalism above all (at least since the Enlightenment), in China, the prominent concept is relationality, because the Chinese society is a relational society. Thus, while Western rationalism presupposes a world composed of human beings, selfish individuals, always willing to maximize their self-interests at the lowest possible cost, Chinese relationality pays special attention to the relationship between things and between individuals, using the corollaries of Confucianism, which highlight self-existence and coexistence; self-identity and social relations;

and self-interest and the interests of others or collective interests (Y. Qin 2018).

In his relational theory, Qin Yaqing proposed the use of the dialectical conceptions of Chinese *zhongyong* (yin-yang), which stresses the harmony between opposing forces. Those two opposing forces are parts of the same whole, one is included in the other, in a movement of complementarity and balance. In this sense, the Chinese *zhongyong* dialectics contrasts with the Hegelian dialectic that prevails in Western thought. While the idea of yin-yang proposes that there are two opposite poles, which coexist in a basic state of harmony, the Hegelian dialectic also considers that there are two opposite poles, but the basic situation between them is one of conflict. That's because the "Yin and yang, fundamentally different from the Hegelian thesis and antithesis, constitute co-theses which are inclusive of and complementary to each and whose immanently dynamic interaction enables what I term 'coevolutionary harmony'" (Y. Qin 2018, xiii).

Furthermore, beyond proposing his own theory of IR, Qin Yaqing delves into questioning the fundamental conception of Western social theory. In this endeavor, Qin introduces the distinction between monism and pluralism. Monism argues that natural and social theories are not fundamentally different and should adhere to the same theoretical logic since reality is uniform. Consequently, culture holds little relevance, and the social scientist's role is simply to observe and explain the external reality. On the other hand, pluralism acknowledges that the social world differs from the natural world, and social theories must not only explain but also understand, interpret, and even construct reality. Thus, ideas, values, mindsets, and worldviews carry significant weight.

In this context, Qin engages in a dialogue with Acharya and Buzan (2007, 290–91), who propose two distinct definitions of social theory: one adhering to a harder positivist, rationalist, materialist, and quantitative approach, and the other embracing a more reflective, social, constructivist, and postmodern stance. According to Qin, these differing perspectives lead to implications where the dominant form of social science in the United States recognizes only the positivist definition, emphasizing the need for scientific theoretical constructs with clear explanations, hypotheses showing evident causality between dependent and independent variables, rigorous empirical testing, and a deductive method of observation. In contrast, the more reflexive approach requires posing meaningful questions, developing systematic ideas, and establishing a set of concepts and categories to generate abstract and general knowledge (Y. Qin 2018).

Qin Yaqing argued that in the post-WWII era, the field of international studies in the U.S. shifted towards a more positivist and scientific approach, where monism became the

predominant trend and influenced the rest of the world. This departure from the past, which had seen a more flexible combination of factors like history, law, and culture, was exemplified by Kenneth Waltz's *Theory of International Politics*, published in 1979. Waltz's work defined that "IR theory is a set of laws and must satisfy three conditions: It is a distinct system of the international; it indicates with clarity the causal directions; and it is parsimonious and rigorous" (Y. Qin 2018, 8).

With this approach, Waltz not only established a system of international politics and a theory of IR but also set homogeneous and positivist standards for evaluating an IR theory. Any theory failing to meet these criteria would be dismissed as a "non-theory." According to Qin (2018), this gatekeeping power to determine what qualifies as a theory holds even more significance than Waltz's structural realism, as it continues to influence mainstream IR theorists to this day. Dave Blaney and Arlene Tickner concur with this critique of the dichotomy between "inside" and "outside" that mainstream IR operates, clearly defining what qualifies as theory and what does not, what is considered knowledge, and what is deemed non-knowledge. They argue that these IR failures occur "because those who make it assume the West, its science and its development as the universal 'norm'" (Blaney and Tickner 2013, 7).

Thus, as part of the effort to pluralize IR, or in the words of Buzan and Acharya (2021, 9), to "broaden the study of IR," helping to "understand, and, if necessary, challenge the dominance of certain key ideas that claim to be universal and have largely been taken for granted in IR as such," Qin Yaqing questioned epistemological and ontological aspects of IR theories. According to Qin, to think about social theories, one must deal with ontological questions, such as "What is our world" and "What is our world composed of?" In this sense, individualist rationalism (the starting point of neorealism, neoliberalism, and social constructivism, the main IR theories in the U.S.) gives very clear and succinct answers about the composition of the world: human beings are selfish individuals, always ready to maximize their self-interest at the lowest possible cost. This definition, refined from the practice of Western civilizations, has influenced political science theorizing ever since. It is an angle, a perspective, a worldview that influences members of Western communities as they try to observe, analyze, and theorize the world around them.

Relational theory, on the other hand, answers these questions through the Chinese worldview, which tends to see the world "as one composed of complex relations, relations among the heaven, the earth, and the human, relations among humans, and relations among all things under the sun" (Y. Qin 2018, xii). In the social world, the focus is not on individuals, but on the relationships between them. That has some implications: "It holds that self-existence is

simultaneous with coexistence; that self-identity is formed in and through social relations; and that self-interest is shared with other-interest and collective interest” (Y. Qin 2018, xii). Qin also highlighted that contrary to the belief that there would be a collective privilege over individuality in China, Confucianism values both. “Because it places special emphasis on relations among actors, it holds that self-existence, self-identity, and self-interest are all related to other-existence, other-identity, and other-interest” (Y. Qin 2018, xii).

Another important aspect of focusing on the relationships between individuals concerns identities. Qin (2018) argued that, from the relational perspective, there is no absolute and pre-existing identity, since the identity of an individual is constructed and reconstructed in relationships with others and in the relational totality as a whole. It is, therefore, a relational identity, which can change according to the relationships and the relational context. To illustrate the difference between this conception of relational identity and the Western idea of identity, in which every individual has a fixed and predetermined identity, Qin (2018) made an interesting analogy between *weiqi* or go, the board game very popular in Confucian societies such as China, Japan, and Korea, and the game of chess. In *weiqi*, the pieces do not have previous defining characteristics, as they are all the same, and only assume their functions when in contact with the others on the board, while in chess, the pieces already have previous functions and properties, such as pawns, bishops, king, queen. According to Qin (2018), it is just a game, but it also reflects a way of thinking and understanding the universe.

It is in this context that Qin (2018) proposes his relational theory, which sees the world as composed of complex relationships, and the social world as composed of human relationships, giving an important ontological status to “relationships” and assuming humanity as a key to understanding the social. Therefore, the importance that Qin (2018) gives to culture. Defined in terms of shared background knowledge, culture shapes the mentalities, ways of thinking and doing, as well as the worldviews of knowledge producers who are members of a certain community. As this background knowledge tends to be constructed without much thought, its influence is often subtle and imperceptible, but it is everywhere, in all those belonging to a given cultural community. Hence, it is important to analyze these cultural elements of knowledge communities to understand their practical and theoretical productions (Y. Qin 2018, xii).

More recently, Qin Yaqing has edited the excellent book *Globalizing IR Theory: Critical Engagement* (2020b), which dialogues with the proposals of Acharya and Buzan (2021) of broadening the study of IR. In his chapter, titled *A multiverse of knowledge: Cultures and IR theories*, Qin (2020a) put “forward a cultural approach to knowledge production, which argues

that culture is a most important source for informing and inspiring theoretical innovation in the social sciences” (Y. Qin 2020a, 139). Despite its importance for the production of knowledge, “mainstream IR theory has largely ignored culture especially through its Waltzianization since the 1980s” (Y. Qin 2020a, 139–40), seeking to produce universally applicable theories that deny the role of any cultural background. Even though IR returned to paying attention to culture after the end of the Cold War, the role of culture in knowledge production and theoretical construction is rarely discussed (Y. Qin 2020a).

Qin (2020a) argued that theory construction is a process of nucleation, which begins with a theoretical hard core. This theoretical hard core is divided into two interrelated components: the substantive one, which deals with the outside world, observing and receiving signals from these external realities; and the metaphysical one, which explains, understands and interprets the perceived phenomena and the signals received by the substantive component. The metaphysical component, according to Qin (2020a), is the soul of social theory, as it defines and identifies the theory. It is because of different metaphysical components that different theories interpret the world (the same reality out there received by the substantive component) differently and therefore it is important to understand them.

Qin (2020a) wrote that the metaphysical component is nurtured, shaped, and informed primarily by background knowledge, which is “the knowledge that has been formed naturally and even spontaneously in and through practice and over history, which constitutes its time-space matrix.” As the background knowledge is produced in and through practice, the concept of “community of practice” is important, being defined as “a configuration of a domain of knowledge that constitutes like-mindedness, a community of people that creates the social fabric of learning” (Y. Qin 2020a, 141). According to Qin (2020a), the most significant community of practice is a cultural community, which he defined in terms of shared background knowledge.

Thus, for Qin (2020a, 142), culture is the “way of life of a group of people, who together constitute a community,” which can, at the macrolevel, shape the ways of thinking and doing of a cultural community. And, because culture shapes a person’s belief, worldview, and way of thinking and doing, the hard core of a social theory tends to contain elements of the background knowledge of the cultural community where the scholar belongs. Qin (2020a, 143) underlined that when looking at Western theories of IR, it might seem that they don’t look to culture for inspiration. But this is because “it is common to equate the West with the human community” and, consequently, “knowledge produced in the West with universal knowledge.” Hence, the reliance on cultural resources has become implicit: “When theorists take it for granted that they



produce universal knowledge, they tend to forget the fact that culture provides the background that influences them in an unaware way and at a highly abstract and metaphysical level,” a phenomenon that Qin (2020a, 143) calls “implicit permeation.”

An example of this “implicit permeation” can be seen in the balance of power theory. The theoretical hard core of the balance of power theory has been formed through the background knowledge from the practice of the European IR since the Westphalian system was established, especially since the Congress of Vienna. There were other international systems in other parts of the world outside the West, but they were completely ignored, because for the creation of the balance of power theory, “Only the practice of the Westphalian IR should matter and only the background knowledge wherefrom should count” (Y. Qin 2020a, 143). The same is true of several other IR concepts. And, because IR first developed as a theory in the West, it is often accepted that these Western IR theories are universal, disregarding that they always started locally and were based on certain background knowledge. “It is therefore necessary to see how culture influences the development of social theory, which itself is a social and cultural construct” (Y. Qin 2020a, 145).

According to Qin Yaqing (2020a), then, for the creation of Chinese IR theories that are truly creative and original, one must look at the metaphysical component of the theoretical hard core, which is based on their background knowledge and practices. Therefore, it is natural for Chinese scholars to seek intellectual stimulation in Chinese culture for the creation of social theories. It is the same as its Western counterparts do, but unlike them, the Chinese draw on their culture and philosophy explicitly, in what Qin (2020a) called “explicit penetration:” “cultural traditions explicitly penetrate into the hard core of the theory and inform its metaphysical component so that the process of theoretical nucleation gets started” (Y. Qin 2020a, 146).

Qin (2020a) gave three examples of theories that have turned to the Chinese culture and philosophy for inspiration and information: Yan Xuetong’s moral realism, Zhao Tingyang’s *Tianxia* (all-under-heaven) system, and Yaqing Qin’s relational theory. According to Qin (2020a), all three adopt perspectives rooted in the “shared background knowledge of the Confucian cultural community to inform and form the metaphysical components of their theories and then through this nucleus to understand and interpret significant phenomena in world politics” (Y. Qin 2020a, 146–47).

I have already discussed Qin Yaqing’s relational theory, so I will now focus on the thoughts of Yan Xuetong and Zhao Tingyang. In his theoretical construction, Yan Xuetong (2011) emphasized the concept of power and, like realists, recognized that anarchy is the nature

of the international system, that States are driven by the national interest, and that struggle for power is inevitable in this scenario. At the same time, “moral realism regards morality as of equal importance to policy-making as are power, capability and interest” (Yan 2018, 6). Therefore, for Yan, morality plays an important role in both constituting and exercising power, and that sets him apart from classic realists like Carr, Morgenthau, and Waltz. Qin Yaqing (2020a) pointed out that it is evident that Yan Xuetong is inspired by traditional Chinese cultural resources, especially those of ancient thinkers of China in the pre-Qin period (before 221 BCE), to develop a realism that centers around world leadership. It is based on these thinkers that Yan (2011) proposes his moral realism, considering that, although material power is important, it will only be relevant if accompanied by the morality of political leadership. Thus, the ideal leadership is not *badao* (hegemony) as practiced by the United States, but *wangdao*, or humane authority, a combination of power and morality. According to Qin Yaqing (Y. Qin 2020a, 147), “Although these were thoughts of the ancient Chinese philosophers, they are highly relevant in today’s world, where humane authority is more effective in the competition for world leadership whereas hegemony will not sustain and last.”

Zhao Tingyang, meanwhile, has published two recent books in English, *Redefining a Philosophy for World Governance* (2019) and *All under Heaven: The Tianxia System for a Possible World Order* (2021). As is evident from the titles of his works, Zhao’s primary concern is with the order, more specifically an order of perpetual peace throughout the world. The model on which Zhao bases his *Tianxia* system is the system of the Western Zhou dynasty, (1046–771 BCE), which was praised by Confucius himself. It is a system with the highest authority of the Zhou Court and quite a few semi-sovereign city-states, which recognized that they were parts of the Zhou and were under the governance of the Zhou Court. Moreover, where the Zhou governed was thus known as the *Tianxia*, ‘all under heaven’, or the whole (known) world. Then, because the system saw no aliens and its institutions were for the whole system rather than for only parts of it, Zhao considers that the Zhou system is truly a world system. In Zhao’s words, “The *Tianxia* conceptual imagination anticipates a world system wherein the world comes to have its own political agency. This would be an “order of coexistence” wherein the whole world is the basic unit of politics” (T. Zhao 2021, 2). This system differs from the current Westphalian system, in which each State has its own distinct worldview, without an institution and a global worldview. “The previous and current imperialistic organization of the world order is grounded in a concept of nation-state and concomitant national interests” (T. Zhao 2021, 2). In this world order, “all those wishing to preserve the imperialistic system are too lazy to carefully distinguish between what they consider to be ‘the rest of the world’ and simply take it as other places to be

conquered” (T. Zhao 2021, 2). And, therefore, conflict is difficult to resolve and transnational issues are hard to deal with through joint efforts. According to Zhao, as the Confucian system of *Tianxia* does not create divisions between self-other, being more inclusive and non-exclusive, is a better way to genuine perpetual peace, successful governance, and stable order over the entire world. Zhao also criticized the ontology of Western theories that focus on self-existence and individualism, highlighting coexistence, which would help to create non-exclusive global institutions, better able to resolve global problems.

Qin Yaqing (2020a) commented that, although Yan Xuetong, Zhao Tingyang, and himself have developed theories that go in different directions, often disagreeing with each other, there are some common points. Perhaps most notable is that “they all explore explicitly the traditional philosophies and thoughts embedded in the Chinese culture for their intellectual inspiration and theoretical construction. It is exactly because of this feature that they all bear their cultural birthmarks” (Y. Qin 2020a, 150). The academic emphasized that, in addition to Confucianism, key concepts in the Chinese cultural traditions, such as morality (*daode*), non-exclusivity (*wuwai*), and relationality (*guanxi*), are also present in all three theories. These are concepts closely related to human relations, more than is common in Western mainstream IR theories. According to Qin (2020a, 150), “one of the reasons is perhaps that the traditional Chinese culture placed more emphasis on management of human affairs.” That is because, “with due respect to the material, Chinese scholars tend to have a particular concern for humanness and humanity, which constitutes a distinct feature of developing IR theory by Chinese scholars” (Y. Qin 2020a, 150).

Qin also stressed that the three theories are visibly more focused on knowledge production, thinking about social order and human behavior, and trying to go beyond the first-order questions onto the second-order ones, believing that “something from the Chinese civilizational and cultural traditions may add to the edifice of human knowledge and provide some value-added for a discipline that claims international or global” (Y. Qin 2020a, 150). However, it does not mean that they are irrelevant to the reality of world politics, as they draw on traditional Chinese culture to build knowledge that can help make the world a better place. The academic also stated that there is no pretense that all Chinese culture is good, but rather an active choice of what can be useful and constructive, and that “In this respect, they are quite idealistic” (Y. Qin 2020a, 150).

Qin Yaqing concluded with a point of special interest for this dissertation, stating that the efforts of the three scholars mentioned “purposefully aim to engage IR communities the world over, especially mainstream Western IR theory, for dialogue, discussion and debate” (Y.

Qin 2020a, 151). And underlined that “they do not want to establish a small fiefdom of their own. (...) They publish in English so that they can communicate directly with their counterparts in other parts of the world, especially in the West” (Y. Qin 2020a, 151). With that, “they try to enrich rather than to replace or displace the existing literature of IR knowledge” (Y. Qin 2020a, 151). Or, going back to the analogy Qin Yaqing (2018) made with Su Shi’s poem: if culture is a worldview, the more cultures, the wider and more diverse the world contemplated by IR will be.

Qin’s comment on the increasing number of Chinese academics who are starting to write in English to dialogue with their international peers is interesting and makes us think about the amount of debate that exists within China on the importance of culture in IR, knowledge not easily accessible for linguistic reasons. Fortunately, there have been several initiatives that try to meet this challenge, translating Chinese texts by leading thinkers into English. One such initiative is the *Reading the China Dream*.<sup>1</sup> And it was there that I found the English translation of an essential text by Wang Huning.

Wang Huning is one of the main ideologues of the Chinese Communist Party. Elizabeth Economy (2018, 25) considers him Xi Jinping’s “top foreign policy strategist and advisor on Party Theory.” David Shambaugh (2021) wrote that “Wang’s genius seems to be in political campaigns—both conceptualizing and ‘branding’ them,” highlighting that “among others he was behind Jiang Zemin’s ‘Three Represents,’ Hu Jintao’s ‘Harmonious Society’ and ‘Scientific Development Concept,’ and he is reported to have generated the ‘Chinese Dream’<sup>2</sup> for Xi.” He also stressed that “Wang Huning has also been a key foreign policy advisor to Jiang, Hu, and Xi (often traveling abroad with them and sitting by their side in meetings with foreign counterparts)” (Shambaugh 2021). In a December 2021 column in *The Washington Post*, Hugh Hewitt (2021) wrote that “In China, Wang Huning is the man to see,” adding that “Wang is almost certainly the most dangerous man in the world that most folks have never heard of.” Perhaps this is an exaggerated claim, but the fact is that, regarding the subject of this dissertation, Wang wrote extensively on culture, even being credited to him the first translations of Joseph Nye’s texts on soft power into Chinese, still in the early 1990s (Glaser and Murphy 2009).

In a 1994 text titled “Cultural Expansion and Cultural Sovereignty”, Wang Huning wrote about how to manage culture – expressed as traditions, values, or civilization – in the international context of post-Cold War globalization. “The point of this essay is to explore the

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<sup>1</sup> Reading the China Dream. Available at: <https://www.readingthechinadream.com/>.

<sup>2</sup> I will talk more about the Chinese Dream throughout this dissertation, which reinforces the relevance of Wang Huning's thinking.

political position of culture in today's international relations, as well as the challenge that cultural development in and of itself poses to the idea of sovereignty" (H. Wang 1994). Wang underlined that "Cultural factors have been traditionally understood as variables in international relations, but the importance accorded to such variables has varied over time," emphasizing that this does not mean that "cultural factors did not exist in the past, or that their role was unclear, but rather that 'hard power' in the form of politics or military might suppressed the role that culture played in international relations, meaning that culture is a kind of 'soft power'" (H. Wang 1994).

Wang wrote that the political use of culture takes many forms, one of which is cultural hegemony when Western countries try to use their cultural strengths "to constrain or influence world affairs and the process of internal developments of developing countries" (H. Wang 1994). He gave an example: "the idea of human rights has become an important cultural factor through which Western countries influence the internal political processes of other countries" (H. Wang 1994). Thus, according to Wang (1994), "in cultural systems with different ideas about human rights, the issue will gradually take on political dimensions and become a part of politics." The way this parallels recent speeches by Xi Jinping is impressive. For example, in the 2021 Two Sessions – "the country's biggest annual political meetings and a rare window into the central government's priorities and plans" (L. Zhou and Mai 2022) –, Xi Jinping said that "there is no universal path to human rights development in the world. In terms of human rights protection, there is no best way, only the better one" and "Chinese people will not accept 'an instructor' on human rights and oppose 'double standards.'"<sup>3</sup> This demonstrates, in a way, that Wang Huning's ideas still find a lot of space in China today.

Wang also commented on the relationship between economic and cultural development. According to him, "developing countries are currently in a weak position in terms of soft power. However, once their political, economic, scientific, and technological strength increases, the strength of their cultural values will also increase" (H. Wang 1994). Wang also pointed out that Western countries are also seeking to establish their cultural hegemony with their long-term interests in mind. So, in the case of China, "once the Chinese economy has greatly developed, and especially once we see what China's economic momentum portends for the future, this may give rise to a certain movement in public opinion having to do with the 'China threat'" (H. Wang 1994).

According to Wang, the idea of a "China threat" would not only be related to the

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<sup>3</sup> Xi Focus-Quotable Quotes: Xi Jinping on human rights. **Xinhua**, March 03, 2021. Available at: [http://www.news.cn/english/2021-03/03/c\\_139780991.htm](http://www.news.cn/english/2021-03/03/c_139780991.htm).

eventual Chinese hard power but would also express anxieties about the strength of China's cultural values. "In the context of Eastern and Western cultures, Chinese culture in and of itself possesses a cultural existence with a long history, broad diffusion, and overall integration, which naturally poses a latent challenge to Western culture" (H. Wang 1994). He also stressed that "there are those in the West who have understood this, and who are anxious to use Western cultural values to establish norms for a currently rising China." Thus, there is a "challenge to the meaning of sovereignty: cultural sovereignty versus cultural hegemony." And warned: "Struggle over culture is therefore a form of 'political struggle,' and a necessary means of defending China's political system" (H. Wang 1994).

Even so, Wang noted the dangers of cultural isolation. "Cultural sovereignty cannot become an excuse for cultural isolation, because cultural sovereignty ultimately aims for cultural openness and benefits the development of the people of the world as well as the cultural development of certain countries and peoples" (H. Wang 1994). Just as examples from biology and human history show that any closed system inevitably becomes archaic and obsolete, "all cultures must become open systems—open to the shared use of other cultures and other systems of knowledge, as well as the shared use of measures to meet the challenges and problems of the age of technology" (H. Wang 1994). He underscored that, while "no one should deploy cultural expansionism in the dynamic process of international relations", all states and peoples "can use cultural factors to the fullest in order to develop a rational strategy, a foreign policy in line with the present-day context of international relations, and thereby accumulating resources and soft power" (H. Wang 1994).

I will come back to Wang Huning and soft power later in this chapter, but the idea of bringing him here is to show that the debate about the importance of culture in IR is not new. More than that, I also wanted to emphasize that this discussion is a concern both for academics – influencing their search for theoretical innovations – and for members of the Chinese state apparatus – influencing their conceptions and political creations. This demonstrates, once again, the relevance of the study of culture in International Relations.

In this section, I thoroughly explored the critical significance of considering culture in the context of international relations. Unfortunately, mainstream theories of International Relations often diminish the role of culture, relegating it to a secondary position. This dismissal occurs because the cultural environment in which these theories and their theorists operate is often taken for granted and assumed to be universal. Consequently, there is a growing awareness that mainstream International Relations Theories tend to overlook alternative worldviews, cultures, and societal organization approaches.

Fortunately, international relations have been moving towards greater global inclusivity. Efforts have been made to acknowledge the influence of Western elements in mainstream narratives and shed light on diverse perspectives that extend beyond the Western-centric view. As a result, it becomes imperative to consider cultural elements that have been neglected in many of these mainstream international relations theories. One notable effort in this regard is the work of Buzan and Acharya, who emphasize the need to embrace other cultures and worldviews, adopting a more global perspective in international relations, what they call Global IR.

I also discussed Qin Yanqing's research, highlighting the vital role of culture in analyzing international relations and offering fresh perspectives. Qin distinguishes between monism, which overlooks culture's significance by treating social and natural worlds equally, and pluralism, which acknowledges the differences between these realms and values culture's expression of those distinctions. The post-WWII era saw a shift towards a positivist and scientific approach in U.S. international studies, with monism influencing global practices. Kenneth Waltz's *Theory of International Politics* in 1979 exemplified this departure from the past, setting uniform, positivist criteria for evaluating IR theories. According to Qin, this gatekeeping power in theory qualification holds significance and impacts mainstream IR theorists even today.

The core of Qin's relational theory of international relations differs from Western perspectives, which often focus on the rational, self-centered nature of human beings seeking to maximize their benefits at the lowest cost. Instead, Qin asserts that in China, the emphasis is on relationships, as it is a relational society. Thus, the focus lies on the interconnectedness between individuals, things, and nature. This shift in perspective also influences the interpretation of significant themes in international relations, such as war. While Western theories predominantly apply a Hegelian dialectic, pitting thesis against antithesis in an antagonistic and tense manner, the dialectical conceptions of Chinese *zhongyong* (yin-yang) suggest that these opposing forces contain parts of each other, leading to harmony rather than conflict.

I also commented on other Chinese theories of International Relations, such as Yan Xuetong's moral realism and Zhao Tingyang's *Tianxia* system. Moreover, I brought up the perspectives of Wang Huning, an influential theorist and member of the Communist Party's Politburo, and one of Xi Jinping's advisors, on cultural sovereignty and soft power.

The ultimate objective of this discussion was to demonstrate the utmost importance of culture in the realm of international relations. Incorporating various cultural perspectives

enriches the analysis of international relations, making it more pluralistic, diverse, and integrative.

Having made these more theoretical considerations about the importance of culture in IR, in the next section, I will begin to address cinema more specifically, presenting a brief history of the interactions between films and world politics.

## **1.2. Cinema and International Relations: a brief history**

The political use of cinema is not new. Films were employed as a powerful political tool by the Soviets in the Russian Revolution of 1917, by the Allies in the Second World War and by the U.S. in the Cold War, and, more recently, in the War on Terror (Zanella and Neves Júnior 2015). Despite the diversity of countries that used films politically, the main academic analyses about the topic are predominantly concentrated in Hollywood, because, according to Nicholas Cull (2012), “Cinema diplomacy has a long history and America has led the way”. For this reason, this section will also begin with this focus.

The importance of the role played by Hollywood cinema in spreading U.S. values and ideals to the world is neither new nor veiled. In a 2002 book, Harvard Law Department professor John Trumbour quoted a speech in London in 1923 by Will Hays, director of Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA, now MPA — Motion Pictures Association), an association that represented the main Hollywood film studios. In his speech, Hays stated:

Members of our Association have taken... definite steps to make certain that every film that goes from America abroad, wherever it shall be sent, shall correctly portray to the world the purposes, the ideals, the accomplishments, the opportunities, and the life of America (quoted by Trumbour 2002, 17).

There are no nuances in Hays’ words: all Hollywood films sent abroad must correctly represent the objectives, ideals, achievements, opportunities, and life of the United States to the world. And this was publicly said by the head of the most powerful film association in the U.S.

Frédéric Martel (2012, 28), in his book *Mainstream, Enquête sur la guerre globale de la culture et des medias* (“On Global War on Culture”, in English), highlighted that the proximity between the MPAA – a nonprofit and officially independent body – and American political power is the worst-kept secret in the business. Talking about Jack Valenti, who chaired



the MPAA for 38 years, from 1966 to 2004, Martel (2012) stated that Valenti was the main American ambassador and cultural diplomat and that the MPAA was a true Hollywood consular representation in Washington. According to Martel (2012), who interviewed Valenti several times for his book, the president of the MPAA coordinated the lobbying work in the American Congress and ensured compliance with public rules; Valenti also accompanied the most delicate negotiations with Hollywood unions and planned a strategy for world conquest.

Jack Valenti's own story shows this proximity between the MPAA – and Hollywood – and the U.S. government. Before taking over MPAA, Valenti served for three years at the White House, working with President Lyndon Johnson, as editor of the president, and as a political, communication, and diplomacy advisor. Martel (2012) wrote that Valenti moved away from Lyndon Johnson as the Vietnam War shook the government's prestige, and in 1966 he accepted to run for the MPAA presidency. Then, for the first time, Valenti saw himself projected in the heart of the film industry, although he knew, above all, the behind-the-scenes of politics (Martel 2012). Charles H. Rivkin, the current CEO of the Motion Pictures Association (from 2017 until 2023, the time of writing this chapter), also has a similar trajectory: before running the association, he led the State Department Office responsible for topics such as international trade negotiations, intellectual property protection, and global internet policy, among others.<sup>4</sup> In his last diplomatic post, Charles H. Rivkin was the U.S. Ambassador to France<sup>5</sup> and now he directs the association that leads the defense of Hollywood's biggest movie studios. Thus, Martel (2012, 41) stressed that, through its diplomacy and dialogue with the Executive and Congress, the MPA, "however independent it may be, is in fact a 'quasi-governmental agency.'"

More broadly, several scholars have analyzed the relationship between Hollywood and the U.S. government. Nicholas J. Cull (2012) pointed out that in the First and Second World Wars and the Cold War, the U.S. government worked closely with Hollywood producers to spread its messages to global audiences, and even generated profit in the process. In *Guts and Glory: The Making of the American Military Image in Film*, Lawrence H. Suid (2002) analyzed the "symbiotic relationship" between the Army services and the U.S. film industry, which, since its origin, has helped to polish the American military image. David L. Robb has also shown how several war and action films produced by Hollywood accepted, in exchange for almost free access to expensive military equipment, the Pentagon's censorship, which ranged from the requirement to remove a few words to the exclusion of entire scenes, in order to convey the desired image by the U.S. Armed Forces (Robb 2004).

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<sup>4</sup> Our People. *Motion Pictures Association*. Available at: <https://www.motionpictures.org/who-we-are/our-people/>.

<sup>5</sup> Idem.

More recently, Tom Secker and Matthew Alford (2017a), based on documents obtained by the Freedom of Information Act, pointed out that, between 1911 and 2017, 814 films received support from the U.S. Department of Defense, and that the government was a determining factor in both the creation and extinction of audiovisual projects, including content manipulation. For the authors, it is possible to perceive the surprisingly important role played by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Department of Defense (DoD) in the cinema entertainment industry (Secker and Alford 2017b). Through these documents, Secker and Alford (2017a) even managed to map different ways the Pentagon and the CIA act in relation to films. While the Pentagon prefers films of alien invasions or based on comics, as they allow demonstration of battle forces without having to name enemies, the CIA prefers films that arouse a strong sense of patriotism, regardless of whether films show the gloomy side of their actions, as long as it is clear that everything is for the security of the nation (Secker and Alford 2017a).

Still using documents obtained by the Freedom of Information Act, Secker and Alford (2017c) commented on one of the superhero films used by the Pentagon to improve the image of the U.S. Army. A report issued by the Pentagon Entertainment Liaison Office on the film *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011) stated the following:

The Army is represented well in the character of Captain America, a former WWII GI brought back to life in contemporary America. Following feedback to producers – including strengthening connection of legacy Army to today’s Soldiers – OCPA LA has agreed to requests for support. (U.S. Army 2011) (Secker and Alford 2017c, 394).

OCPA LA, mentioned in the report, is the Department of Defense’s Office of the Chief of Public Affairs, at its Los Angeles, California, branch, which would support Captain America’s upcoming productions, due to its “connection of legacy Army to today’s Soldiers”, strengthened by request of the OCPA LA.

Yet another example of using films to improve the image, this time from the U.S. Navy, can be seen in documents related to the movie *Battleship* (2012). In the film, aquatic alien robots invade the world in the middle of the Pacific Ocean and begin attacking Hong Kong. Luckily for all, the navies of the U.S. and some other countries are in the region conducting military exercises. After many explosions, U.S. sailors save the world, with the unusual help of veterans who fought in the Pacific War against Japan, in praise both of the past and the present of the US Navy. Documents obtained by Secker and Alford (2017c) through the Freedom of Information Act showed the following email written by Dennis Moynihan, then the Chief Information Officer of the U.S. Navy:

[the film] would carry our brand and represent who we are to the American people... *Battleship* will certainly continue to be a conversation starter that carries our brand to many Americans who aren't familiar with their Navy (Secker and Alford 2017c, 395).

Secker and Alford (2017c) also commented that, in some films, the praise for the U.S. Army was so evident that it looked more like a promotional video. This was made explicit, for example, in this annotation by the U.S. Army Entertainment Liaison Office about the movie *Lone Survivor* (2013), based on the true story of a U.S. Marine in Afghanistan:

Support of entertainment feature films like this reach far greater audiences than any single news media story about the actual events. Audiences going to see the film will voluntarily sit through a two-hour infomercial about the participation of Army Special Forces in one of our many joint missions (Secker and Alford 2017c, 398).

In other situations, implicit and explicit praise for the U.S. Armed Forces was used as a tool for promotion and recruitment. That was the case of *Independence Day: Resurgence* (2016), which was accompanied by a promotional video funded by the U.S. Army, in which it was stated: "When the soldiers in the movie rise up, when they adapt to a new threat facing the world, when they find a way to win no matter what, remember where Hollywood gets that from" (Secker and Alford 2017c, 399).

Tricia Jenkins (2013) is another author who delves into this topic in her book *The CIA in Hollywood: How the Agency Shapes Film and Television*. The professor argues that the CIA goes beyond improving its image; it strategically utilizes American films and series to achieve institutional objectives, including recruitment. Jenkins offers examples, such as Jennifer Garner, an actress who portrayed a CIA agent in the series *Alias* (2001-2006), creating a recruiting video for the agency.

Furthermore, the CIA leverages films and series to conduct threat-scenario workshops, as seen in *The Agency* series (2001-2003), where the agency's entertainment liaison provided initial ideas to develop new threats, including scenarios like an anthrax attack in the U.S. and escalating militarization on the Indian border (Jenkins 2013). Another objective involves deliberately presenting an exaggerated version of the CIA's technical skills, aiming to intimidate potential foreign adversaries. As an industry liaison officer reportedly told one of the creators of *The Agency* series, Michael Frost Beckner: "Terrorists watch TV, too" (Jenkins 2013, 69).

Moreover, it is essential to consider U.S. objectives abroad. In Brazil, a classic example that analyzes the use of Hollywood for political purposes is Gerson Moura's work, *Tio Sam Chega ao Brasil* (Uncle Sam Comes to Brazil) (1994). This study explores the North American

cultural penetration campaign in Brazil, which commenced in the early 1940s, including the establishment of the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs (OCIAA) under the leadership of Nelson Rockefeller. According to Moura (1994), in addition to documentaries, fictional films, in collaboration with Hollywood, also played a pivotal role as cultural and ideological propagators.

Moura (1994) highlighted that OCIAA's actions, in conjunction with Hollywood, involved excluding American institutions and customs not well-regarded, such as racial discrimination, from the content of films. Additionally, they created characters, like the parrot José "Zé" Carioca, Donald Duck's cousin, in the film *Saludos Amigos* (1942), produced by Disney Studios, to promote solidarity across the continent, emphasizing the Good Neighbor Policy. Notably, *Saludos Amigos* was entirely funded by OCIAA, including a two-month trip taken by designers, technicians, and Walt Disney himself throughout South America (Adams 2007; Zanella 2015).

Darlene J. Sadlier also studied the role of OCIAA, which, according to the author, sought to promote solidarity in the hemisphere and combat the Axis influence through the promotion of inter-American cultural ties. This was done, among other things, through the sponsorship of trips to Latin America by Orson Welles, John Ford, and several other American personalities. According to the professor, OCIAA used cinema, radio, the press, and various educational and artistic activities, both to convince people in the U.S. of the importance of good neighborly relations with Latin America and to persuade Latin Americans that the U.S. recognized the importance of its southern neighbors (Sadlier 2012).

While Hollywood's influence is often central to discussions on the political use of cinema, it is crucial to recognize that numerous other countries have also employed films for such purposes. In the twentieth century, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (U.S.S.R.) stands out as an undeniable reference in the realm of politically-driven cinema. Sergei Eisenstein, renowned director of iconic Soviet films like *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), *Alexander Nevsky* (1938), and *Ivan the Terrible* (1944, 1958), provided a classic example of cinema's conception in the Soviet context:

It is not a 'Cine-Eye' that we need but a 'Cine-Fist.'

Soviet cinema must cut through to the skull! It is not 'through the combined vision of millions of eyes that we shall fight the bourgeois world' (Vertov): we'd rapidly give them a million black eyes!

We must cut with our cine-fist through to skulls, cut through to final victory and now, under the threat of an influx of 'real life and philistinism into the Revolution we must cut through as never before!

Make way for the cine-fist! (Eisenstein 1988, 64).

It is clear, in Eisenstein's words, that cinema had a manifest political role and should be used to spread Soviet values among its citizens. In a way, it also shows a more internal function of Soviet cinema, which should be used to counter the threat of contamination of the revolution by the petty-bourgeois spirit, which would come from outside. This is a marked difference in relation to U.S. cinema, which from the beginning – as stressed previously through Will Hays' speech – had the intention of spreading American values and ideas to the world.

Also relevant to the analysis proposed in this dissertation are the differences in posture between U.S. and U.S.S.R. cinemas during the Cold War. Some Hollywood films from that period openly addressed the Soviet threat, often representing the Russian enemy in a direct and concrete way. Films like *Rocky IV* (1985), for example, show the frightening physical presence of the Soviets, embodied in the fearless fighter Ivan Drago, who is accompanied in the audience by a Soviet Prime Minister who sported a spot on his forehead quite similar to that of Mikhail Gorbachev, the then Soviet prime minister in real life. In *Rambo III* (1988), American soldier John Rambo must invade Afghanistan, then occupied by the Soviets, to free his friend and mentor Colonel Trautman. To that end, Rambo allies with the Afghans, and together they fight the merciless Soviets, who do not hesitate to wipe out villages full of innocents.

Like the Americans, the Soviets also attacked the United States for decades in their films. Unlike the U.S., however, this representation – for the most part – did not occur with the creation of stereotyped villains. Usually, Americans were represented as “either morally deplorable or totally naive, and always filthy rich” (Piper-Burket 2017). More than villains, Americans were the result of a failed society: Western capitalism and democracy were not values that inspired the same commitment as communism, and the only reason anyone would fight for those values was that they did not know better (Vishnevetsky 2016).

These differences between the villains of each cinema, or between the degree of exaggeration of stereotypes shown by American and Soviet filmmakers during the Cold War, were quite evident in an event that took place in 1987 called “Beyond Stereotypes” (Harmetz 1987). Film directors from the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. met at the American Film Institute to watch a display of the biggest stereotypes made about each other in the Cold War environment. For those present, it was clear that, although there were pieces of propaganda from the Stalinist period, such as, for example, criticisms of corrupt capitalists who tried to influence the Soviets in the McCarthy era, there was nothing in the U.S.S.R. comparable to *Red Dawn* (1984), *Rocky IV* (1985), or *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985), films that showed the Soviets as bloodthirsty and merciless villains. Franklin J. Schaffner, director of *Patton* (1970) and *Planet of the Apes*

(1968), came to recognize to Soviet colleagues: “We out-stereotyped you”. Robert Chartoff, the producer of the *Rocky* series films, expressed regret over the depiction of the character Ivan Drago, the Soviet killing machine of *Rocky IV*, but explained: to make good movies, “you need worthy villains” (Harmetz 1987).

In this sense, Vishnevetsky (2016) highlighted that the Soviets did not consider Americans as worthy villains. That is because they already had their worthy villains: the Nazis, defeated by the U.S.S.R. in World War II, a source of national pride. Thus, the Soviets could not raise Americans to the same level as the Nazis (Vishnevetsky 2016).

Emma Piper-Burket (2017) also commented on the cinematographic history of the U.S. and the U.S.S.R., showing that North Americans were portrayed as silly, ostentatious, wasting money and food, and admiring the rich and powerful, whoever they were. She mentioned a Soviet animated short film called *The Millionaire*<sup>6</sup> (1963), which was quite successful in the U.S.S.R. in the 1960s, in which a bulldog, after the death of its owner, a millionaire resident on Fifth Avenue in New York, inherits all her money. Rich, the dog becomes a snob, eats many meals a day, and goes to spas with manicures, pedicures, and hairdressers. It buys a country house, a Cadillac, tuxedos, and top hats. The dog starts to frequent the chic clubs in the city and, as it is very rich, everyone starts to imitate its way of dancing: the dance floor is filled with people dancing like dogs, on all fours. It also becomes part of the millionaires’ club – “a banker, if you please” –, where old men smoke cigars and decide the future of the country. With bankers, it learns to growl when someone mentions the word “peace”: the dog and the bankers start grunting on the balcony when they see a pacifist protest passing on the street. In addition, it speaks in all newspapers, giving many interviews and always letting everyone know that it has a special opinion about everything. And then it is elected to the Senate: “Now that’s what crooked money does – if only you can get it!” A very caricatural image of the U.S., but, as highlighted by Vishnevetsku (2016) and Piper-Burket (2017), not of bloodthirsty and merciless villains, but of a society in frank and remarkable decay.

Despite the differences in approaches between U.S. and U.S.S.R. cinemas during the Cold War, Tony Shaw and Denise J. Youngblood (2010) argued that there are parallels that can be drawn between the films of the two superpowers at that time. In their book *Cinematic Cold War: The American and Soviet Struggle for Hearts and Minds* (2010), the authors identified five distinct moments in the history of Cold War films.

The first moment, from 1947 to 1953, was characterized by rhetorical aggressiveness,

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<sup>6</sup> The animation is available, with English subtitles, at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qO5ykJuTUSs>.

with representative films such as *Man on a Tightrope* (1953), by Elia Kazan in the U.S., and *Encounter at the Elbe* (1949), by Grigory Aleksandrov in the U.S.S.R. The second moment, between 1953 and 1960, saw milder propaganda, with films like *Roman Holiday* (1953), by William Wyler in the U.S., and *Spring on Zarechnaya Street* (1956), by Marlen Khutsiev in the U.S.S.R. The third moment, during the 1960s, featured relative self-criticism in films like *Fail Safe* (1964), by Sidney Lumet in the U.S., and *Nine Days in One Year* (1962), by Mikhail Romm in the U.S.S.R. The fourth moment, in the 1970s, marked divergent cinematic paths between the two superpowers, with examples like Woody Allen's anarchist and anti-government film *Bananas* (1971) in the U.S., and Vladimir Rogovy's military saga *Officers* (1971) in the U.S.S.R. Finally, in the 1980s, there was a renewed investment in Cold War narratives from both countries, represented by George P. Cosmatos's *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985) in the U.S., and Mikail Tumanishvili's films *Incident at Map Grid 36-80* (1982) and *Solo Voyage* (1986) in the U.S.S.R. (Shaw and Youngblood 2010). While this selection involves a subjective cut, open to questioning, it is an interesting effort to systematize four decades of cinematic history during the Cold War.

Cyril Buffet also dealt with cinema in the Cold War period. According to the researcher, in the preface to the book he edited called *Cinema in the Cold War: Political Projection* (2016), cinema – which is always used in conflicts to dispute images and narratives – was even more important in the Cold War, due to the nuclear parity between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. and the logic of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD). Thus, the Cold War was the implicit and explicit theme of many films from 1947 to 1991, mirroring the societies, ideologies, and cultures in which they were created. Buffet (2016), however, argued that films did more than just reflect the Cold War: they projected it, contributing decisively to shaping and establishing Cold War culture. This was done by inventing and reiterating stereotypes, promoting policies, and spreading fears. For this reason, some even claim, perhaps in a somewhat hyperbolic way, that the Cold War was, above all, a war of images (Buffet 2016).

Due to the predominant focus on the Cold War theme in international cinematography during the second half of the twentieth century, much of the analysis regarding the use of films for political purposes tends to revolve around the two main actors of that era, the U.S. and the U.S.S.R., as highlighted in the previous paragraphs. However, it is essential to recognize other significant players in these dynamics. One obvious participant in this context, which will be analyzed later in this dissertation, is China. Yet, another crucial actor is India.

India's significance lies in the fact that Bollywood, its film industry, is the largest in the world in terms of audience and production. According to Daya Kishan Thussu (2016),

Bollywood produces an average of 100 movies annually, with its films reaching audiences in over 70 countries. In fact, more people worldwide buy tickets to see Bollywood films than Hollywood productions each year.

In an article in which he analyzes the Indian case to understand the soft power of films, Thussu (2016) commented on the history and popularity of Indian cinema. According to the professor, a few months after the invention of cinema by the Lumière brothers (1895), films began to be made in Bombay, and the first film production in India took place in 1897. India was still a British colony, but its films were already exported to Southeast Asia and African countries. The reasons for this interest in Indian cinema, according to Thussu (2016, 6), stemmed from the very characteristics of the movies, “larger-than-life characters, escapist melodramatic narrative style, and song and dance sequences.” Also, the anti-colonial struggle and progressive ideology of the early years of Indian cinema were attractive to governments in the communist world: the 1946 film *Dharti Ke Lal* (*Children of the Earth*, in English) was the first film to be widely distributed in the U.S.S.R.

Thussu (2016) also commented that, more recently, the Indian industry and government recognized and endorsed, at the highest levels, the potential power of culture. In 2000, the Indian film industry was formally granted industry status by the Indian government, which resulted in greater access to resources and foreign investors. As an example of this appreciation of national soft power, Thussu (2016, 6) highlighted the speech of the then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, who, in 2011, stated: “India’s soft power is an increasingly important element of our expanding global footprint... The richness of India’s classical traditions and the colour and vibrancy of contemporary Indian culture are making waves around the world.”

Thussu (2016) also pointed out some highlights regarding Bollywood’s geopolitical issues. The first was the success made by Indian films in Arab countries, as the promotion of family and community values, in contrast to the celebration of Western individualism, generates a large audience for Indian films in Islamic countries (Thussu 2016). For this reason, most Indian films make their première in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, where there is a Bollywood theme park.

Another relevant point is Bollywood’s participation in the relationship between India and Pakistan. According to Thussu (2016), Indian films were banned in Pakistan from the establishment of the country until 2008, when, realizing that piracy already made the exhibition of Indian films a reality, the Pakistani government decided to regularize the situation, revoking the ban and trying to take advantage of the box office success of Bollywood films. Thussu (2016) highlighted that religiosity, gender representation, and family-oriented scripts make the



Bollywood version of modernization attractive to Pakistani audiences.

Furthermore, leaked U.S. government documents from WikiLeaks shed light on Bollywood's potential role in promoting anti-extremism globally and fostering peace in Afghanistan. For instance, a document from 2007 revealed the perspective of U.S. officials on Bollywood cinema, stating that "We understand Bollywood movies are wildly popular in Afghanistan, so willing Indian celebrities could be asked to travel to Afghanistan to help bring attention to social issues there" (Thussu 2016, 9).

Thussu (2016) also wrote about the collaborations between Hollywood and Bollywood, which are quite recent. The first Indian mainstream film to employ a Hollywood production team was *Kaante*, from 2002; and *The Rising: The Ballad of Mangal Pandie*, from 2005, was the first Indian film to be distributed worldwide by 20th Century Fox. Another prominent Indian film in the relationship with the U.S. was *My Name is Khan* (2010), which was internationally distributed in 64 countries by Rupert Murdoch's Fox Star Studios. This point is relevant because, although Rupert Murdoch's broadcaster has a more conservative profile in the U.S., *My Name is Khan* (2010) was considered by the magazine *Foreign Policy* as one of the best films related to the 9/11 attacks (Chopra 2010), offering an important alternative perspective to the widespread prejudice against Muslims in the West (Thussu 2016).

Comparing the Indian and the North American cases, it is already possible to make some notes. The government of India, especially in 2000, started to value the film industry for its potential as a creative economy and as a way to expand the country's global presence. But there are no clear positions by the government or state agents regarding thematic directions to be followed, as happened at times in the U.S. case. Issues of possible political importance, such as the success of Indian films and movie stars in Pakistan, have not been politically addressed by the Indian government either, but, as noted above, this strategic potential has not gone unnoticed by U.S. officials. These points already show different postures in the political use of cinema by India and the United States.

Another highlight brought by Thussu (2016) was regarding cinematographic interactions between India and China. According to the academic, Indian films were very popular in the early years of Communist China, as they were seen as a useful alternative to state propaganda and a cheap substitute for Hollywood films. This, however, changed with the opening of China in the late 1970s, when there was a greater entry of Hollywood films and the development of the Chinese film industry. In 2001, however, the film *Lagaan* was a huge success in China, marking Bollywood's return to the country. Following, several Bollywood films were successful in China, such as *PK* (2014), which broke records as the highest-grossing

Indian movie in the Chinese market until then (Thussu 2016).

In this context, it is crucial to highlight the immense success of another Indian film in China: *Dangal* (2016). According to Hu Jianlong (2017), *Dangal* became the first non-Hollywood foreign film to surpass the 1-billion-yuan mark in China. The film's impact was so significant that even Xi Jinping praised it during a conversation with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Beyond its commercial success, Hu Jianlong (2017) argues that *Dangal* also offers valuable lessons on soft power to China. The film portrays the story of former wrestler Mahavir Singh Phogat, who, in adverse circumstances and with little support from the state, trains his two daughters, Babita and Geeta, to become India's most prominent female wrestlers. According to Hu Jianlong (2017), this narrative dialogues with the Chinese government's view of the neighboring country as a poor and dirty nation, and, in showing this image of India, China highlights the success of socialism with Chinese characteristics, which takes good care of the country and its people.

However, Hu Jianlong (2017) points out that the Chinese government fails to recognize that it is precisely the candid portrayal of India's reality that enables the creation of inspiring and triumphant stories like *Dangal*, which deeply resonated with the Chinese audience. Consequently, he concludes that China's hostility towards freedom of expression weakens the country's ability to produce films that could consolidate Chinese soft power, as exemplified by *Dangal* (Jianlong Hu 2017).

Once again, it is possible to draw significant conclusions about the utilization of cinema for political purposes, focusing on the cases of India and China. As previously emphasized, the Indian government's involvement in the country's film industry appears to be more limited to promoting the sector's economic growth and exporting its productions abroad. In contrast, as I will elaborate on in the following paragraphs, the Chinese government's engagement extends further, even more pronounced than in the North American case mentioned earlier. This comprehensive involvement includes influencing the content of movies, which significantly impacts various aspects relevant to this analysis, such as the relationship between the film industry and the government and the very notion of soft power.

This leads us to China, where, as Yuxing Zhou (2015) pointed out, "the Chinese government has been seeking to promote its soft power internationally through films and other creative industries." The scholar emphasized that, recognizing the influential role played by Hollywood in disseminating the American ethos, Chinese government leaders have realized the potential of films and narratives as powerful means to introduce Chinese culture to the world.

Consequently, from the mid-1980s to the early 2000s, the Chinese government initiated a series of reforms in the film industry to revitalize the then-declining sector. These reforms encompassed areas like distribution, production, and exhibition, with the aim of enhancing the industry's competitiveness while ensuring state control over culture (Y. Zhou 2015). In the subsequent chapters of this dissertation, I will delve further into exploring these pivotal reforms.

It is crucial to highlight that while these dynamics have become more pronounced in recent times, China has a longstanding history of shaping art and culture to serve national interests (Zhu 2020). Since the inception of the People's Republic of China, the Chinese State has regarded cinema as a significant tool for political education and propaganda, a role that films continue to fulfill even in contemporary times (Nakajima 2016).

I will dedicate a substantial portion of Chapter 3 of this dissertation to discuss Chinese cinema. However, it is pertinent to provide an overview for this chapter, particularly to juxtapose the Chinese experience with that of the other countries discussed in the preceding paragraphs. In a 2016 article, Seio Nakajima explored the origin, structure, and evolution of China's contemporary film field. The scholar highlighted one of the golden ages of contemporary Chinese cinema in the early 1980s. During this period, as part of the opening and reform initiated by Deng Xiaoping, film studios gained greater autonomy in determining the types of films they would produce and the financing models they would adopt. This came with increased accountability for their financial outcomes, be it success or failure.

Seio Nakajima (2016) identified Wu Tianming's ascent as the director of Xi'an Film Studio in 1983 as a significant milestone in this new model. To adapt to a changing market, Wu Tianming employed a strategic approach of producing diverse types of films, catering to three distinct audiences in China: the government, the art community, and the general public. Accordingly, he crafted commercial films for profit, and allowed the studio to produce main melody films (*zhuxuanliudianying*) for political education or propaganda purposes to satisfy the government's demands. With the revenue generated from commercial films and the political legitimacy established through main melody films, Wu Tianming could then pursue the art films he truly desired to create as a professional filmmaker.

Seio Nakajima (2016) also emphasized the significance of globalization for the Chinese film industry, as art films began winning prestigious awards at international festivals, consequently gaining greater legitimacy within China. As a result, Nakajima referred to these films as "international Chinese films." Subsequently, a new generation of directors emerged in the 1990s, creating independent films that were less reliant on resources, granting them a higher degree of creative autonomy (Nakajima 2016).

The importance of understanding the Chinese film field stems from the fact that each of these types of cinema – main melody films, international (or art) films, commercial films, and independent films – has different strategies and objectives, as well as are based on distinct (financial and political) capitals, thus having greater or lesser autonomy within China. In the case of “main melody films,” or “leitmotiv films”, as they are financially and politically supported by the government, with strong “party propaganda” message, Nakajima located them in a position of high political capital, low cultural capital and low economic capital (Nakajima 2016). The “commercial films,” the equivalent of “blockbuster films” which target commercial success at the box office, are in the position of low political capital, low cultural capital, and high economic capital. The “International Chinese films,” which often receive prestigious awards abroad and are regularly distributed and exhibited outside China, being internationally renowned, are located in the position of medium “counter-political capital” (although they potentially counter the discourses presented by politically sanctioned films, international Chinese film directors work by and large within the state-sponsored studio system), high cultural capital and medium economic capital (Nakajima 2016). Finally, “independent films” – low-budget productions, which use both fiction and documentary modes of storytelling and have a relatively small market – are located in the position of high counter-political capital, high cultural capital, and low economic capital.

In the following table, I summarized the main logic and capital of each sub-fields of the Chinese cinematic field, also highlighting the capital conversion performed by each of them, according to Nakajima (2016).

	<b>Main logic</b>	<b>Main capital</b>	<b>Capital Conversion</b>
<b>Main Melody Films</b>	Political	Political	Political → Economic
<b>Commercial Films</b>	Commercial	Economic	Economic → Cultural
<b>International Chinese Films</b>	Artistic	Cultural	Cultural → Economic
<b>Independent Films</b>	Artistic	Cultural and counter-political	Cultural and counter-political → Economic

**Table 1:** Structure of the Chinese Cinematic Field. **Source:** elaborated by the author, with data from Nakajima (2016).

Thus, understanding these dynamics can help us better comprehend the political use of cinema and the Chinese film industry, especially for two reasons. First, by showing that it is not a homogeneous whole: in China, there are also independent artists, critical of the

government and the reality of the country. Second, by highlighting that the financing logic changes according to each subfield, increasing the need for financial and political capital – which, in turn, increases the dependence on the government (and the government’s interference capacity). It is also interesting to note how changes in economic capital occur across subfields. For example, despite the fact that in 2016 Seio Nakajima pointed out that main melody films would have low economic capital, the most-watched movies in China<sup>7</sup> in 2017 (*Wolf Warrior 2*), 2018 (*Operation Red Sea*), 2020<sup>8</sup> (*The Eight Hundred*), and 2021 (*The Battle at Lake Changjin*) are, all of them, patriotic films, which could by some definitions be considered main melody films. This could signal that this subfield starts to have increasing economic capital, or that it began to blend in with the commercial film subfield. I will address this in more detail in Chapter 4 when I analyze Chinese movies with a global vocation.

At this point, it may be fruitful for the purpose of this research to make some comparisons with what I pointed out at the beginning of this chapter, about Hollywood cinema and its relations with the U.S. government. David L. Robb (2004), for instance, commented that several war and action films produced by Hollywood — from the origins of Hollywood until the early 2000s, when Robb wrote his book — accepted, in exchange for almost free access to costly military equipment, Pentagon censorship. Sometimes, this interference came in the form of a demand to withdraw some words; at other times, the removal of entire scenes was required, in order to convey the desired image by the U.S. Army. Robb (2004) cited the case of a film in which one of the scenes would take place on a nuclear aircraft carrier. To this end, the Pentagon was asked to grant access to one of its aircraft carriers. As usual, the Pentagon’s chief liaison to the film and television industry read the film’s script to assess the demand. And the answer, according to Robb (2004, 41), was: “*I want pages 6 and 7 completely thrown out or you don’t get to use our aircraft carrier*”. Hence, according to the scholar, if the Pentagon does not like the scripts presented, producers will have the option of either changing the scripts or finding ships, fighters, and aircraft carriers elsewhere – or giving up their projects (Robb 2004). This shows that also in the U.S., when there is a greater dependence on the State, there is also a greater capacity for State interference in the films being produced.

This relationship between greater dependence on the State and greater capacity for State interference can also be observed in China, even if at different scales than what is seen in the U.S. Seio Nakajima (2016), for example, showed the existing tensions between the various subfields of the Chinese film industry and the government, resulting from the constant

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<sup>7</sup> Source: Highest-Grossing Chinese Films, IMDB. Available at: <https://www.imdb.com/list/ls560342491/>.

<sup>8</sup> The most-watched film in 2019 was the Chinese animation *Ne Zha*.

transformations that the growing Chinese film market is undergoing. For example: in the main melody films subfield, there has been a tendency to combine political and market logic to take advantage of the country's growing box office. Films that were made only to educate and send a political message are now being made also seeking financial returns – while transmitting political messages (Nakajima 2016).

On the other hand, the growth of the domestic market in China has also caused changes in the subfield of international Chinese films. According to Seio Nakajima (2016), at least part of the subfield of international Chinese films has also been incorporated into the new logic of the state's cinematographic bureaucracy, which increasingly embraces the logic of the market. In this way, the subfield of international Chinese films has progressively positioned itself in the field of mass production, targeting global and domestic audiences – which at the same time grows the financial independence of the directors (since their films make more money) and the capacity for State interference (since the international films now also depend on the domestic market, more susceptible to State wills).

The subfield of independent films is undergoing transformations as well. According to Seio Nakajima (2016), compared to the past, the subfield of independent films and the state cinema bureaucracy are adopting increasingly conciliatory positions. Many, if not all, of the subfield filmmakers began making films with “official exhibition permissions” (*gongyingxukezheng*). In addition, many of the films in the subfield are no longer low budget as before – so the subfield also begins to adopt a market logic (Nakajima 2016).

However, Seio Nakajima (2016) stressed that it is crucial to remember that the State, in its relationship with the subfield of independent films, has not abandoned the conceptions about the political function of films. The scholar cited the example of the film *Summer Palace* (2006), by Lou Ye, which tells the story of two lovers, against the backdrop of student protests in Tiananmen in 1989. The film ran for the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival in 2006, but as it was sent to the festival without the approval of government censorship, Lou was banned from making movies for five years. This, according to Seio Nakajima (2016), shows that the political criterion, even if sometimes vague and negotiable, still exerts a significant force on the contemporary film sector in China. If one considers that, in January 2020, the largest independent film festival in China – the *China Independent Film Festival* (CIFF) – announced that it would suspend its activities after 17 years of existence, as it was “impossible” to maintain the “independent spirit” in the country<sup>9</sup>, it is clear that these tensions continue to exist and are

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<sup>9</sup> China's biggest independent film festival forced to suspend operations indefinitely. *South China Morning Post*, January 10, 2020. Available at: <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/society/article/3045614/chinas-biggest->

getting stronger.

Therefore, it is possible to perceive, both by the reports highlighted by David Robb (2004) about the interference of the American State in Hollywood and by the analysis proposed by Seio Nakajima (2016) about the relations between the State and the Chinese cinematographic field, that some comparisons can be drawn between U.S. and Chinese cinema. This is because the same phenomenon – State interference in films – happens in both places. However, this interference occurs on different scales and dimensions. David Robb (2004) pointed out several instances in which directors were unable to get support from the State to film with materials borrowed by the U.S. Army or with the support of CIA and FBI consultants if the narratives were not of interest to these institutions. If they wanted to count on this support, the scripts should be changed. If they did not want to change, they could continue filming, but they would not have the support of these institutions – although, as in the case reported by Robb (2004), it would be quite difficult to make a film that takes place in an aircraft carrier without having access to one. This situation is very different from what Seio Nakajima (2016) reported in China, where, for a film to be produced, shot, and released commercially, it is necessary to obtain the seal of the State. Seio Nakajima (2016) underlined that there are also those in China who decide not to submit to state supervision, but their films can only be shown either at international festivals or at independent festivals in China, which are also under increasing pressure. Hence, the circumstances in the two countries are, evidently, different, but the same phenomenon, the State's interference in production, exists in both. Thus, the comparison may even help to highlight the difference between the two realities, justifying the importance of this study.

In this section, I discussed the political use of cinema by states, emphasizing that this practice is not new and has been employed practically since the inception of cinema. I highlighted early speeches from representatives of the Hollywood film industry in the 1920s, which exemplified how cinema was intended to promote American worldviews and political values abroad. Additionally, I showcased instances of state censorship in the United States, particularly to portray a more positive image of the U.S. military and intelligence forces.

During the Cold War, the ideological rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union extended to cinema, with both countries adopting distinct approaches in portraying each other. The Soviet Union, emphasizing the political indoctrination power of cinema, often depicted the United States as a society in decline, rather than resorting to typical villain stereotypes. On the other hand, many U.S. films portrayed antagonists as bloodthirsty

individuals with no qualms about killing innocents.

I also explored the use of cinema as soft power in other countries, such as India, where Bollywood serves as the largest film industry in the world in terms of production and audience. The Indian government's direct involvement in transforming the film industry facilitated investments and promoted Indian products abroad. Indian films found success in the Soviet Union and played a role in geopolitical dynamics between Pakistan and India. The United States even considered using Bollywood films to strengthen ties with Afghanistan after September 11, 2001.

Additionally, I presented an overview of the Chinese film sector, highlighting its diversity and various subfields. While China has utilized films with political intentions for many years, the success of Hollywood in exporting the American way of life has also influenced their approach. Similar to India, China has invested in its film industry to promote soft power internationally. However, China exercises strong control over the narratives conveyed through cinema, akin to the Soviet Union.

Overall, the analyses in this chapter aimed to demonstrate the extensive history of political cinema usage by states to promote their cultures, values, narratives, and soft power. This further justifies conducting this research within the Institute of International Relations.

Throughout the process, several concepts were mentioned, such as soft power and narratives, for example. Thus, in the next section, I will look at the theoretical definitions of the political use of cinema. With this, this dissertation seeks to contribute to the strengthening of the foundation of this growing field of research, a foundation that will be important even for the subsequent analysis of the political use of Chinese cinema.

### **1.3. The use of cinema for political purposes: theoretical and methodological considerations**

In this section, I will delve into theoretical and methodological discussions concerning the analysis of cinema's political use in International Relations research. I will start by discussing the concept of soft power, followed by critiques and its evolution. Furthermore, I will explore alternative analytical approaches, such as poststructuralist perspectives, debates on strategic narratives, and the significance of incorporating economic aspects into these analyses. Lastly, I will address the methodological aspects of this research.



Given the predominance of Hollywood in the analysis of the political use of films, as seen in the previous section, it does not seem to be a coincidence that cinema was mentioned by Joseph Nye (2004) as one of the most important elements of soft power, in the book in which the academic further explained the concept he created in 1990 (Nye 1990). Dealing with the Cold War environment, Nye (2004) wrote that, despite their strength, the culture and propaganda programs coordinated by the Soviet government were unable to keep pace with American popular and commercial culture, which was much more flexible and attractive. The author added that long before it fell, in 1989, the Berlin Wall had already been “pierced” by television and cinema (Nye 2004). Despite the restrictions and censorship of Western films promoted by the Soviet government, the films that managed to be shown were capable of causing devastating political effects: even movies without political pretensions showed that in the West people did not have to spend hours in line to buy food, did not live in community apartments and had their own cars, which invalidated the negative propaganda made by the Soviet media against them (Nye 2004, 5).

Joseph Nye defined soft power as “the ability to affect others and obtain preferred outcomes by attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or payment” (Nye 2021, 10). According to the scholar, a country’s soft power comes from three resources: “its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority)” (Nye 2006). Nonetheless, despite the relevance of the soft power concept, it is necessary to add other elements to broaden the investigation about the use of films as a soft power instrument. And this can be exemplified from an excerpt taken from Joseph Nye’s work.

In his 2004 book *Soft Power: The Means To Success In World Politics*, in which he better explains the concept of soft power, Nye (2004, 4) quoted a young Chinese activist, who would have stated the following: “we’ve seen a lot of Hollywood movies – they feature weddings, funerals and going to court. So now we think it’s only natural to go to court a few times in your life.” This excerpt, besides being relevant to understanding the Harvard professor’s interpretation of the role of cinema as an instrument of soft power, also helps to comprehend some of the critiques made of Nye’s concept. Referring to this passage, Christina Rowley and Jutta Weldes (2016) stated that “the underlying causal logic is that seeing litigious practices in U.S. movies causes Chinese people to have beliefs that, in turn, cause them also to behave litigiously.” According to the authors, that creates a problem, for, although it is an argument reasonable to common sense, it is not thoroughly analyzed, and, then, these causality allegations “are left both theoretically implicit and empirically unsubstantiated” (Rowley and

Weldes 2016).

Other authors have already criticized the concept of Nye in this regard, stating that soft power analyses highlight various aspects of popular culture and cultural institutions, such as cinema, music, and television programs, but generally, these mentions are not theorized more consistently (Joffe 2006; Hall 2010; Hayden 2012; Roselle, Miskimmon, and O’Loughlin 2014). Thus, Rowley and Weldes (2016) propose other perspectives, in the sense of using more robust forms of investigation about the role of popular culture. One that recognizes, and does not obscure, the complexity of cultural relations, researching the allegations of causality and making them explicitly. One that employs a more complex analysis of where and how cultural elements are produced, including an investigation of a broad array of cultural texts, institutions, and practices. One that researches how these cultural elements are constituted, and the possible mutual impacts between culture and world politics. And one that widens the repertoire of actors and audiences both of culture and International Relations, opening space for expanded and potentially more critical politics (Rowley and Weldes 2016).

One of the authors’ propositions for this more in-depth analysis is to replace the conduit metaphor with perspectives of analysis that consider the text (or discourse) metaphor for the investigation of cultural issues (Rowley and Weldes 2016). The conduit metaphor considers that cultural elements only carry a message from a sender to a receiver. An example: in the case mentioned by Joseph Nye (2004) about the Chinese activist who watched court films, court films are considered to carry contentious messages to recipients, who, after that, will act litigiously. The text metaphor, in turn, proposes to analyze cultural productions (films, in the case of this dissertation) as if they were texts, written by someone, for some audience, and which can be read and interpreted.

According to Rowley and Weldes (2016), the text metaphor has the advantage of opening the black box of the “message” propagated by soft power, highlighting that meanings are created not only in linguistic practices, but also in visual, auditive, gestural, institutional, and in all practices that can be read as a text; and of calling attention to three separated, but interconnected places of meaning: the text production, its consumption, and its internal structure. These practices of cultural production of meaning help to construct fundamental components of world politics (such as subjects and objects, identities and interests, agents and structures), which tend to be neglected or taken for granted for most of the causal IR theories (Rowley and Weldes 2016).

Analyzes using the text metaphor are especially relevant in the context of China, especially when considering Xi Jinping’s stated goal of enhancing China’s cultural soft power

and international communication capacity. According to Xi Jinping (2017), the aim is to “improve our capacity for engaging in international communication so as to tell China’s stories well, present a true, multi-dimensional, and panoramic view of China, and enhance our country’s cultural soft power.” The topic was also included in the Resolution of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee on the Major Achievements and Historical Experience of the Party over the Past Century, which stated that “We have accelerated work to strengthen our international communication capacity, with the goal of telling well China’s stories and the Party’s stories, making China’s voice heard,” what increased significantly “Our cultural soft power and the appeal of Chinese culture” (The State Council of the People’s Republic of China 2021).

Thus, more than only understanding that messages are transmitted and can cause effects (using the conduit metaphor), it is important to understand what are those histories and how are they being told and explained, by and to whom.

This shift of research focus is also relevant for the Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA), because, as conceptualized by Valerie Hudson, from the FPA perspective, the most important factor is culture as a dynamic force and an element in the political competition for power (Hudson 2014). In this sense, it is less important the culture itself, and more the understanding of what ideas and how they were employed (Wilkening 1999). For that, to open the black box of the soft power “message” — in the case of this dissertation, of the films — and to comprehend which were the messages chosen to be transmitted, who chose them, and how this transmission took place, can make the analysis over the interactions between culture and International Relations richer. This is significant because, as emphasized by Hudson (2014), the study of how culture affects foreign policy has the potential to inform both theorists and policymakers.

These relations between popular culture and world politics were also analyzed by Jutta Weldes (2003). According to the author, on the one hand, popular culture helps to create and sustain the conditions for contemporary world politics – as an example, she cited the case of popular culture in the 1980s, which helped to redeem Vietnam and Tehran with films such as *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985), and technological novels such as *The Hunt for Red October* (1984) and *Red Storm* (1986), both by Tom Clancy. On the other hand, popular culture may challenge the barriers of common sense, which contests what is already taken for granted – Weldes (2003) exemplified this by citing the film *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964), which ridiculed, among other things, anti-communist paranoia and nuclear deterrence convolutions. According to the scholar, regardless of whether

a particular popular culture text supports or challenges existing power relationships, examining these texts can help highlight the functioning of power (Weldes 2003). As popular culture reproduces existing power relationships, it can be examined for insights into the character and functioning of world politics. In addition, popular culture, by expressing, disseminating, and producing discourses, participates in the production of meaning and, therefore, participates in politics (Weldes 2003).

Hence, seeking to carry out more detailed research on the interactions between culture and power, and considering contributions from other disciplines, this research will adopt the poststructuralist perspective as a theoretical framework. First, because it is one of the theories that function with a more fluid division of disciplinary boundaries. In fact, a poststructuralist would say that such disciplinary tagging and division are part of a modern effort to bring order and certainty to a world of flux and chaos; the post-modern vision, on the other hand, “is the vision of plurality, a positive attempt to secure and explore multiple dimensions of the processes that legitimize and ground social and political practices” (Bleiker 2017, 175).

Second, because poststructuralism is one of the theories of International Relations that emphasizes the texts and discourses present in cultural practices — although one does not need to assume a poststructuralist attitude to realize that popular culture expresses anguish and perspectives of the society that produces it (Buzan 2010). For that matter, it is relevant the research of Michael J. Shapiro, who, aiming to analyze the post-9/11 environment, devoted his attention to the cinema, whose aesthetics can produce and mobilize images, creating new cartographies of violence. According to the professor, there is a direct relation between the cinema and the geopolitics of war, because the way we experience the history of war is inexorably connected to the forms the war assumes in mediatic representations (Shapiro 2009). When critically watched, as a practice of resistance to the dominant modes of representation of the world, the cinema can propagate generosity and can challenge episodes of violence promoted by official politics of war and other forms of coercion and abjection, besides encouraging critical thinking about the modern world (Shapiro 2009).

Another scholar who defends the idea that visual experiences help to shape our perceptions about the world is William A. Callahan, in his book *Sensible Politics: Visualizing International Relations* (2020). According to the professor, the study of visual international politics is important, among other reasons, because: 1) it provides an important tool for understanding how images shape the way we think about International Relations in our “post-literate age,” in which, for most people, visual media is the main source of information about what happens in the world; and 2) it explores how visual artifacts, more than just being an

illustration of international events, can also actively create international politics through non-narrative and non-verbal experiences and performances (Callahan 2020). In other words, according to the perspective of Callahan (2020), it is important to analyze visual artifacts, as they are part of the informational framework that shapes the way people see International Relations, at the same time they also help to constitute international politics itself.

It is also important to highlight the work of Sophie Harman, author of the 2019 book *Seeing Politics: Film, Visual Method, and International Relations*. According to Harman (2019b), many people “read” International Relations in films, but few people in International Relations make films (among these few people, there are documentaries made by James Der Derian, Cynthia Weber, and the already mentioned Michael Shapiro). Realizing this gap and the impact that films and visuals can have both on the general public and International Relations students, Harman produced a fiction film (not a documentary) that tells the story of women living with AIDS in Tanzania<sup>10</sup>, which earned her a 2019 BAFTA nomination for Outstanding Debut by a British Writer, Director, or Producer. In addition to issues related to Global Health, race, and gender, the film’s production process allowed Harman to make contact with dynamics not always accessed by International Relations scholars. For example: how government gatekeeping and global hierarchies of film governance serve to control and marginalize stories and people, choosing what will or will not be produced and shown. In this sense, Harman (2019b) proposed that engagement in the production of films should also be thought of as a way of researching and producing knowledge within the scope of International Relations. According to the professor, “Lots of people question how film can be a research method, how it can be valid, and whether you can replicate it, and I would say no, it’s not a positivist method but that doesn’t mean it can’t have rigor to it as well” (Harman 2019a).

Another interesting analysis can be seen in the article published in 2017 by J. Furman Daniel and Paul Musgrave. Based on studies from other disciplines, including Cognitive Science and Psychology, they propose a theory about how fictional narratives influence the behaviors of real actors (Daniel and Musgrave 2017). According to the professors, fictional narratives influence the behaviors of real actors because when reading, watching, or consuming fictional narratives, people process the stories as if they were actually witnessing the phenomena, even if they are improbable or impossible events. These “synthetic experiences” can change behaviors, reinforce existing views or even replace knowledge acquired from other sources (including formal sources, such as schools and books, for example), both from elites

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<sup>10</sup> For more information about the film *Pili*: <https://notanotheraidsfilm.com/>.

and the masses. Thus, as ideas condition the way agents act, Daniel and Musgrave (2017) argued that International Relations theorists should take more seriously the studies about how popular culture propagates and shapes notions about world politics.

Jutta Weldes (2003) also commented on the importance of analyzing science fiction to understand reality. This is because science fiction is always consciously concerned with political issues, such as technology and social changes, confronting the current world with possible alternatives. It usually does this through extrapolation, which is based on the metonymic extension of the limits of reality. So, it starts with something known and projects or expands some parts into the unknown. In that sense, science fiction reflects where the present is going, both in terms of how the future is imagined and in the sense of cognitive spaces that help shape and guide how people conceive and create the future (Weldes 2003). As an example, Weldes (2003) mentioned utopias and dystopias: utopias say something about how we expect the world to be, while dystopias say something about how we fear the world will be.

The comments by Jutta Weldes (2003) are especially relevant since one of the most-watched films in China in 2019 was precisely a science fiction one. As I will further explore in Chapter 4, the Chinese movie *The Wandering Earth* shows a dystopian future in which the Earth is threatened by the expansion of the sun, and propulsion engines are developed to take the planet to another solar system, all with remarkable Chinese prominence. The film was a huge box office hit in China and was included in the global catalog of the Netflix streaming service, being watched by viewers worldwide. In addition to financial returns, the extrapolation of reality with Chinese characteristics was noted by some academics. For example, Aynne Kokas (2019b) wrote about how China is using science fiction – the film *The Wandering Earth* – to sell Beijing’s vision of the future.

Another scholar who defends the use and interpretation of films to think about International Relations theories is Cynthia Weber. According to the professor, “using popular film to help us think about IR theory seems to work because of some of the similarities between how films tell stories and how IR theory tells stories” (Weber 2021, 225). Therefore, “selecting popular films as a medium through which to revisit IR theory makes sense in part because popular films enable us to access what IR theory says, how it plots its story, and how all this together gives us a particular vision of the world” (Weber 2021, 225).

Roland Bleiker (2018) also highlighted the importance of culture and visuality for understanding the world. According to the scholar, we live in a visual world, and images shape both international events and our perception of them. As an example, Bleiker cites the case of Hollywood, which transmits images of so deeply rehearsed and rooted models of villains and

heroes that it helps shape social values with its productions. Thus, the ubiquity of the image is political and alters the way we live and interact today (Bleiker 2018). According to the professor, images are political in their most fundamental sense, as they outline what we, as a collective, see and do not see, and therefore, by extension, how the political is perceived, sensed, framed, articulated, conducted, and legitimized. Even so, although researchers from areas such as cultural studies, media, and communication, have been studying these issues for some time, International Relations theorists still have little idea about the role played by images, especially those generated by audiovisual media, in politics and global affairs. For this reason, Bleiker (2018) also suggests a closer engagement with the concrete implications of images in politics and International Relations.

An example of academically based research on popular culture is that of Gary D. Rawnsley about the film *Hero* (2002), by Zhang Yimou. In his article, Rawnsley proposes a “detailed reading” of the movie, to show “a multi-layered political discourse” (Rawnsley 2007, 20). According to the scholar, the film addresses themes and issues “that resonate with political meaning and imagery, and which have as much relevance to an analysis of modern China as to our understanding of the ancient period of the Warring States that forms the backdrop to the movie” (Rawnsley 2007, 20).

One of the aspects analyzed by Rawnsley was the exposure of several overlapping narratives in the film – the character Nameless tells the Emperor several versions of the same facts – which, according to the professor, is related to relevant political issues of modern China, such as: “Who is allowed to tell the real story? Whose voice is heard? Whose version of history is legitimate and accepted as such? How do the powerful deal with narratives that challenge the official version of the story?” (Rawnsley 2007, 20). Based on these questions, Rawnsley (2007) then addressed issues related to censorship and official truth, so present in the studies of contemporary China<sup>11</sup>. Rawnsley added to his analysis elements of the film director’s own biography. Rawnsley (2007) mentioned that Zhang Yimou had several censored films at the beginning of his career and could have moderated the tone of his criticisms in order to release *Hero*, a film that raised him to international stardom – having even been accused by some critics

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<sup>11</sup> For more information on this topic: JIANG, Ying. *Cyber-nationalism in China: challenging Western media portrayals of Internet censorship in China*. Adelaide: University of Adelaide Press, 2012. XU, Beina; ALBERT, Eleanor. Media censorship in China. *Council of Foreign Relations*, February 17, 2017. KING, Gary; PAN, Jennifer; ROBERTS, Margaret E. How the Chinese government fabricates social media posts for strategic distraction, not engaged argument. *American Political Science Review*, v. 111, n. 3, p. 484-501, 2017. THUSSU, Dava Kishan. Globalization of the Chinese media: the global context. In: THUSSU, Daya Kishan; DE BURGH, Hugo; SHI, Anbin (Ed.). *China's media go global*. London: Routledge, 2018.

of having praised a strong and authoritarian government in the film.<sup>12</sup> Rawnsley (2007), however, disagrees with this accusation. For him, under apparent praise for a strong government, there are several criticisms: it is not a coincidence that not by chance, “the film concludes with a king surrounded by the drabness of his court (in stark contrast to the vibrancy of life outside) and hundreds of faceless bureaucrats who in unison remind the king of his duty in executing Nameless” (Rawnsley 2007, 25). Therefore, like the character Nameless, who tells different versions to be able to approach the Emperor, Zhang Yimou could also be making a film with the appearance of praise to be able to approach the Chinese government and show his story that, in some layer, criticizes that same government.

Apropos, the movie *Hero* allows us to make references to some of the theories brought up in the first section of this chapter. As I mentioned, from Zhao Tingyang’s perspective, the *Tianxia* system would be more inclusive and less exclusive than the Westphalian system, thus configuring itself in a better way to reach genuine perpetual peace, successful governance, and stable order over the entire world. And the idea of *Tianxia* is precisely one of the main themes addressed in the film *Hero*. According to Xiaoming Chen and Ming-Yeh T. Rawnsley, the hidden logic of *Tianxia* in the film is: “On the one hand, terrorism and violence must be abandoned if peace (*heping*) within *tianxia* is to be restored; on the other hand, it is necessary to tolerate, and even support, unification of nations by force in order to pursue universal peace” (Xiaoming Chen and Rawnsley 2010, 78). Thus, peace “becomes the ultimate justification that resolves all violence in the world of *Hero*” (Xiaoming Chen and Rawnsley 2010, 78). As the authors highlighted that “the film directs attention towards the creation of a new world order” (Xiaoming Chen and Rawnsley 2010, 79), a close reading of *Hero* could help to understand connections between it and Zhao Tingyang’s work and, moreover, even to get a better knowledge about China’s perspectives regarding world order.

Yet another reason for adopting poststructuralist perspectives in the present dissertation is that they enable a joint analysis of narratives and power. When one talks about a state’s soft power, one is essentially talking about power dynamics. And poststructuralist theorists, like realist theorists, are also concerned with power and the state. However, according to Hansen (2020, 182), “poststructuralism’s concept of power goes beyond that of realism, which defines power as material capabilities.” Poststructuralists follow Michael Foucault’s definition of power as productive, meaning that, power “comes about when discourses constitute particular subject positions as the ‘natural’ ones (Hansen 2020, 181). For structuralists, it “is also an

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<sup>12</sup> One of such critics was Evans Chan, who wrote an article entitled *Zhang Yimou’s Hero and the Temptations of Fascism* (Chan 2004).



instance of power when states and institutions establish themselves as having the knowledge to govern a particular issue” (Hansen 2020, 181). Hence, bringing poststructuralist premises to the study of foreign policy means focusing on how foreign policy decisions are legitimized or undermined in the broader public sphere.

Poststructuralist perspectives understand that language has political power because it is a means of both communication and mystification (Walker 1986). Language is considered to have power because it is through discourse that subjects, objects, actors, and identities are constructed (Hansen 2020). Furthermore, typical issues of foreign policy analysis, such as national interests, are social constructions that emerge from a ubiquitous and inevitable process of representation (Weldes 1999).

It is important to highlight that poststructuralist perspectives, even though they are not based on the empirical method, are also attentive to material issues. Data on economic growth, investments, and revenues are all important for poststructuralism. But the poststructuralists reiterate that at this point too, the importance of materiality is given through discourse, that is, materiality cannot generate its own political effect, as there is no way to observe political power other than through language and symbols (Hansen 2020). Thus, decisions about potential acquisitions of material capabilities, for example, are based on discursive constructions about who are the trustworthy allies and who are the enemies to be deterred (Hansen 2020).

The poststructuralist perspective also argues that there is no single, absolute, and immutable identity for international actors. According to poststructuralists, identity is relational and performative, meaning that identities have no objective existence, but rather that they depend on discursive practices (Hansen 2020). There is an interesting possible connection here between poststructuralism and Qin’s relational theory, which highlights that, in a Chinese worldview, identities are relational, depending on relations between individuals and on the relational context. That is no coincidence since both poststructuralist and relational approaches reject the positivist idea of mainstream IR about actors as individualist and rational beings. This dissertation, then, in this sense, is aligned with the poststructuralist and Chinese worldviews.

At this point, it is interesting to mention that, for Joseph Nye, the attraction exerted by soft power also depends on the context and the audience that receives this action. According to the academic, “Attraction rests in the eye of the beholder and can be generated by impressions of kindness, competence, or charisma”, and “To a greater degree than with hard power, soft power depends on the minds of the target audiences” (Nye 2021, 6). And he exemplified using, coincidentally or not, cinema: “A given cultural resource such as a Hollywood film may produce attraction in Brazil at the same time it produces repulsion in Saudi Arabia” (Nye 2021, 6). Even

if Nye defines himself as a “liberal realist” (Nye 2021, 4) and says that “power implies causation” (Nye 2021, 2), which clearly puts him in line with positivist approaches to IR, the idea that “the effectiveness of a power resource depends upon the context” (Nye 2021, 3), and that the same action can be understood in different ways depending on who receives it, dialogues a lot with the poststructuralist perspectives adopted in this dissertation.

In this sense, as the narratives are constructed, there is no single reality. Realities are mediated by forms of representation, and these representations are not necessarily mirrors of reality, but rather ways of creating facts (Shapiro 1988). One of the aims of the poststructuralist approach is precisely to deconstruct and denaturalize the languages, concepts, and texts that have constituted the privileged discourses of international relations, to the point of being considered as facts (Der Derian 1989). Therefore, if visual images are political forces, they shape both international events and our understanding of them (Bleiker 2018), then investigating these cultural aspects in greater depth, understanding which cultural representations were chosen, by whom, and for what purpose, in addition to how they were received, can assist in the analysis of the use of films as important elements in the dispute for power.

But how will this investigation be conducted? In the next subsection, I will clarify the methodology and also some concepts I will use throughout this dissertation.

### **Concepts, definitions, and theoretical-methodological**

In this subsection, I will delve into the fundamental concepts, definitions, and relevant theoretical-methodological perspectives essential for this dissertation. To initiate this discussion, I will explore the concept of soft power. As previously emphasized, Joseph Nye introduced the term “soft power” in 1990, defining it as the ability to achieve desired outcomes through attraction rather than coercion or force (Nye 2004). Over time, as the concept entered the public domain, it underwent expansion and distortion, sometimes becoming unrecognizable (Nye 2006). In Nye’s own words:

With time, I have come to realize that concepts such as soft power are like children. As an academic or a public intellectual, you can love and discipline them when they are young, but as they grow, they wander off and make new company, both good and bad. There is not much you can do about it, even if you were present at the creation (Nye 2021, 11).

In fact, over the years, the concept has also been the target of several criticisms. According to Craig Hayden (2012), for example, the idea that soft power differs from hard

power because of a focus on intangible attributes, co-option, and attraction seems straightforward and elegant, but soft power remains difficult to apply in an analytically consistent form, an argument also endorsed by Todd Hall (2010). Another criticism made of Nye's concept is that soft power is based on a conception of power that does not clearly specify the distinctions between capabilities (the resources that the actor may have), vehicles (policies or other attempts to use the resources of soft power) and effects (results that can be derived from soft power) (Hayden 2012). More recently, Ilan Manor (2019) has debated the possible banality of soft power: "And it is within the public diplomacy milieu that soft power has become banal. I do not mean to suggest that Nye's original term is banal but rather that soft power is now often employed in a banal manner" (Manor 2019).

Despite recognizing the relevance of this debate, I decided to use the concept of soft power in this dissertation for two main reasons. The first and most important is that the term soft power has been widely used in China. As Nye (2021, 10) wrote: "I was more surprised by the fate of the concept in China." According to the scholar, "As China dramatically developed its hard power resources, leaders realized that it would be more acceptable if it were accompanied by soft power" (Nye 2021, 10). And that was a "smart strategy because as China's hard military and economic power grew, it could frighten its neighbors into balancing coalitions. If it could accompany its rise with an increase in its soft power, China could weaken the incentives for these coalitions" (Nye 2021, 10).

Glaser and Murphy (2009) showed how the term was quickly translated into Chinese by Wang Huning, still in the early 1990s. And they cited an excerpt published by Wang in the *Journal of Fudan University* in 1993 in which he highlights that culture was the main source of the soft power of a state, writing that "if a country has an admirable culture and ideological system, other countries will tend to follow it. ... It does not have to use its hard power which is expensive and less efficient" (Glaser and Murphy 2009, 12). Danielly Ramos and I already wrote elsewhere that, among the distinctive features of Chinese soft power is precisely a centrality of culture, which even leads to the use in China of the concept of cultural soft power (Ramos and Menechelli 2019). According to Zhang Guozuo, from the China Center for Cultural Soft Power Research and former deputy director of the Theoretic Bureau in the Propaganda Ministry of China and director of the National Planning Officer for Philosophy and Social Sciences, "apparently, Nye's understanding of culture is too narrow: There would be no political values or foreign policies without culture" (G. Zhang 2017, 12).

In an article from 2021, Joseph Nye brought an interesting anecdote about China's focus on culture within the concept of soft power. According to the scholar, he was once invited to

speak to 1500 students at the School of Marxism at Peking University. And he responded as usual to the question of how China could increase its soft power, saying that “a country’s soft power comes from its civil society rather than from its government. Propaganda is not credible and thus often does not attract. China needs to give more leeway to the talents of its civil society, even though this is difficult to reconcile with tight party control”. He exemplified this “too tight control over civil society” by mentioning the harassment of the Chinese artist Ai Wei Wei. According to Nye, “there was a slight titter in the crowd, but at the end of my lecture, the dean of the School of Marxism took the stage and said ‘we are flattered to have Professor Nye here, but you students must realize that his use of the concept is overly political and we prefer to restrict it to cultural issues’” (Nye 2021, 11).

On December 6, 2022, I had the privilege of interviewing Professor Joseph Nye in his office at the Kennedy School, Harvard University, in Cambridge, United States. During the interview, one of the key topics I discussed with him was the evolving definitions of soft power and culture in China, which sometimes encompass political issues and at other times exclude them. According to Nye:

Well, concepts have different purposes. One purpose is analytical, to explain how one person or one state can influence others to get what it wants through attraction... But concepts also have a political use, which is to mobilize people behind a political approach. And so when a political leader uses soft power, they’re usually less interested in analysis than they are in moving people in a direction. So when Hu Jintao used the concept in 2007, he was talking as the Secretary General of the Communist Party, and he wanted to get cadres of the Communist Party to move in a direction. And so if you take an analytical view of soft power in this idea, you end up coming up with awkward things like throwing Ai Weiwei in jail reduces your attractiveness. And people in power don’t want to say that. So they say it’s more of a cultural concept, not a political concept ... All sorts of concepts are twisted for purposes, when people talk about democracy, sometimes is analytical, sometimes it’s to move people in a given direction. So I’m not surprised that the Chinese would like to narrow it down to avoid political embarrassment. But to me, the purpose of the original development of the concept was for analysis, not for politics.

During the interview, I also raised questions regarding the significance of Wang Huning, who was the first to translate Nye’s texts into Chinese, being a member of the Standing Committee, and how the involvement of academics in the government, along with the diverse conceptual perspectives of soft power, could potentially influence China’s soft power efforts. In response, Nye stated that:

Wang Huning was a professor at Fudan. And when he first started to think about this, he was more thinking about the analytical question. But as he became politically influential, and became one of the chief propagandists in the Party and particularly of Xi Jinping, he couldn’t really be just an analyst, or we would run up against the type of awkwardness that I described for you that you couldn’t, for example, say that it made China unattractive to throw Ai Weiwei in jail. And so he had to turn the phrase and turn it as a way for China to win the war of ideas to be stronger in

propaganda, but not to analyze what are the sources of attraction, which might have led him to these awkward conclusions. So it's he's a particular example of the point that I was making about the two purposes of a concept, which could be analytical or political. One is to analyze things, the other is to move people. So I think Wang Huning went from analysis to moving people.

Nye's considerations are relevant for multiple reasons. Firstly, they emphasize the importance of analyzing diverse perspectives, including the Chinese viewpoint, which gives the concept of soft power a distinct dimension. This complexity challenges the application of the same concept or theoretical frameworks to comprehensively analyze the global landscape. Secondly, Nye delves into the differentiation between the material and social realms, emphasizing that politics and international relations analysts are not mere observers but active shapers and describers of these relations. As Nye expounds, concepts serve various functions, both analytical and political, as they can mobilize people when employed by politicians. It is important to point out that the term "soft power" has been entrenched in the U.S. political lexicon for decades, which opens the possibility of political use of the concept in the U.S. as well. When discussing "smart power," for instance, he highlights its adoption by then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton (Nye 2009). Consequently, striking a balance in these analyses is crucial. Nye underscores that the same happens to other concepts, such as democracy. Interestingly, this dialogues with Wang Huning's arguments about how Western countries used the concept of "human rights" for political purposes. This perspective also resonates with the adopted poststructuralist theoretical framework, which regards language and narratives as subjectively constructed elements, thus emphasizing the importance of considering the context.

Lastly, Nye explores the role of academics, illustrating cases like Wang Huning, who initially analyzed the concept of soft power as a professor at Fudan University but later used it for more political purposes after engaging in politics. It's noteworthy that Joseph Nye's professional website<sup>13</sup> at Harvard University reveals his involvement in various political roles, such as "Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, Chair of the National Intelligence Council, and Deputy Under Secretary of State for Security Assistance, Science and Technology." This underscores the significance of critically utilizing concepts and emphasizes the relevance of adopting a poststructuralist framework in this dissertation, which consistently questions accepted notions and perspectives, investigating who is speaking, from which vantage point, and for what objectives.

For my purpose here, one of the most relevant aspects of soft power is that the concept has been used both in analyses of China (H. Wang 1994; G. Zhang 2017; Edney, Rosen, and

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<sup>13</sup> Available at: <https://www.hks.harvard.edu/faculty/joseph-nye>.

Zhu 2020b; Mitter 2020) and in the speeches of the Chinese leaders themselves (Jintao Hu 2007; Xi 2014; 2017; 2022). As put by Li Mingjiang (2019, 44), “Soft power has been one of the most popular terms in the Chinese foreign policy lexicon since the mid-2000s.” The scholar proposed that the popularity and intensity of the Chinese debate over soft power have been shaped especially by two factors:

First, the Chinese elites have a growing desire to dramatically expand China’s influence and elevate China’s international image and status. Second, the Chinese are disappointed with the international status of their country’s soft power. The contrast between these two factors has sparked keen interest in soft power among the Chinese scholars (Li 2019, 44).

Li Mingjiang (2019) also highlighted the interesting roles Chinese scholars who study soft power have been playing in relation to foreign policy and policymaking. “First, some Chinese analysts who are close to the political circle play the “epistemic community” role by directly contributing policy ideas and proposals to various decision-making institutions;” second, their “academic publications and media commentaries have led policymakers to pay more attention and allocate more resources to the advancement of China’s soft power;” third, “in retrospect, it is quite clear that the Chinese soft power debate reflects two decades of changes in the soft power elements in China’s international relations” (Li 2019, 44–45). These interactions between academia and foreign policy can also be of interest for analyses that focus on discourses and narratives, such as the one in this dissertation.

The second reason for including the concept of soft power in this dissertation is that it is frequently used in studies about the interactions between cinema and International Relations (Dennison and Dwyer 2021), whether regarding the U.S. (Adams 2007; Zanella 2015), China (Y. Zhou 2015; Rosen 2017; Kokas 2017; G. Zhang 2017)(Y. Zhou 2015; Rosen 2017; Kokas 2017; G. Zhang 2017), or other regions of the world (Richeri 2016; Thussu 2013). In using it in this dissertation, I wish to contribute to this increasingly important field of study.

Another important concept I will employ is one of the strategic narratives. According to Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle (2013, 3),

Strategic narratives are a means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors. Strategic narratives are a tool for political actors to extend their influence, manage expectations, and change the discursive environment in which they operate. They are narratives about both states and the system itself, both about who we are and what kind of order we want. The point of strategic narratives is to influence the behavior of others.

The authors also argue that “Strategic narrative *is* soft power in the 21st century” (Roselle, Miskimmon, and O’Loughlin 2014, 71 emphasis in the original) . They highlight that

soft power is a crucial factor in international relations, yet identifying soft power resources, processes, and conditions for success remains a challenge. The concept of strategic narratives can help address these questions by providing a means to shape perceptions, beliefs, and behaviors in target audiences. In today's chaotic world, with leaders that are ill-prepared to deal with its complexities, strategic narratives are even more crucial for ordering chaos (Roselle, Miskimmon, and O'Loughlin 2014).

Roselle, Miskimmon, and O'Loughlin (2014) stress that even though Nye argues that international affairs have become a competition of narratives, he doesn't delve into the nature of these narratives or explain how they gain persuasion among target audiences. Consequently, the analysis of how strategic narratives are formed, projected, and received, along with the subsequent interactions, fulfills the promise that soft power analysis offered but failed to deliver (Roselle, Miskimmon, and O'Loughlin 2014).

The authors propose a fresh perspective on soft power, seeing it as the capacity to establish a consensus around shared meanings. For example, if people value and deem the promotion and protection of human rights as important, desirable, and morally right, it becomes harder to justify actions perceived to contradict this consensus. Soft power resources can serve as a basis for creating shared understandings, enhancing various interactions, such as business opportunities and cooperation towards common humanitarian goals, like mitigating human suffering (Roselle, Miskimmon, and O'Loughlin 2014). This aspect is particularly noteworthy as the notion of shared meaning aligns with both poststructuralism and Qin Yaqing's relational theory, which I discussed in this chapter and serve as essential references for this dissertation.

The concept of strategic narratives also highlights the significance of the level of analysis. As explained by Roselle, Miskimmon, and O'Loughlin (2014), hard power resources, like military assets, are typically controlled by the state. On the other hand, soft power resources can be found both within and outside the public sector. Effective utilization of soft power resources requires recognizing that a country's most crucial assets are the values associated with an open, diverse, and complex society. Soft power can emanate from various sources such as universities, businesses, religious organizations, sports teams, and its citizens. These entities can become essential components of soft power strategies, but it is crucial to motivate them to align with national objectives, especially in non-authoritarian states (Roselle, Miskimmon, and O'Loughlin 2014). Consequently, when studying soft power and strategic narratives, it is essential to be adaptable and considerate of the specific circumstances, identifying which actors are involved in shaping and promoting certain narratives and how this impacts a country's soft power.

In this context, it is worth contemplating that the definition of soft power itself adds complexity to the level of analysis. Joseph Nye posits that soft power arises from a nation's culture, which originates from civil society, as well as from foreign policies, which is a function of the State, and political values, which mix both the State and society. Consequently, the intricacy of analyzing and defining the level of analysis is inherent to both the concept of soft power and strategic narratives.

An illustrative example is the Chinese film *Wolf Warrior 2* (2017). As discussed in Chapter 3, the movie is categorized as a main melody film, but it was produced by a private studio, not a state-owned one. Furthermore, the film's director and lead actor, Wu Jing, expressed that he sensed a desire among the Chinese population to see China take a more assertive role on the global stage (Osno 2018). In this case, there is a private individual acting in line with the strategic narratives favored by the Chinese State. Thus, from a theoretical and methodological standpoint, it becomes challenging to determine the level of analysis at the outset. Instead, the level of analysis must be assessed on a case-by-case basis, discerning when private entities participate and when the Chinese State is involved.

The same complexity applies to Hollywood films produced by private studios, which, in theory, aim to distance themselves from the U.S. State. However, as I also highlighted, there are constant interactions between the State and studios and directors in the context of Hollywood. Therefore, identifying the level of analysis beforehand is also difficult. The level of analysis needs to be fluid and, in line with the concepts of strategic narratives and soft power, contingent on the specific case, considering the actors involved in formulating, reinforcing, promoting, and disseminating these strategic narratives.

One of the main points highlighted by Roselle, Miskimmon, and O'Loughlin (2014) pertains to the challenges in measuring the impacts of soft power initiatives. According to the authors, the weakness in studying soft power lies in IR's inability to effectively trace or quantify its effects. While some scholars have attempted to identify situations where soft power matters, their focus has been primarily on identifying the capabilities to use and how to employ them, rather than analyzing the actual effects of soft power. Nye argues that we should not only assess the impact of a country's soft power appeal on foreign public opinion but also understand the resulting behavioral changes. However, he suggests that journalists and historians are better suited for conducting such analyses, as it would be costly and cumbersome for IR scholars to carry out such assessments in the present context (Roselle, Miskimmon, and O'Loughlin 2014).

Consequently, the authors emphasize the significance of the concept of strategic narratives. They assert that soft power plays a pivotal role in understanding today's international



relations. While many accept this general statement, identifying soft power resources and the processes through which soft power operates, as well as understanding the conditions under which soft power resources can support foreign policy, remains challenging. The authors argue that the concept of strategic narrative helps address several fundamental questions concerning our understanding and analysis of soft power (Roselle, Miskimmon, and O'Loughlin 2014).

Furthermore, when observing how different states strategically employ narratives to influence target audiences, we gain valuable insights into the dynamics of contestation, particularly in complex media environments (Roselle, Miskimmon, and O'Loughlin 2014). For those utilizing narrative strategically, it becomes imperative to pay equal attention to the reception and interpretation of narratives as to their creation and projection. This is where meaning is constructed, and the effectiveness, engagement, and persuasive potential of the narratives are experienced. Nye himself underscores this point, recognizing that the audience or targets hold as much importance as the agents in the process (Roselle, Miskimmon, and O'Loughlin 2014).

There is a fundamental connection with the Chinese government's objective of presenting an authentic and multifaceted image of China to the world. The selection of themes presented in this portrayal reflects the strategic narratives that the Chinese government aims to disseminate. As I will point out in the next chapters, this is achieved through direct censorship of themes that do not align with the government's strategic narratives, along with the promotion of guidelines that outline the central themes to be emphasized. Additionally, certain themes receive government resources for production through indirect incentives. Also, Chinese artists can express themselves genuinely, contributing to the creation of narratives that represent the new story of China as they see it.

One of the central questions raised in this study is how to identify these strategic narratives. With no single document explicitly outlining Chinese foreign policy, the process becomes more intricate. Thus, in this dissertation, I will employ a comparative approach by analyzing the main films and examining discourses from Chinese leaders and guidelines. The goal is to demonstrate that the narratives portrayed in the films align with the priorities of Chinese rulers and intellectual analysts. In addition to these primary documents and discourses, I will incorporate analyses from scholars who investigate Chinese foreign policy, helping to identify its primary actions and directions. This multifaceted approach will allow for a comprehensive understanding, as I analyze the films, identify their main narratives, and illustrate how they align with China's central foreign policy objectives.

Thus, for the purposes of this dissertation, it is fundamental to consider the concept of

strategic narratives for three main reasons. Firstly, this concept allows for establishing a connection between soft power and foreign policy, since, through the strategic use of these narratives, States seek to influence the international environment to achieve their national interests. Second, the idea of strategic narratives relates to Chinese leaders' use of the concept of soft power, the idea of telling China's stories well, so often highlighted by Xi Jinping. Finally, the concept of strategic narratives has been increasingly explored in the literature on the relationship between cinema and soft power. Stephanie Dennison, co-editor of the book *Cinema and Soft Power: Configuring the National and Transnational in Geo-politics* published in 2021, highlights that: "It is no coincidence that a number of the chapters in this volume engage with Roselle, Miskimmon and O'Laughlin's singular take on soft power in the twenty-first century as 'strategic narrative' (2014). For a start, the narrative aspect of this interpretation of soft power resonates with the uniquely placed story-telling abilities of audio-visual culture." (Dennison 2021, 5).

One example is Chris Homewood's chapter, which examines Hollywood as a crucial tool in China's public diplomacy. The author argues that the Chinese government uses Hollywood to project a positive image to global audiences and, in doing so, develop soft power, particularly in the West. Homewood writes that the dissemination of Chinese strategic narratives is essential to achieving this objective, and that, as a frequent characteristic of international relations, strategic narratives are the stories a nation must tell the world, and itself, to develop and sustain a competitive edge in the international system (Homewood 2021). Therefore, the concept of strategic narratives will be central to this dissertation.

To gather a broader knowledge about Chinese foreign policy, I will connect (soft) power, culture, and economy, and, for that, I will resort to the concept of creative industry. The Dictionary of Media and Communication defines creative industries as:

Commercial and industrial production sectors involved in generating new cultural contributions through creativity, skill, and talent. Definitions variously include: art, music, film, performance arts, and games; architecture, design, designer fashion, and craftwork; books, publishing, and software; television and radio; advertising and public relations. Often a synonym for cultural industries (Chandler and Munday 2011, 80).

According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the "cultural industries, which include publishing, music, cinema, crafts, and design, continue to grow steadily apace and have a determinant role to play in the future of culture."<sup>14</sup> The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) states that

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<sup>14</sup> Creative Industries, *UNESCO*. Available at: <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/culture/themes/creativity/creative-industries>.

the “creative economy is recognized as a significant sector and a meaningful contributor to national gross domestic product”. The report adds that the creative economy has both commercial and cultural value: “acknowledgment of this dual worth has led governments worldwide to expand and develop their creative economies as part of economic diversification strategies and efforts to stimulate economic growth, prosperity and well-being” (UNCTAD 2019b).

According to Frédéric Martel (2012), the concept of creative industry is the most appropriate to study these new global media, because they are involved not only with cultural products but also with services. The analysis regarding the creative industry, then, should consider not only culture but also content and formats; not only the industry but also governments seeking soft power and small companies seeking innovations (Martel 2012). Moreover, Michael Keane (2013, 73) also highlighted how “the creative industries and their alternative nomenclatures – the ‘cultural industries’ and the ‘cultural creative industries’ – took root quickly in the early 2000s, precipitated by a sense that China needed to compete in soft power markets.”

The importance of adding the concept of creative industries to soft power analysis is also pointed out by Hyungseok Kang. According to the researcher, “Although soft power primarily concerns the sociopolitical influence of public opinion and culture abroad through fostering positive national image and advancing foreign policy objectives, it has significant economic implication as well” (Kang 2013, 9). This is evident when we consider cases like the one reported above, of the bill proposed by Senator Ted Cruz, which suggests limiting access to US government funds for films that cave in to pressure and alter scripts to please China.

Additionally, according to the publication *Key Concepts of the Creative Industries*, creative industries “has proven a useful concept.” among other reasons, “it is valuable because it mainstreams the economic value of culture, media and design” (Hartly et al. 2013, 59). When debating specifically cinema, then, considering the economic aspect becomes even more important, because movies “are firmly tied to their social and economic context. Films are distributed and exhibited for audiences, and money matters at every step” (Bordwell, Thompson, and Smith 2020, 1).

Thus, the concept of creative industries will also help to integrate the economic aspects of culture in general, and cinema in particular. And those economic aspects are immensely relevant in China’s case. According to Marisa Henderson, UNCTAD’s creative economy head, “China’s contribution to the global creative economy is both important and has driven more than a decade’s worth of growth in creative industries and services,” and “indications are that

it will continue to grow” (UNCTAD 2019a). In this sense, it is important to consider the economic aspect of these industries, since, as stated in a 2019 UNCTAD report on the creative economy, “China’s trade in creative goods and services is outstripping those of other countries, making it the driving force behind a prosperous global creative economy over the past 15 years” (UNCTAD 2019b). This is one more justification for aggregating the concept of creative industries into the analysis.

It is also important to incorporate the Chinese creative industry into this analysis because it presents new formats of integration between the State, companies, and societies, and new models of soft power, which deserve to be better studied. Writing specifically about East Asia, Peichi Chung (2017, 146) pointed out that, “altogether, creative industry policy in East Asia demonstrates a new imagination of globalization that differs from one created by the soft power of the United States.” According to the scholar, it is important to consider those peculiarities, because they shed “light on the type of popular cultural complexity as the nation-state engages in different strategies to participate in cross-border cultural trade” (Chung 2017, 146). And added: “China’s active engagement in growing its domestic cultural market also illustrates a new form of soft power competition from China” (Chung 2017, 146). The professor at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) also highlighted that the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT) “has played an influential role in creating a monopolistic film market that keeps foreign players’ hands off China’s film production, importation, exhibition and distribution” (Chung 2017, 146), and that, “in the export-oriented media industry, for example, the economic nature of the media industry can cause media policy to conflict with cultural policy (Chung 2017, 146). According to Peichi Chung (2017, 147), the “industry structure can be problematic, especially when the government becomes an enabler of media content.” Thus, in this situation “it is crucial that the government maintains balance between culture and economy in order to allow the continuity of empowerment to public initiatives and to fight against standardization in the commercial system of the media industry” (Chung 2017, 147). Once again, the importance of analyzing together the cultural and economic aspects of soft power is stressed.

### *Theoretical-Methodological Framework*

Along with these concepts, a brief explanation of the theoretical-methodological framework is needed. As already stated, this research will adopt a poststructuralist perspective, considering that language has political power because it is through language that subjects, actors,

objectives, and identities are constructed (Walker 1986; Weldes 1999; Shapiro 2009; Hansen 2016). This resonates with Ismael Xavier's definition of cinema – “discourse composed of images and sounds” (Xavier 2005, 14) –, and with Xi Jinping's ideas about using soft power tools (films included) in a way that “the stories of China should be well told, voices of China well spread, and characteristics of China well explained” (Xi 2014). Thus, I will analyze films as discourses, aiming to understand which messages are being promoted and how they are related to Chinese foreign policy. The goal is to achieve a broader understanding of the correlations between Chinese foreign policy, power, economy, and cinematographic culture.

Therefore, this research will dialogue with the expanding literature which believes that popular culture (including films, television, and audiovisual productions in general) functions as something beyond mere representations of world politics: “the ongoing and phenomenal growth in the production and circulation of popular culture *makes* world politics what it currently is” (Grayson, Davies, and Philpott 2009, 156–57 emphasis on the original). Popular cultural texts such as magazines, novels, films, and television shows are important because they are implicated in the production of common sense and therefore in the “manufacture of consent” for states' foreign policies (Weldes 1999; 2003). Popular cultural artifacts not only make use of the same background meanings (cultural resources) as do policymakers, in order to construct a compelling vision of the world; they also create cultural resources on which other cultural and state actors – and people more generally – draw (Rowley 2015).

According to this idea, fictional narratives influence the behaviors of real actors because when reading, watching, or consuming fictional narratives, people process the stories as if they were actually witnessing the phenomena, even if they are improbable or impossible events (Daniel and Musgrave 2017). These “synthetic experiences” can change behaviors, reinforce existing views or even replace knowledge acquired from other sources (even formal sources, such as schools and books, for example), both from elites and the masses (Daniel and Musgrave 2017). Or, as stated by Roland Bleiker (2018): visual images are political forces, which shape both international events and our understanding of them.

Rowley and Weldes (2016) highlighted that, for a deeper analysis of the possible effects of popular culture on world politics, it is important to investigate three separate, but interconnected, sites of cultural artifacts: the text production, its consumption, and its internal structures. Nexon and Neumann (2006) also stress the importance of researching what they call three different aspects of popular culture: production, content, and reception. In this dissertation, I will use different approaches to research each one of these three aspects.

To analyze the content of movies, I will follow the recommendations of Grayson,

Davies, and Philpott (2009) about possible agendas of investigation to understand the “popular culture-world politics continuum” (in which popular culture and world politics implicate each other’s practices and comprehensions). The authors suggest as a research technique observing “the signifying and lived practices of popular culture as ‘texts’ that can be understood as political and as sites where politics takes place” (Grayson, Davies, and Philpott 2009, 158).

The idea of reading movies is already well-developed in cultural and film studies. According to James Monaco (2009), in its classic *How to Read a Film: The World of Movies, Media, Multimedia: Language, History, Theory*, “[s]emiotics still seems to me the best way to understand how films mean what they mean.” That is because “[f]ilm may not have grammar, but it does have systems of “codes.” It does not, strictly speaking, have a vocabulary, but it does have a system of signs” (Monaco 2009). It is interesting to mention here that, according to Mikhail Bakhtin and Mikhailoch Volochínov (2009), signs are ideological, as they have a meaning and refer to something outside of themselves. In this sense, there is a clear relation with the ideas debated by poststructuralist perspectives. As stated by Hansen, poststructuralism values the concept of intertextuality, according to which we can see the world as made by a diversity of texts, and each text, although unique, relates to and refers to other texts (Hansen 2020). Among those texts which contribute to the construction of meaning, we can include cultural artifacts (Hansen 2020). Within this perspective, “[t]he ‘real’ is therefore always intertextual, an image of the world among many other images that claim to adequately represent the world” (Engert and Spencer 2009, 91). And “[m]ovies are neither objective nor culturally neutral texts, but socially constructed transcripts of ‘reality’: inherently subjective, equally valid, and, most of all, culturally bound stories” (Engert and Spencer 2009, 91).

In this sense, I turn again to film studies. In the seminal work *Film Art: An Introduction*, Bordwell, Thompson, and Smith (2020) analyzed the various possible meanings of a film. According to the authors, there is a “referential meaning”, which can be called “tangible meanings referential because the film refers to things or places already invested with significance in the real world” (Bordwell, Thompson, and Smith 2020, 58). There is also an “explicit meaning”, which is “[t]he point of the film – what it seems to be trying to get across”. And, “[l]ike referential meanings, explicit meanings function within the film’s overall form. They are controlled by context” (Bordwell, Thompson, and Smith 2020, 59). Additionally, there is also an “implicit meaning”, which “is more abstract than the first two remarks we’ve mentioned”: “[w]hen perceivers ascribe implicit meanings to an artwork, they’re usually said to be interpreting it” (Bordwell, Thompson, and Smith 2020, 59). Bordwell, Thompson, and Smith highlighted that interpretation may vary, as they demand an active role of the audience:

“[a]gain, the filmmaker invites us to perform certain activities – here, building up implicit meanings, guided by the film’s overall form” (Bordwell, Thompson, and Smith 2020, 59). Here the authors make the relevant warning that “when we interpret a film we should try to harmonize the meanings we detect with the film’s overall formal development”: “[w]e suggest that the search for implicit meanings should not leave behind the particular and concrete features of a film” (Bordwell, Thompson, and Smith 2020, 59). To conclude, Bordwell, Thompson, and Smith wrote that films have also a “symptomatic meaning and ideology”: “[i]t’s possible to understand a film’s explicit or implicit meanings as bearing traces of a particular set of social values. We can call this symptomatic meaning, and the set of values that get revealed can be considered a social ideology” (Bordwell, Thompson, and Smith 2020, 59).

According to Marc Ferro (1988), cinema can be seen as both a “source” and an “agent” of history. As a source, it reveals not only the physical and social realities of the past but also the beliefs and attitudes of the period in which it was created. Through cinema, we can gain insight into how people lived, thought, and felt in the past (Ferro 1988). However, cinema is not just a passive source of information. Ferro also sees it as an agent of history in a two-fold way: by shaping our views of the past, cinema can have a significant impact on our decisions and behaviors in the future (Ferro 1988). Therefore, according to Ferro, cinema plays a crucial role in the way we understand and engage with history.

Again, we can trace connections with Mikhail Bakhtin and Mikhailoch Volochínov’s ideas of signs being ideological and with poststructuralism’s considerations about the importance of intertextuality. In this sense, Bordwell, Thompson, and Smith (2020, 60) stressed that “symptomatic meanings remind us that meaning of all sorts is largely a social phenomenon. Many meanings of films are ultimately ideological; that is, they spring from systems of culturally specific beliefs about the world.” And the authors once again underlined the importance of considering the formal aspects of movies: “[a]s in analyzing implicit meanings, we should ground symptomatic meanings in the film’s specific aspects. A film *enacts* ideological meanings through its form” (Bordwell, Thompson, and Smith 2020, 60).

Thus, to read the movies considering their formal aspects in search of referential, explicit, implicit, and ideological meaning, and looking for ideas such as function, similarity and repetition, difference and variation, development, and unity and disunity, I will resort to segmentation. According to Bordwell, Thompson, and Smith (2020, 68), a “segmentation is simply a written outline of the film that breaks it into its major and minor parts, with the parts marked by consecutive numbers or letters”, being a technique that “enables us not only to notice similarities and differences among parts but also to plot the overall development.”

This recourse to film studies concepts and techniques to analyze movies in International Relations, although not yet widespread, is not entirely new either. An example was the doctoral thesis by Christina Rowley (2010), who performed an Intertextual analysis of Vietnam War Films and US Presidential Speeches. To analyze the discourses, Rowley conducted an intertextual reading, and, to read the movies, she “‘poststructuralise’ some of the concepts discussed by Monaco and by Stam *et al*” (Rowley 2010, 73). Rowley concluded that “the act of ‘reading together’ these seemingly discrete discourses provides us with a richer and more nuanced understanding of how the construction of identity, foreign policy and world politics occurs than does the analysis of either policy articulations or popular culture in isolation” (Rowley 2010, 2). In this dissertation, I followed Rowley’s steps, resorting to film studies concepts and “poststructuralizing” them.

It is interesting to note that the possibility and importance of working with more than one theory to analyze cinema have already been highlighted in film studies. David Bordwell and Noel Carroll, in 1996, defended the importance of performing a “piecemeal, problem-driven reflection and research” of films (Bordwell and Carroll 1996, xiii): “building theories not of subjectivity, ideology, or culture in general but rather of particular phenomena” (Bordwell 1996, 29). Noel Carroll also argued that, in addition to being piecemeal, film theorizing “should also be diversified. Insofar as theorists approach film from many different angles, from different levels of abstraction and generality, they will have to avail themselves of multidisciplinary frameworks” (Carroll 1996, 40). This piecemeal, problem-driven, and multidisciplinary approach will guide this research.

To narrow down the selection of films for analysis, I will draw inspiration from Professor Naomi Green’s approach. In her book *From Fu Manchu to Kung Fu Panda: Images of China in American Film*, Greene (2014) pointed out that the primary focus of her study was the evolving perceptions of China and their reflections on America, which influenced her choice of films to explore. Following a similar rationale, this dissertation will meticulously choose films that I consider to be highly representative of each process under examination.

Thus, in each of the following chapters, one film will be analyzed. In Chapter 2, I explore Hollywood films created to appeal to both Chinese audiences and the Chinese government, and for this purpose, I analyze the movie *Mulan* (2020). This film sheds light on how much Hollywood values the Chinese market (Kokas 2020b). In Chapter 3, I delve into Sino-American co-productions, and my analysis centers on the film *The Great Wall* (2016) — a notable example of Chinese cinema engaging in dialogue with Hollywood (X. Zhou 2017). Chapter 4 focuses on Chinese blockbusters, with a specific analysis of the film *Wolf Warrior 2*



(2017) — one of the most-watched Chinese movies in history (Rosen 2018). This film has become representative of China's new foreign policy approach, leading to the term "Wolf Warrior Diplomacy" increasingly being used to describe China's diplomacy (Westcott and Jiang 2020; *Global Times* 2020; Martin 2021).

To achieve its aims, a mixed-method approach will be employed, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative aspects. Quantitative data, such as movie budgets, box office performance, and investments, will be analyzed alongside qualitative examinations of films and relevant discourses from authorities, agents, and stakeholders. The primary objective is to identify and analyze the key strategic narratives propagated through these films and their broader implications for foreign policy.

As I already highlighted, to identify strategic narratives and how they are related to China's foreign policy goal, I will employ a comparative approach by analyzing the selected films and examining discourses from Chinese leaders and guidelines. The goal is to demonstrate that the narratives portrayed in the films align with the priorities of Chinese rulers and intellectual analysts. In addition to these primary documents and discourses, I will incorporate analyses from scholars who investigate Chinese foreign policy, helping to identify its primary actions and directions. This multifaceted approach will allow for a comprehensive understanding, as I analyze the films, identify their main narratives, and illustrate how they align with China's central foreign policy objectives.

Furthermore, to gain a comprehensive perspective on the topics explored in this dissertation, I conducted three semi-structured interviews with individuals closely involved in soft power, China-Hollywood relations, and Chinese cinema. The interviewees included the Harvard Professor Joseph Nye, PEN America's Deputy Director of Free Expression Research and Policy James Tager, and film executive Dede Nickerson. These interviews provide valuable insights and enrich the overall understanding of the subject matter.

In terms of the time frame, the study primarily focuses on the twenty-first century, starting from China's entrance into the World Trade Organization in 2001. This date marks a significant milestone, intensifying the legal pressures for the opening and globalization of the Chinese film industry. However, to provide contextual understanding, historical developments of both Chinese and Hollywood cinema were also explored. This broader historical context contributes to a comprehensive analysis of the subject matter.

By employing these concepts and theoretical and methodological frameworks, the goal is to conduct a more comprehensive analysis of how China utilizes cinema as a soft power tool to disseminate its strategic narratives and achieve its foreign policy objectives.

In this chapter, I initially emphasized the critical importance of considering culture in the context of international relations. Mainstream theories in this field often overlook the role of culture, assuming a universal perspective that neglects alternative worldviews and diverse approaches. However, there has been a growing recognition of the need for global inclusivity, acknowledging diverse perspectives beyond the Western-centric view. Scholars like Buzan and Acharya advocate for a more global perspective in international relations, termed Global IR.

Qin Yanqing's research highlights the vital role of culture in analyzing international relations. Qin's relational theory presents a departure from Western perspectives, focusing on relationships and interconnectedness in China's relational society. This perspective influences how significant themes like war are interpreted, emphasizing harmony rather than conflict.

I also discussed other Chinese theories of International Relations, including Yan Xuetong's moral realism and Zhao Tingyang's *Tianxia* system. Additionally, I mentioned the views of Wang Huning, a prominent theorist and advisor to Xi Jinping, on cultural sovereignty and soft power.

The key objective of this discussion was to underscore the importance of culture in international relations. Incorporating diverse cultural perspectives enriches the analysis, promoting pluralism, diversity, and integration in the field.

Next, I discussed the longstanding political use of cinema by states, which dates back to the early days of the film industry. Hollywood representatives in the 1920s already aimed to promote American worldviews and values abroad. State censorship in the United States was also evident, shaping a more positive image of the military and intelligence forces.

During the Cold War, both the United States and the Soviet Union used cinema to portray each other differently. The Soviet Union emphasized political indoctrination, presenting the U.S. as a declining society, while the U.S. depicted antagonists as ruthless killers.

Cinema's role as soft power extended to other countries, like India, where Bollywood played a significant role in geopolitics and cultural exchange. Similarly, China's diverse film industry has been utilized for soft power objectives, with strong control over narratives.

These historical analyses justify the importance of conducting this research within the Institute of International Relations, as it demonstrates how states have used cinema to promote their cultures, values, narratives, and soft power throughout history.

Finally, I addressed central theoretical and methodological considerations for this dissertation. I discussed Joseph Nye's concept of soft power, introduced in 1990, which remains highly relevant in studies of culture and power in international relations, especially regarding the use of cinema for political objectives in foreign policy. While acknowledging some

criticisms of the soft power concept, particularly its challenges in understanding conveyed messages and cinema's influence on audiences, I delved into the concept of strategic narratives. This concept aims to deepen the debate on soft power by investigating how countries choose narratives to build consensus and shared understandings, influencing actors' behavior in international relations. It aligns closely with the poststructuralist framework used in this dissertation and also resonates with Chinese perspectives, notably Qin Yaqing's relational theory, emphasizing the significance of culture as shared knowledge within a community.

The selection of poststructuralist perspectives for this dissertation was justified based on their emphasis on fluid boundaries between disciplines, the importance they place on visuality and cinema, their relevance to language and narratives, and their alignment with Chinese perspectives, particularly Qin Yaqing's relational theory.

Moreover, incorporating the concept of the creative economy in this dissertation allows for an exploration of the relationship between cinema, soft power, and strategic narratives in the context of economic considerations. This aspect is crucial, given China's status as the world's leading and largest film market in 2021, granting it greater agency and leverage, particularly in its relationship with Hollywood and the United States.

The debate proposed in this chapter underscores that the analysis of this dissertation is firmly rooted in recent discussions within international affairs and aims to contribute to this discourse, providing deeper insights not only into the interplay between pop culture, global politics, and the use of cinema in international affairs but also into China's soft power and strategic narratives and their implications for the country's foreign policy.

In the next chapter, I will investigate the first of the three strategies that China has been employing to improve its international image through films: the strengthening of the China-Hollywood relationship and the movies made for China. For that, I will analyze Disney's film *Mulan* (2020).

## CHAPTER 2 – HOLLYWOOD MADE FOR CHINA: HOLLYWOOD MOVIE TAILOR-MADE FOR THE CHINESE MARKET

In a heated session of the United States Senate, after intense debates, a Congressman firmly stated: “What message does it send that Maverick, an American icon, is apparently afraid of the Chinese Communists?” (R. Davis 2020a). This could easily be a scene from a movie, right? But it is not. At least not all of it. The Congressman in question is the Republican Senator for Texas Ted Cruz. And who is Maverick, the “American icon,” mentioned by him? Maverick is the character played by the actor Tom Cruise in the 1986 film *Top Gun*, and in its sequel, *Top Gun: Maverick*, released in 2022.<sup>15</sup> But why does a fictional character fear the Communist Party of China, and why does a real-life U.S. Congressman is talking about this in the Senate?

To understand how we arrived at this situation, it is important to take a few steps back. In 2018, an article titled “How China Is Rewriting Its Own Script” (A. Qin and Carlsen 2018), published in the special series *China Rules – How China Became a Superpower* (*The New York Times* 2018), started with this question: “When was the last time you watched a movie with a Chinese villain? If you can’t remember, that may not be too surprising.” The article then described how the expanding Chinese domestic market provides a much-needed audience for Hollywood, especially in a moment of a falling box office in the United States and of new competitors, such as *Amazon* and *Netflix*. But it also highlighted that “Hollywood’s embrace of China has not come without strings attached:” several Hollywood movies had their script altered to avoid resenting Chinese authorities, since studios that greenlight films critical to China risk having their productions banned from the Asian country, losing a desperately needed income. And, according to the article, that is why there are no Chinese villains in recent Hollywood movies (A. Qin and Carlsen 2018).

With that in mind, we can return to Maverick’s case. On that occasion, Senator Ted Cruz proposed a bill named *Stopping Censorship, Restoring Integrity and Protecting Talkies Act*, or the *SCRIPT Act*.<sup>16</sup> According to Cruz, “[f]or too long, Hollywood has been complicit in China’s censorship and propaganda in the name of bigger profits. The *SCRIPT Act* will serve as a wake-up call by forcing Hollywood studios to choose between the assistance they need from the

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<sup>15</sup> The release of *Top Gun: Maverick* was delayed because of the pandemic and happened on May 27, 2022. Source: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1745960/>.

<sup>16</sup> The full text of the most recent version of the *SCRIPT Act*, dated January 18<sup>th</sup>, 2022, is available at: <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/BILLS-117s3466pcs/pdf/BILLS-117s3466pcs.pdf>.

American government and the dollars they want from China” (Cruz 2020). And, to make his case, Senator Cruz specifically mentioned *Top Gun: Maverick*, co-financed by China’s Tencent Pictures, in which the flags of Taiwan and Japan were digitally removed from the back of Tom Cruise’s flight jacket supposedly to appease Beijing (R. Davis 2020a).

If you have not seen *Top Gun*, perhaps some context is needed. One of the most iconic props from the 1986 film was Maverick’s leather jacket, adorned with different patches. You can even find the jacket or just all its patches to buy online. And among the patches, in the middle of the back of the jacket, there were four flags, representing the United States, the United Nations, Japan, and Taiwan, in reference to the USS Galveston Far East Cruise in 1963-4. When the new movie was announced and the first images were released, in 2019, the absence of the Taiwanese and Japanese flags was soon noticed, stirring controversy. Even the website *Military.com*, “a news and resource website for military members, veterans and their families,” echoed on its portal an article that questioned: “Did Maverick’s ‘Top Gun’ Jacket Change to Please the Chinese Government?” (Military.com 2019).

According to Schwartzel (2022), Chinese investors in the film warned Skydance executives that the 1986 patches now posed a problem: having a global movie star flaunt Taiwan’s flag on his back undermined Chinese sovereignty. Skydance, one of the investors of the film, is a Los Angeles film and TV company partially financed by Tencent, the Chinese multinational conglomerate and tech company behind the app WeChat. The studio officials also reasoned that they should play it safe and remove the Japanese flag as well, considering China’s long-standing hostility toward the country (Schwartzel 2022).

After all the controversy, the flags would be put back up for the film release (Toh and Chang 2022), and there were reports that “at the movie premiere in Taiwan, the audiences cheered and clapped at the unexpected sight of their national flag” (Cheung 2022). But those developments, which I will debate later in this chapter, were still in the future when Ted Cruz accused Maverick of apparently being afraid of the Communist Party of China.

It is important to highlight that this is not the first time that politicians and members of the U.S. government have spoken out on the subject. In 2018, then-U.S. Vice President Mike Pence stated:

And Beijing routinely demands that Hollywood portray China in a strictly positive light. It punishes studios and producers that don’t. Beijing’s censors are quick to edit or outlaw movies that criticize China, even in minor ways. For the movie, “World War Z,” they had to cut the script’s mention of a virus because it originated in China. The movie “Red Dawn” was digitally edited to make the villains North Korean, not Chinese (Pence 2018).

In 2020, Attorney General William Barr also criticized Hollywood for “bowing to

Beijing:”

All too often, for the sake of short-term profits, American companies have succumbed to that influence—even at the expense of freedom and openness in the United States. Sadly, examples of American business bowing to Beijing are legion.

Take Hollywood. Hollywood actors, producers, and directors pride themselves on celebrating freedom and the human spirit. And every year at the Academy Awards, Americans are lectured about how this country falls short of Hollywood’s ideals of social justice. But Hollywood now regularly censors its own movies to appease the Chinese Communist Party, the world’s most powerful violator of human rights. This censorship infects not only versions of movies that are released in China, but also many that are shown in American theaters to American audiences (Barr 2020).

Barr mentioned a few examples to illustrate his point. One of them – also cited by Pence (2018) – is the movie *World War Z* (2013), about a zombie apocalypse caused by a virus. Barr (2020) remarked that, in the initial version of the film, the virus originated in China, but any scene referring to this was deleted at the request of Paramount Studios. The hope was to secure a Chinese distribution deal, which in the end never happened (Barr 2020).

According to the Attorney General, there are some known examples of scripts altered to “conform to CCP<sup>17</sup> propaganda” (as the movie *World War Z*), but there may have many more scripts that never get written, “because writers and producers know not to even test the limits” (Barr 2020). Barr underlined that “Chinese government censors don’t need to say a word, because Hollywood is doing their work for them,” and that represents “a massive propaganda coup for the Chinese Communist Party.”

The Attorney General went on to emphasize how the situation gets even worse. According to him, “in the long run, as with other American industries, the PRC may be less interested in cooperating with Hollywood than co-opting Hollywood – and eventually replacing it with its own homegrown productions” (Barr 2020). That would be accomplished through “a usual modus operandi:” “[b]y imposing a quota on American films, the CCP pressures Hollywood studios to form joint ventures with Chinese companies, who then gain access to U.S. technology and know-how” (Barr 2020). He closed his remark by quoting a Chinese film executive, who mentioned that “[e]verything we learned, we learned from Hollywood” (Barr

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<sup>17</sup> The official name of the political party in China is the Communist Party of China, with the acronym CPC, as stated, for instance, in the State Council of the People’s Republic of China’s report about the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC), available at: <https://english.www.gov.cn/2022special/20thcpccongress/>. However, in the English media and among English politicians, such as Attorney General Barr, it is common the use of the name Chinese Communist Party, with the acronym CCP. Even some Chinese outlets, such as The China Today, uses both acronyms, such as in the post about the organizational chart of “The Communist Party of China (CPC, CCP),” available at: <http://www.chinatoday.com/org/cpc/>. In any case, I will use the official name and acronym of the party, the Communist Party of China (CPC), but maintain references to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) when in a direct citation.

2020).

The speeches of Ted Cruz, Mike Pence, and William Barr contain indications of some of the central elements of China-United States relations in the field of cinema, which will be addressed in this dissertation. First, they show that cinema matters for politics, both domestic and international. Second, they made clear that China-Hollywood relations are intrinsically connected to the China-U.S. relationship more broadly. It is no coincidence that all the names cited in this paragraph are close to, or part of, the Trump administration – which, according to Wendy Su, marked a “turning point” in the “Hollywood-Chinawood relationship,” drastically reversing “the US’s long-practiced policy toward China from engagement into confrontation, igniting a trade war” (Su 2022a, 340). Third, they highlighted a clear interaction between power, economy, and cinema. The changes in Hollywood movies are made by the “Hollywood actors, producers, and directors” (Barr 2020), who want access to the Chinese market. This economic motive, the box office, would lead to changes in the images and narratives presented in Hollywood films, which would strengthen China’s soft power, or, in Barr’s words, would represent “the massive propaganda coup for the Chinese Communist Party” (Barr 2020). Hence the importance of analyzing the dynamics of (soft) power and (creative) economy at the same time, since, as highlighted by Wendy Su (2022a, 340):

Film industries are considered to be market-based and profit-driven entertainment enterprises, especially Hollywood. Yet they are never purely entertainment businesses for they can never escape the constraints of the respective political structures, ideological and cultural value systems in which they are situated. Nor can they be free from the conditions of diplomatic relations and geopolitics. Both Hollywood and Chinawood are often caught in between these tumultuous relationships.

Finally, the speeches also underscore a supposedly *modus operandi* in this relationship, with Hollywood agents giving in to the Chinese in their own films, but also allying themselves with them in joint actions, which results in the transfer of technologies and know-how, which in turn could lead to an eventual superiority of Chinese films over Hollywood films. Each one of these possible developments – Hollywood films tailored-made for China, China-Hollywood co-productions, and Chinese global blockbusters – will be analyzed in a specific chapter of this dissertation.

In this chapter, I will address the first part of this *modus operandi*, focusing on Hollywood films that have altered their script “bowing to Beijing” (Barr 2020). The objective is to understand how China has been using its cinema, in this case, its relationship with Hollywood, to advance China’s foreign policy objectives. For that, I will, initially, present the

history of China-U.S. relations in the field of cinema to comprehend what were Hollywood's main narratives about China in the past, and how were the dynamics between the two sides. Next, I will analyze the current stage of the relationship between China and Hollywood to better understand the symbiotic relations between them (Kokas 2017), focusing both on the continuities and on the changes (Su 2022a). Finally, to underscore the arguments put forward, I will analyze *Mulan* (2020), "a movie about how much Hollywood needs China", in which "Beijing has deputized American studios to advance its national narratives" (Kokas 2020b). If, as noted by Erich Schwartzel (2022), "Hollywood became a commercial arm for China's new ambition," complementing Chinese political ascendance and "rewriting the global order of the new century," this analysis seeks to apprehend the main actors, bodies, and agents involved in these processes, as well as the possible impacts on Sino-U.S. relations.

Throughout this journey, we will see that Hollywood and China have a long history of cooperation and competition. Initially, Hollywood dominated the Chinese market during the Republican period (1912-1949) but was later banned from the country with the arrival of the Communist Party in power in 1949. Negotiations began in the 1980s for Hollywood's return to China, and Hollywood played an instrumental role in the reform and growth of the Chinese market. With China's entry into the World Trade Organization in 2001, pressure increased for the opening of the Chinese market to Hollywood films. In the 2000s and especially in the 2010s, there was an intensification of the relationship between China and Hollywood, with a honeymoon period and mutual gains for both sides. Hollywood wanted to expand its market and profit, and China expected to diminish its perceived cultural deficit and increase its international presence and soft power, which would help to achieve the country's foreign policy objectives. However, this changed in 2017 with the beginning of the Trump administration and the so-called trade war, which targeted films as well. China also became more aware of its market power and began imposing more conditions on Hollywood. This tense environment led to perceptions that Hollywood was bowing to Chinese interests, which decreased the possibility for China to propagate its narratives through cinema and weakened its ability to expand its soft power. The COVID-19 pandemic and the passage of a new U.S. bill that tries to restrict cooperation between Hollywood and China have also made it difficult for Chinese stories to be disseminated through cinema, further hindering China's capability of achieving its foreign policy goals through cinema.

In the next topic, I will start the analysis with a history of China-Hollywood relations. To carry out my study, I will access a variety of primary and secondary sources, and access quantitative data such as movie budgets, box office revenues, and investment figures, alongside



qualitative sources such as film analyses and discourses of authorities, agents, and actors related to the topic. My goal is to identify the main ideas promoted during this period and, through a poststructuralist perspective, investigate how they relate to International Relations debate.

## **2.1. The first scenes of the China-Hollywood relations**

The relationship between China and Hollywood has a long history of political influence, with China using art and culture to serve its national interests and exercise image control through censorship policies in both the Republican (1912-1949) and PRC (1949-present) eras. However, this relationship has changed over time, from Hollywood's dominance in the Chinese market during the Republican era to the closure of the Chinese market after the CPC came to power, to the rapprochement of the 1990s onwards. In this session, I will analyze this trajectory.

### *2.1.1. Chinese Republican Era, Yellow Scare in the U.S., and China-Humiliating Films*

The early relationship between China and Hollywood was marked by ambiguity. American films were introduced in China as early as 1897, and by the end of World War I, Hollywood studios dominated China's film market (Zhiwei 2004). Despite this, Hollywood's China-themed films faced obstacles due to growing nationalist and anti-imperialist sentiment in China and complaints about stereotypes of China and the Chinese in films such as *Fu Manchu, the bandit, and the warlord* (Zhu 2020). During the 1930s and 1940s, popular protests were held against Hollywood movies that portrayed China in a negative light (Zhu 2020). An illustrative example was an incident involving *Welcome Danger* (1929): the comedy film featured Harold Lloyd showed Chinese people robbing in San Francisco's Chinatown and was met with protests from the Chinese, including the Chinese Consulate, which led to a joint manifesto denouncing Western imperialism (Zhu 2020).

The Chinese cultural elite had been complaining about the lack of government control over the influx of American films since the 1920s. And, although proposals were made to counter Hollywood's influence, no systematic measures were taken until the Nationalist government came to power in 1927 (Zhu 2020). During the Nanjing decade (1928-1937), the Nationalist government tried to reduce the negative impact of American films and eliminate

racist representations through censorship. They charged censorship fees for foreign films but exempted Chinese films and charged lower fees to Chinese film distributors. The Society for China's Cultural Reconstruction recommended that to increase the audience of movie theaters, foreign films could be shown with Chinese subtitles, but the Film Censorship Committee rejected this request, stating that adding subtitles would increase interest in foreign movies and harm the revival of Chinese films (Zhu 2020).

In that sense, the relationship between China and Hollywood was marked by early tensions due to Hollywood's portrayal of China and the Chinese and the lack of government control over the influx of American films. The Nationalist government attempted to address these issues through censorship, but balancing the needs of the film industry and national interests was challenging. In any case, that did not stop Chinese-themed films to continue to be made in Hollywood, and not without polemic. Perhaps the most well-known case of this period is the one involving *The Good Earth* (1937) and Anna May Wong.

Anna May Wong was already a well-known Chinese-American movie star in the early 1930s, and there was a high expectation of her landing the main role in *The Good Earth* (1937), a film based on the best-selling novel of the same name that told the saga of the survival of a Chinese couple, including some scenes shot in China. The role ended up going to German actress Luise Rainer, who acted in yellowface and received the Oscar for best actress in 1937. According to Nancy Wang Yuen, a sociology professor at Biola University and author of *Reel Inequality: Hollywood Actors and Racism*, this was due to an existing production law in Hollywood. "The industry itself put up a production law, and part of the clause was this anti-miscegenation clause that said that you could not have interracial romances on-screen" (E. Lee 2019). It is possible to access online the document through which "a resolution incorporating the Don'ts and Be-Carefuls is now officially adopted by the MPPDA" (Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, later Motion Picture Association of America [MPAA] and Motion Picture Association [MPA]), from 1927, which states that "those things which are included in the following list shall not appear in pictures produced by the members of this Association, irrespective of the manner in which they are treated: (...) 6. Miscegenation (sex relationship between white and black races<sup>18</sup>)." In other words: the representations on the screen were even supported by domestic policy, consolidated by law.

It is interesting to notice that both Pearl Buck, the author of the book on which the film is based, and the Chinese government, with whom the production of the film made an agreement

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<sup>18</sup> Document "Scan #3-2410 For Record #365", available at: <https://mppda.flinders.edu.au/records/365><https://mppda.flinders.edu.au/records/365>.

for the filming of *The Good Earth*, insisted on the presence of Chinese actors in prominent roles. Buck would later say that she was informed that “our American audiences demand American stars” (Greene 2014, 85). Regarding the Chinese government’s involvement, they entered into an unusually formal agreement with MGM, outlining specific guidelines for the film. The agreement required the film to portray a “truthful and pleasant picture of China and her people.” Furthermore, MGM agreed to consider the suggestions of a Chinese supervisor, and all footage shot by MGM in China would be subject to review by a Chinese censor (Greene 2014, 84). In addition, Chinese officials expressed their expectation that the movie would feature Chinese actors in prominent roles. However, unlike the other requests, this particular requirement was not fulfilled, even though MGM tried to meet the other requests to the best of their ability (Greene 2014).

After passing the Chinese censors in January 1937, *The Good Earth* underwent minimal editing, primarily to remove certain sequences depicting poverty and brutality (Zhu 2020). Ironically, despite the movie passing both the U.S. and Chinese censors, the U.S. Office of War Information (OWI) protested about the movie’s references to concubinage and slavery, which it judged objectionable to Chinese sensibilities when MGM submitted it for a wider international release in 1943 (Zhu 2020). Hollywood was urged by the OWI to emphasize the nobility of the Chinese people and avoid portraying them as “backwards illiterates” in order to win China’s support for the US military fight against the Japanese. During the Pacific War, U.S. national interests coincided with Chinese national interests, albeit at *The Good Earth*’s expense (Zhu 2020).

Rewatching *The Good Earth* today, one of the most cringeworthy aspects of the production is the use of yellowface. According to Greene (2014), the yellowface is a taboo that for many years determined the depictions of Chinese characters in leading roles. Interestingly, those roles were often given to foreigners, such as the German-born Louise Rainer (*The Good Earth*, 1937), the Armenian-born Akim Tamiroff (*The General Died at Dawn*, 1936), and the Swedish Nils Asther (*The Bitter Tea of General Yen*, 1933). However, these actors couldn’t be too different physically from the characters they portrayed and couldn’t be Chinese or Chinese American actors. In addition to Anna May Wong, an example almost 40 years later is Bruce Lee, who in 1972 was passed over in the lead role of the *Kung Fu* series, which ended up being played by the Caucasian actor David Carradine (Greene 2014; Menechelli 2020).

This is directly related to the invisibilities of Asian characters in Hollywood cinema, largely due to the exclusion of Chinese and Asian actors and actresses from leading roles in the film industry (Menechelli 2020). This has resulted in the limited representation of Asian

characters as servants, coolies, laundry workers, and prostitutes (E. Lee 2019). The matter was also addressed by Anna Mae Wong in her explanation of why she left her Hollywood career:

I was tired of the parts I had to play. Why is it that on the screen the Chinese are nearly always the villain of the piece, and so cruel a villain – murderous, treacherous, a snake in the grass. We are not like that. How could we be, with a civilization so many times older than that of the West? We have our rigid code of behavior, of honor. Why do they never show those on the screen? (quoted by Tiana 1995, 38).

These concerns were amplified in the case of Chinese women. In Chinese actress representations, two stereotypes stand out: the Dragon Lady and the Lotus Blossom (Johnson 2004). Dragon Ladies are “an evil amoral vamp” (Alquizola and Hirabayashi 2003), being both exciting and dangerous, having “treacherously enticing wives” (C. W. Liu 2000, 24). Lotus Blossoms, also referred to as China Dolls, on the other hand, are “sexual playthings for Caucasians” (Alquizola and Hirabayashi 2003), being feminine, delicate, sexually knowledgeable, and pandering to the needs of men (L. Johnson 2004; J. Lee 2018). Both the Dragon Lady and the Lotus Blossom are highly sexualized, exotic objects in American culture. Subsequently, the “widespread perception of Asian women as inherently, exotically sexual is too often taken as fact” (Yamamoto 2000, 52). Yamamoto (2000) also states that the objectification and commodification of these women’s bodies do not provide visibility for them as individuals.

In her book *From Fu Manchu to Kung Fu Panda: Images of China in American Film*, Naomi Greene (2014) examines the portrayal of China in American cinema. She argues that Hollywood films reflect and reinforce stereotyped images of China in the United States, such as early Hollywood films’ depiction of Chinese men as either sexually obsessed or pure, and Chinese women as either vengeful or tragic. According to Greene (2014), these images of China have roots in American history and reflect the country’s unresolved racial issues and puritanical values, such as in the movies *Broken Blossoms* (1919), *Shanghai Express* (1932), *The Shanghai Gesture* (1941), and *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* (1933), which approach this taboo in ways that reveal much about American views of sexuality (Greene 2014). Greene also argues that these representations are not always consistent and can reflect both fear and admiration. However, films rarely acknowledge the complexities of otherness and instead either fear or erase differences.

Greene also argues that the representations of China in Hollywood movies oscillated between positive and negative representations in pendulum movements, reflecting perceptions of threat and danger. On the positive side, that of “seduction,” Hollywood has portrayed China as a land of wise and ancient civilization, inhabited by intelligent and hardworking citizens,

peaceful and stoic, devoted to family values and the moral teachings of Confucius. Some examples are the images of self-sacrificing Buddhist scholars (*Broken Blossoms*, 1919), hardworking laundrymen (*Shadow*, 1922), noble peasants (*The Good Earth*, 1937), and courageous allies (*Thirty Seconds over Tokyo*, 1944) (Greene 2014). On the negative side, that of “repulsion,” Hollywood has depicted China as a land of oriental despots, strange practices, and barbaric torture. Examples of this include devious torturers like Fu Manchu, warlords, perverse half-casts (*Shanghai Express*, 1932), and treacherous “allies” (*The Mountain Road*, 1960) (Greene 2014).

In the 1930s, this pendulum can be seen in full swing. The decade started with the prevalence of negative film images of China, including the infamous Fu Manchu series, which portrayed China in a negative light. However, from 1937 to 1944, the “Age of Admiration” began, with wholly sympathetic images of China dominating American-Chinese relations. This period coincided with the U.S.’s entrance into the war in the Pacific as China’s ally, and American support for China was reflected in cinema. The film *The Good Earth* (1937) played a key role in changing American attitudes toward China, according to Greene (2014). After China became an ally, the U.S. Era of Admiration for China peaked, and both documentaries (such as *China Fights Back*, *The Battle of China*, and *Ravaged Earth*) and feature films (including *Thirty Seconds over Tokyo*, *Dragon Seed*, and *Objective, Burma!*) celebrated China’s resistance to the Japanese while emphasizing the ties of friendship and respect between America and China. One example of this fervent declaration of Sino-American friendship is found in *The Battle of China*, a documentary directed by Frank Capra and produced by the War Department as part of a propaganda series called *Why We Fight* (1942-1945), which contrasts China with Japan and emphasizes China’s similarities with the U.S. During this period, China appeared incredibly American to the U.S. (Greene 2014).

When addressing the many changes the image of China has undergone in Hollywood cinema, Greene brings a quotation from Fairbank, in which the sinologist questions, in 1974: ‘How could the Chinese be such ‘bad guys’ in the America of the 1950s and 1960s and such ‘good guys’ today?’ (Greene 2014, 16). Greene affirms that “I am not sure that we can ever give an adequate answer to the rhetorical question posed by Fairbank decades ago.” But adds that “films remind us of how easy it was to move from perceptions of the Chinese as ‘our kind of people’ to a worldview in which China was seen as the embodiment of betrayal and deceit. Films may not tell the whole story, but they make it easier to understand how the ‘good guys’ of yesterday became the villains of today” (Greene 2014, 16).

The images of China will change once more with the Communist Party of China coming

to power in 1949, as we will see in the next section.

### *2.1.2. The rise of the Communist Party of China to power and the post-1949 detachment from Hollywood*

When the Communist Party of China came to power in 1949, Hollywood movies were really popular in the country. Surveys from 1925, 1935, and 1947 show that during those years, 90% of the films screened in China were from the U.S. (Zhiwei 2004). As one commentator observed in the 1930s, Hollywood had “replaced the missionaries, educators, gunboats, businessmen and English language literature as the most important venue through which the Chinese learned about Western cultures and life in industrialized societies” (Zhiwei 2004, 64). Within this context, the ban on American movies decreed by Mao Zedong in 1950, followed by the nationalization of the Chinese film industry by 1953, becomes even more striking (Schwartzel 2022).

According to Schwartzel (2022), the exclusion of Hollywood cinema from post-1949 China can be attributed to Mao Zedong’s two-pronged approach to cinema. On one hand, China focused on producing films that praised its leaders and political philosophy. On the other hand, it considered it equally vital to influence any form of political messaging in films produced and disseminated by other countries, especially those that could potentially pose a threat to Chinese interests. produced and disseminated in other countries that posed a threat to Chinese interests. Schwartzel also emphasized that, between 1951 and 1981, the only American film believed to have crossed Chinese borders was *Salt of the Earth*, a little-known 1954 drama about a workers’ strike at the Empire Zinc mine in New Mexico. Chinese authorities praised the protagonists’ collective heroism in defying the capitalist structure (Schwartzel 2022). Curiously, few Americans had the opportunity to see the film, since Senator Joseph McCarthy’s House Un-American Activities Committee<sup>19</sup> had proscribed its director and writers for sympathizing with

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<sup>19</sup> The House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) was a congressional committee established in 1938 to investigate alleged subversive activities and disloyalty in the United States. During the Cold War era, the committee conducted investigations into communist infiltration in Hollywood and other sectors of American society, using unjust tactics that contributed to the growth of anti-red hysteria and virulent anti-communism. The most famous of these investigations were the Hollywood Ten hearings, in 1947, which resulted in the proscription of numerous Hollywood figures as subversives (Schrecker 1998; Gladchuk 2013). Despite criticism of its methods and disregard for constitutional rights, HUAC’s investigation of Hollywood served a critical role in fanning the flames of anticommunism and laying the foundation for Joseph McCarthy’s campaign (Schrecker 1998). The case also demonstrates the negative effects that unwarranted hysteria has had and continues to have on a country’s

Communists. As underscored by Schwartzel (2022), in the 1950s, such allegiances could result in the same film being banned in the United States but embraced in China.

However, the ban on Hollywood films was not immediate with the coming to power of the CPC. Zhiwei (2004) explored the reasons behind the campaign to expel American films and whether it was driven by the CPC or by anti-U.S. sentiments among the Chinese public. The academic analyzed who organized the campaign, the CPC's response to American films, and Hollywood and the U.S. government's reaction to the crackdown on American cultural institutions in China. Zhiwei found that the CPC's policy towards American films was driven by both pragmatism and ideology and that the public demand for the expulsion of Hollywood from China was also a factor. The anti-Hollywood sentiment was rooted in resentment harbored by the native film industry towards Hollywood. Zhiwei (2004) concluded that it is not enough to simply view the expulsion of American films from China as politically motivated, but it should also be noted that cultural and economic dimensions also played a role.

Zhiwei underlined that despite their ideological incompatibility with the CPC's cultural policy – that culture should serve a positive social function and help to advance a good cause, or, ultimately, that art should promote the needs of the Party –, American films were still shown in China after 1949, albeit with a new quota system implemented in the spring of 1950. This system required theaters to reserve 50-55% of screen time for domestic productions, 20-25% for Soviet films, and no more than 20-30% for American and British films. This caused theater owners to resist the system as it would negatively affect their profits, leading to a drop in audience numbers (Zhiwei 2004). The CPC's measure was similar to efforts by European governments to protect their own film industries after World War II. Two notable examples can be found in Germany, where officials implemented a quota limiting the number of foreign films released in the country so that the box office balance did not shift away from domestic productions, and in France, which attempted to do the same thing, but theater owners objected, claiming that American films were so popular that such measures would deprive them of too

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progress and development (Gladchuk 2013). Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that, although the term "McCarthyism is invariably pejorative," it is "also misunderstood" (Schrecker 1998, xii). McCarthyism encompassed much more than the life of Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy, being "the most widespread and longest lasting wave of political repression in American history. In order to eliminate the alleged threat of domestic Communism, a broad coalition of politicians, bureaucrats, and other anti-communist activists hounded an entire generation of radicals and their associates, destroying lives, careers, and all the institutions that offered a left-wing alternative to mainstream politics and culture" (Schrecker 1998, xii). In the preface to the paperback edition, dated 1999, Ellen Schrecker wrote that "I had hoped that the anticommunist political repression of the McCarthy period was far enough in the past that an attempt to look at how it operated could be assessed primarily as historical scholarship. Such was not the case" (Schrecker 1998, xii). Writing this dissertation at the end of four years of the Bolsonaro government (2019-2022) in Brazil, and after reading a survey published in March 2023 finding that 44% of Brazilians consider that Brazil is at risk of "turning into a communist country" under the government of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (*O Estado de S. Paulo* 2023), it still seems that this is not yet the case.

much revenue (Schwartzel 2022).

In any case, the CPC originally sought to restrict rather than outright prohibit the number of American films that were exhibited in China. Due to the waning popularity of American films, this decision was made, and even throughout the Korean War (1950-1953), they were nevertheless shown until November 1950, when the Shanghai Cinema Theaters Guild unilaterally stopped doing so (Zhiwei 2004). Although the CPC and the U.S. had a tense relationship in the years after the war, the CPC made a distinction between the U.S. government and the American people, enabling US companies to continue functioning in China (Zhiwei 2004). However, American cultural institutes in China had to close once the U.S. government decided to freeze all Chinese assets there in 1950. The CPC's moderates and hardliners were split by internal party struggles; the latter sought more extreme methods to purge China of Western cultural influences. The CPC's lax film censorship regulations allowed normal operations to resume even though Hollywood distributors in China were aware of China's anti-Hollywood stance. The party also sought to maintain competence and fairness in its interactions with Hollywood to avoid alienating the urban population, who liked U.S. movies (Zhiwei 2004).

When it first came to power, the CPC kept up a democratic front, even making a feeble attempt to abolish film censorship in the summer of 1949 and an effort to quell the radical leftist press commentary, which it believed tended to limit the options available to the authorities (Zhiwei 2004). But it was during this period that censorship and the film licensing system were established, requiring all films to receive approval from relevant authorities before being shown to audiences in the 1950s (C. Berry 2004; Y. Yang 2017). The categories of films prohibited included those promoting imperialism, feudalism, racism, pornography, or violating state laws or policies. Anti-Soviet, anti-Communist, and anti-human rights films were also prohibited (C. Berry 2004; Y. Yang 2017). The Film Guidance Committee simultaneously developed the film licensing system in an effort to improve the centralized system by establishing precise ideological and artistic standards for films through an analysis of completed films and distribution data (Y. Yang 2017).

Regarding Hollywood movies, the CPC was faced with the challenge of dealing with American films that did not violate the regulations but were at odds with the political climate of post-1949 China (Zhiwei 2004). The CPC had a practical reason to tolerate American films, which accounted for more than 65% of screen time in Chinese cinemas even after new releases from the U.S. ceased. Hollywood studios were unable to enforce their original contract terms, and the CPC was unable to find a suitable replacement for American films. In short, the Party's decision to outright ban American films in the first year of the PRC was both unwise and



impractical (Zhiwei 2004). In that sense, it is possible to notice that both politics and economics weighed in PRC decisions regarding Hollywood, and that highlights the importance of including considerations about the creative industry in analyses of cinema's political use.

The PRC government changed its stance on American cinema following the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950. The Ministry of Culture issued measures to promote domestic films and limit Hollywood's dominance in China. During this time, the public was bombarded with criticism of American culture, primarily targeting Hollywood. Unlike the Nationalist period where criticism was limited to intellectual elites, the CPC denounced American films through a national campaign, manipulating the media and associating the viewing of American films with unpatriotic behavior (Zhiwei 2004).

Although American films were no longer being shown in China's major cities, Hollywood was still vilified, and newspaper pages and editorial columns were dominated by critical essays and personal testimonies (Zhiwei 2004). By early 1951, several edited volumes had been released that provided a more systematic and elaborate critique of Hollywood. According to the editors of one of these books, "The vanguard of American imperialism, Hollywood, is largely destroyed in China. However, we must treat this as biological warfare; even though the battle is over, we cannot let down our guard; we must continue to treat the infected areas" (Zhiwei 2004, 74).

It was one thing, according to these activists, to prohibit the viewing of American films, but quite another to eradicate Hollywood's lingering influence. Indeed, some moviegoers had written to newspaper editors to express their displeasure with the censorship of Hollywood films. Such dissenting voices were limited, but cannot be disregarded. One example of Hollywood's enduring appeal is demonstrated by an episode when, in the 1990s, Jiang Zemin, the General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, spoke fondly of the American film *A Song to Remember* (1945), which he had seen in the late 1940s. This also calls into question the effectiveness of the anti-Hollywood campaign in ridding the Chinese people of American cultural influence (Zhiwei 2004).

This curious relationship between Hollywood and China, where Hollywood was both welcomed and reviled, was noted by Zhiwei (2004). There was genuine Hollywood anger among China's cultural elite who argued for some limitation on foreign films, but the expulsion of American films from China was also politically motivated and featured coercive means. Prior to 1949, critical debate addressed issues including Hollywood's detrimental effects on China's economy, the dissemination of racial stereotypes, and its advocacy of imperialism, which by the late 1950s had evolved into Communist propaganda (Zhiwei 2004). The anti-Hollywood

effort involved public opinion manipulation and was hampered by diplomatic reasons. The campaign also displayed characteristics that were used in subsequent political movements. These developments resulted in the absence of American films from China's screens for the next thirty years.

It is also important to note that, although not exhibited in China, several China-themed films were made in Hollywood during this period. And, according to Greene (2014), those films about China continued to talk about the U.S., but now in more distorted ways. For example, behind the fears involving China in both *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962) and *The Sand Pebbles* (1966), it is possible to sense deep fears concerning the collapse of U.S. political institutions in the former and the failure of the U.S. imperial mission in the latter. Other Cold War films seemed to take refuge in an idealized past, but they, too, said much about the mood of the U.S. Greene (2014) debated that, at the very moment when China's "betrayal" challenged Americans' self-image and sense of mission, one film after another took care to remind viewers of the good faith and benevolence that had marked American conduct there in the past. Along with selfless missionaries like Ingrid Bergman in *The Inn of the Sixth Happiness* (1958), other unlikely heroes such as John Wayne in *Blood Alley* (1955) and Charlton Heston in *55 Days at Peking* (1963) also stood ready to help the Chinese people. Those films were not shown in China, but the images of China served as a distorted mirror to highlight the features of the U.S.

Thus, we have seen that, after an initial period of hesitation, the Communist Party of China banned Hollywood films in the country, also carrying out anti-imperialist and anti-Hollywood campaigns. This has not prevented films about China from continuing to be made in the U.S., showing images that often spoke more about the United States than about China. In any case, China-Hollywood relations would change radically from the 1990s onwards, as I will discuss below.

### *2.1.3. Movie market reforms in China and the rapprochement with Hollywood in the 1990s*

In this section, I will explore China's film sector reform in the 1990s and Hollywood's return to the country in that decade. I will underscore how this process of convergence was propelled by mutual interests. While Hollywood aimed to expand its market reach, China was equally eager to rejuvenate its struggling film industry. Additionally, I will spotlight the fact that many of the characteristics that would continue to shape China-Hollywood relations for

decades were already conspicuously evident during that era. These include the intricate interplay between politics and economics within the film market, and China strategically harnessing its burgeoning market as a tool to influence the depictions crafted within Hollywood. Consequently, a comprehensive analysis of this historical juncture paves the way for a deeper understanding of the dynamics that would intensify following China's accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001.

After more than three decades of being banned from the country, Hollywood will once again become a constant presence in China after the 1990s. And, as in other periods, China-Hollywood relations will be marked by nuances and complexity, arousing rejection, repulsion, admiration, emulation, competition, and coercion (Zhu 2020). Hollywood was rejected and repulsed for perceived offenses against the image of China, while also admired and emulated for the fascination and marketing ability of Hollywood films. Additionally, there was competition and coercion due to the global dominance of Hollywood and, more recently, a new determination to put Hollywood in service of promoting China's global image (Zhu 2020).

Following Mao Zedong's death in 1976 and the conclusion of China's Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the nation experienced a period of significant changes. China's "economic mechanism reform" during this period had a substantial impact on the film industry (Y. Yang 2017). The use of film as a propaganda tool to represent class struggle was abandoned, and along with more conventional propaganda films, a range of cinema genres started to be supported to cater to the watching preferences of the populace and the market (Y. Yang 2017).

However, the ideological role of Chinese film for the government was still present despite the increased diversity of filmmaking and the renewed desire to create financially successful movies. Yang (2017) cites the "China Film Yearbook" from 1994 as stating that main melody films were the CPC's key method of ideological control during this time, with its "patriotism, collectivism, and socialism" being primarily focused on extolling the CPC's illustrious history and leadership. According to a 1991 directive titled "Suggestion on Current Prosperous Literary and Artistic Creation," it is the Chinese government's duty to finance and support main melody movies (Y. Yang 2017).

The Party State made a significant effort to foster this film genre by creating specific rules, awarding state-level prizes, and providing special financial resources (Y. Yang 2017). The regime continued to see movies as a valuable instrument for indoctrinating the populace with its ideology, and the CPC took great attempts to balance supporting the growth of the film industry with repackaging its own propaganda machinery to maintain its credibility (Y. Yang 2017).

Ding Yaping's *General History of Chinese Film* highlights significant changes in the structure of the Chinese film industry in this period. The nationalization of the industry in 1949 had a significant impact on the production and screening of films, reflecting the prevailing mentality of the country's workers, peasants, and soldiers. Filmmaking stopped during the first four years of the Cultural Revolution, but the period following the revolution saw the emergence of a significant number of 'scar films' that reflected on and criticized the event (Ding 2021). In the 1980s, the industry faced difficulties such as a reduction in urban audiences and competition from other forms of entertainment, but reforms such as increased autonomy in production and distribution, a contract system, and a more flexible pricing system helped to revive the industry and pave the way for further reforms in the 1990s (Ding 2021).

Yang (2017) points out some of those extensive reforms in the late 1980s and in the 1990s as a result of the profound changes in the political, cultural, and economic spheres. They included the denationalization of film production, distribution, and exhibition, which occasioned economic reform and a general opening up of the industry. The main modification was the opening of the film market to non-State-Owned Enterprise (SOE) companies for the first time (Y. Yang 2017). The Chinese government encouraged non-State players, including social organizations, commercial businesses, and even private individuals, to invest in the film industry. Another significant development was the government's decision to allow Hong Kong and Taiwan, two regions that had previously been prohibited from investing in the Chinese film industry for more than three decades, to once again do so (Y. Yang 2017). Those reforms were responsible for the expansion of the Chinese domestic film market and the international promotion of Chinese cinema (Y. Yang 2017).

Ding (2021) emphasizes how these changes affected the viewers, who demonstrated a ferocious and compulsive passion for movies. While a small number of state-owned film studios produced 21 feature films in 1977, the total number of feature films produced in 1980 was 82, and there were 29 billion viewers worldwide (Ding 2021). Additionally, foreign film weeks in China began to be held regularly in 1978, providing an exciting and captivating new atmosphere for the viewing of films in cinemas. This era brought about opportunities for the promotion of foreign films and the creation of domestic films, as well as the search for new ideas and technologies. One notable example was the release of the Italian-French movie *Zorro* (1975), which had a record number of 70 million viewers and contributed to making going to the cinema the primary leisure activity for the Chinese people (Ding 2021).

During this period, Chinese cinema gained attention globally, with the "Fifth

Generation”<sup>20</sup> of Chinese directors – the first Post-Cultural Revolution graduates from the Beijing Film Academy in the early 1980s – bringing new types of films that gained popularity overseas (Y. Yang 2017). According to Ding (2021), European countries began showing a growing interest in Chinese cinema since 1980, with the National Archive of the British Film Institute holding a retrospective exhibition of Chinese cinema, which sparked Western audiences’ interest in Chinese films. Similar exhibitions were later held in other countries, such as in the U.S., during the San Francisco International Film Festival, and they received enthusiastic responses from participants (Ding 2021).

Talking more specifically about China-U.S. relations, Wendy Su (2016) highlighted that, early in the 1980s when China began to open up to the outside world and implemented economic reforms, U.S. films that could pass the country’s strict official censorship laws have begun to re-enter China. Chinese satellite TV networks also showed imported American films (Su 2016). However, the Tiananmen Square incident in 1989 briefly halted the importation of American movies from 1990 to 1992 (Su 2016). Since 1994, mainland China has been importing roughly ten foreign blockbusters annually (the number increased to twenty after China entered the World Trade Organization [WTO] in 2001, a topic I will discuss in the next section). The majority of these films were produced in the United States. This practice, which allows foreign and domestic film distributors to split the box office revenue from these films, was seen as the end of the PRC’s forty-year tradition of paying a set price for out-of-date international films, and as a relief for China’s indebted State-owned studios (Su 2016). These international mega-productions created a sensation in China that had never been seen before (Su 2016). They gravely challenged and fundamentally altered the country’s domestic cinema industry and ignited a prolonged discussion about the viability of the government’s cultural strategy (Su 2016).

Responses to the Chinese government’s policy on Hollywood imports from various organizations were nuanced. Liberal film reviewers, distributors, and exhibitors applauded the market revival, the financial benefits brought on by these Hollywood blockbusters, and the

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<sup>20</sup> Chinese cinema has gone through several generations, each spanning a distinct period of time and marked by significant historical events. The First Generation of Chinese cinema lasted from 1905 to 1937, encompassing the silent era and ending with the start of the Second Sino-Japanese War. The Second Generation, from 1937 to 1949, took place during the Sino-Japanese War and Civil War. The Third Generation spanned from 1949 to 1978, starting with the proclamation of the PRC and ending two years after the Cultural Revolution. The Fourth Generation, from 1978 to 1983, followed the death of Mao Zedong and included the graduation of the Fifth Generation from the Beijing Film Academy. The Fifth Generation lasted from 1983 to the late 1980s, starting with the release of *One and Eight* by Zhang Junzhao and *Yellow Earth* by Chen Kaige. The Sixth Generation emerged from 1989 to the present, after the post-Deng Xiaoping era (and there are some that propose a Seventh Generation of Chinese Cinema) (*Gerações e Geografias Do Cinema Chinês, Com Cecília Mello - Café Filosófico CPFL* 2021). I will come back to this topic in Chapter 4.

“freedom of choice” of the public (Su 2016). The general public welcomed Hollywood competition and enjoyed Hollywood blockbusters. Contrarily, the bulk of Chinese filmmakers and left-leaning intellectuals vehemently opposed Hollywood imports and pushed for the preservation of the homegrown film industry. Some urged “resistance” against Hollywood, while others declared that “the wolf is coming” and that Hollywood will annihilate the whole Chinese film industry (Su 2016, 2). But despite this, the Chinese government continued to implement its “going to sea by borrowing a boat” approach, which involved utilizing Hollywood’s resources to revamp the Chinese film industry (Su 2016, 75). “We should use the language of Hollywood to portray our own ‘Moments in Peking,’” as one state film bureau official argued to Wendy Su (2016, 150).

Su (2016) detailed that, before reforming the system in the 1980s, China still operated with the Soviet model of State ownership and a planned economy. The Chinese film industry was nationalized in 1953, with the creation of 16 state-owned film studios that produced 120-150 films each year. The China Film Export & Import Corporation (CFEIC) would purchase the films for 110% of production costs and distribute them. In the 1980s, economic reforms led to the studios being responsible for their own economic efficiency and receiving limited subsidies, but the production sector remained State-controlled and censored. This caused a decline in the domestic film audience, competition from television, and a market for pirated films, putting a heavy burden on the national finances (Su 2016).

In 1993, the Ministry of Radio, Film, and Television allowed studios to bypass CFEIC and issue prints of their films directly to local distribution companies but faced challenges such as low-cost prints, a shortage of production capital, and high payroll costs (Su 2016). To revive the film market and raise funds, the government approved revenue-sharing agreements with foreign studios such as Hong Kong’s Golden Harvest and Hollywood’s Warner Bros. The first blockbuster, *The Fugitive* (1993), was imported in 1994 and this was followed by other Hollywood hits such as *True Lies* (1994), *Forrest Gump* (1994), *The Lion King* (1994), and *Speed* (1994). The revenue-sharing system split the box office earnings 46% to foreign distributors, 8-10% to domestic film distributors, and 44-46% to theaters (Su 2016). Foreign distributors were also responsible for publicity costs and customs tariffs.

Su (2016) narrates how the distribution process for *The Fugitive* in China was complicated by Cold War ideology and old ways of thinking. There was a conflict between the CFEIC and the Beijing Municipal Film Distribution Company, which resulted in CFEIC signing a contract with the Haidian District Film Distribution Company (Su 2016). This caused tensions and led to a ban, but the film was still released and had successful box office sales.

The conflict was eventually resolved after intervention by the Film Bureau and CFEIC's sales in other cities. The struggle revealed the tension between market interest and political ideology, with CFEIC being accused of selling out China's national interest, and distribution companies opposing the introduction of revenue sharing for imports (Su 2016).

In any case, the return of Hollywood to China in the distribution and exhibition sectors helped fulfill the state's financial needs and reform agenda. In an interview with Wendy Su, Mao Yu, the deputy director of the Film Bureau under the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT) – which replaced the Ministry of Radio, Film, and Television in March 1998 –, remembered that the decision to import Hollywood movies was based on audience demand, market requirements, and the need to combat piracy (Su 2016). He commented that Hollywood imports had a positive impact on China's film market and introduced commercial film marketing strategies (Su 2016). The imports also changed Chinese filmmakers' mindset about film production and led to the establishment of Hollywood-style theater chains. Despite concerns about the ideological implications of Hollywood movies, officials saw them as a source of entertainment. The imported films revitalized China's ailing film market and became essential to its survival, accounting for 70% of the market by the turn of the century (Su 2016). The popularity of Hollywood movies sparked a debate on the government's policy and its impact on the domestic film industry, which the State tried to address (and which I will debate in Chapter 4).

However, once again demonstrating the complexity of China-Hollywood relations, it is also during the 1990s that some traits that will be very characteristic of these dynamics in the following decades begin to become evident. As told by Erich Schwartzel in his book *Red Carpet: Hollywood, China, and the Global Battle for Cultural Supremacy* (2022), Disney's efforts to enter Chinese market is another interesting story of this period, as it offers a cautionary tale of the complex relationship between Hollywood and Chinese politics. In 1990, Peter Murphy, Disney's head of strategic planning, visited Shanghai to identify a location for Disneyland. Disney's 5-year plan was to first launch a TV channel and stores, followed by the park. However, the production of the movie *Kundun*, a drama about the Dalai Lama directed by Martin Scorsese, in 1996, disrupted these plans. The film portrays the life of Tibet's fourteenth Dalai Lama, highlighting how he copes with Chinese oppression. The problem was that topics like Tibet, Taiwan, and Xinjiang are considered part of China's core interests – non-negotiable bottom lines of Chinese foreign policy (Zeng, Xiao, and Breslin 2015).

The Chinese Embassy contacted Murphy and warned him that the film put Disney's future in China in jeopardy. According to Schwartzel (2022), this marked the beginning of a

pattern in which Chinese capital would be tied to politics, and the Chinese government would exercise significant power in Hollywood, including the ability to approve projects and change scripts. Despite considering shutting down the film, Disney released it with minimal marketing and spending to limit its impact, hoping to justify not expanding its nationwide release. Murphy and Henry Kissinger met with Chinese officials in Washington, but the Chinese remained skeptical of Disney's claims and uncertain of the outcome (Schwartzel 2022). In any case, the involvement of a former Secretary of State with a long and prominent history in China-U.S. relations once again highlights the interactions between the dynamics of film and politics.

The controversy surrounding *Kundun* was not an isolated incident. In 1997, Sony released the movie *Seven Years in Tibet*, which added further fuel to the tension. The film, based on the true story of Heinrich Harrer, an Austrian mountain climber who befriended the Dalai Lama during China's takeover of Tibet, depicted scenes where Chinese soldiers destroyed statues of Buddha with machine guns, bombed villages, and terrorized the local population. It also offended Chinese officials, leading to concerns about the expulsion of all Sony businesses from China. This threatened not only Sony's movie division but also its electronics division, which had driven Japan's electronics boom since its founding after World War II. Hope Boonshaft, a Sony executive, attempted to establish rapport with Chinese authorities to manage the damage, and Chinese officials took advantage of Sony's eagerness to please by requesting support to join the World Trade Organization, which Sony accommodated (Schwartzel 2022). However, Sony still faced the risk of losing access to China's factories and customers (Schwartzel 2022).

In the same year, the release of MGM's movie *Red Corner* (1997), starring Richard Gere, caused a geopolitical stir. The film portrays Gere's character as an entertainment executive in China who is denied due process after being falsely accused of murder. The movie represented the expected democratizing effect of Western culture and business on China's Communist regime, and Gere, already a prominent figure in the pro-Tibet movement, used his platform to position the film as a political statement, adding to the controversy (Schwartzel 2022). Chinese officials visited MGM to express their displeasure with the film's release, which threatened to tarnish China's image during Chinese President Jiang Zemin's state visit to the United States. Despite the movie's release, Jiang's visit marked a shift towards freer trade between China and the U.S., even with continued criticism regarding China's human rights record (Schwartzel 2022).

Schwartzel (2022) argues that these incidents highlight the wider implications of making a movie that alienates the Chinese market, beyond its box office performance. Political



missteps can result in economic sanctions and put significant revenues at risk, damaging the larger corporate structure. For Disney, a mid-budget drama directed by Martin Scorsese put not only the TV channel, theme park, and merchandise but also all the investments made by the company in the Chinese market at risk. For Sony, China threatened the disruption of a valuable electronics supply chain (Schwartzel 2022).

In this sense, Aynne Kokas (2022) argues that, beyond just movies, China's influence in international media is expanding across the whole entertainment sector. According to Kokas, U.S. companies' financial commitments in projects like the Shanghai Disney Resort and the Universal Beijing Resort (which opened in 2016 and 2021, respectively) give Chinese authorities additional power over American media corporations. There are countless reasons for businesses that have invested heavily in Chinese theme parks to ensure that all of their platforms, including movies, streaming entertainment, video games, and more, abide by Beijing's content laws and steer clear of carrying information that will infuriate PRC officials (Kokas 2022).

Going back to 1997, Schwartzel states that, despite the poor performance of *Kundun*, *Seven Years in Tibet*, and *Red Corner*, the head of the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), Jack Valenti, tried to downplay their impact on the relationship between China and Hollywood (Schwartzel 2022). However, on November 1, 1997, China's State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television issued a memo announcing a temporary halt to all business cooperation with the three companies that produced the films (Schwartzel 2022).

The impacts of the memo were visible. In the case of Sony's film, the director and leading star of *Seven Years in Tibet*, Jean-Jacques Annaud and Brad Pitt, were banned from China (Schwartzel 2022). Sony executives believed that apologizing for the film would harm the company's relationship with actors and directors, so instead, they expressed regret if any offense was caused without apologizing for the film itself. Sony was allowed to resume business in China, and to improve relations further, the company organized an "apology tour" across China. Despite these efforts, the Chinese authorities continued to remind Sony of the controversy surrounding *Seven Years in Tibet* (Schwartzel 2022).

Disney's CEO, Michael Eisner, visited China in 1998 to rectify the situation after the ban on Disney resulting from the release of *Kundun*. During his meeting with China's Premier Zhu Rongji, Eisner apologized for the release of *Kundun* and assured the Chinese that Disney was a family entertainment company committed to amusing its audience in lighthearted and harmless ways. Eisner's willingness to compromise on the company's creative mission paid off, and the ban was lifted a few months later (Schwartzel 2022).

According to Schwartzel (2022), films such as *Kundun*, *Seven Years in Tibet*, and *Red Corner* defied Mao Zedong's ideas about the need to "critically reject all works of literature and art expressing views in opposition to the nation, science, masses, and Communist Party." In the case of Disney, Eisner was reminded of the \$1.2 billion the company had invested in China and the government's control over the dissemination of cultural messages when he sought to challenge these boundaries. Eisner argued for the launch of a Disney Channel in China, while officials pressed for a Chinese theme park. However, Zhu Rongji emphasized China's growing economic power and noted that a theme park was in line with the government's plan to develop the countryside and move away from a manufacturing economy. China's economic leverage allowed it to set boundaries for foreign companies distributing messages that it deemed unacceptable, and Hollywood conformed (Schwartzel 2022).

Although these interactions with China are visible for their present scale and impacts, Schwartzel (2022) notes that Hollywood has a history of adapting its narratives to gain market share. Hollywood faced a ban on its films in Mexico in the early 1920s as a result of stereotypical depictions of Mexicans as criminals, which threatened the studios' international market and alarmed officials in Washington. Mexico quickly agreed to start distributing American movies when the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) approved a resolution banning the creation of any film that was degrading to Mexico. This compromise between market access and representation became a common theme in Hollywood (Schwartzel 2022).

Zhu (2020) reinforces Schwartzel's argument that China's economic power has given it the ability to influence the image portrayed by Hollywood. However, the use of market leverage to construct and defend an image is not a new strategy. Zhu highlights that Hollywood is consistent when it comes to defending its market share, as seen in the late 1930s when the Americans warned the Japanese that they could become villains in Hollywood films if they threatened to reduce the market for American movies. Although Hollywood has a history of partnering with the State Department to promote American ideals globally, the department has at times been skeptical about Hollywood's commitment to this mission, given its primary goal of maximizing profits. Consequently, the State Department has remained cautious and vigilant in its dealings with Hollywood. For example, the U.S. occupation authorities banned the screening of *Gone with the Wind* in Germany due to the movie's depiction of racism and slavery (Zhu 2020). Thus, while some script changes may occur to appease Chinese audiences, Hollywood is unlikely to glorify China. Hollywood has not attacked China in the past and is unlikely to glorify China now, as it remains consistent in defending its interests (Zhu 2020).

It is relevant to point out that, as in other periods of China-Hollywood relations, this process of Hollywood's return to China in the 1990s was once again motivated by interests on both sides. If China wanted to revamp its failing film market, Hollywood wanted to boost its profits. For example, Schwartzel (2022) recounts how Warner Bros. and American attorney Ellen Eliasoph fought for the importation of Hollywood films into China. Following a successful negotiation, China Film Group, the government-run organization with exclusive rights to import international films, and Warner Bros. reached a distribution arrangement that allowed for 10 imported movies per year, with the studios earning 13% of ticket sales. *The Fugitive*, the first Hollywood picture to be released in China in 1994, made over \$3 million in ticket sales and launched the country's successful film industry (Schwartzel 2022).

In order to counter Hollywood's economic power in China, Chinese officials devised a *quid pro quo* system (Schwartzel 2022). They sought to use the additional income to also improve their own Chinese tales. The distribution rights to one of the Hollywood imports would be granted to a Chinese company if it made a main melody movie. In addition to ensuring the development of homegrown films, this action gave China both ideological and financial counterweights to Hollywood's influence. The governing principle on China's side was unmistakable: Chinese national interests came first (Schwartzel 2022).

Western business leaders saw a new market and a chance for cross-cultural interaction as Chinese leaders realized how economically necessary it was to open up their nation to Hollywood. Disney had previously invested money to mend fences after the *Kundun* incident, but until *Mulan* (1998), the classic tale of a Chinese girl who poses as a boy to fight in her father's place, was eventually permitted to be screened in February 1999, their films were still prohibited in China. Schwartzel (2022) emphasized that, before *Mulan*'s approval, Disney did much more than just send Michael Eisner to apologize. *A Time to Remember*, a 1998 romantic drama directed by Ye Daying that sparked patriotic enthusiasm and was made by the Forbidden City Film Co., a firm closely associated with the authorities who would decide whether *Mulan* would be admitted, was acquired by the company. Disney defended the arrangement as a regular procedure with overseas partners, despite accusations that it manipulated distribution agreements to win favor. Disney's tactics ultimately paid off when *Mulan* was approved in China, ending the nation's boycott of the company (Schwartzel 2022).

In yet another interesting case highlighting the interactions between films and politics, Schwartzel (2022) tells that Jiang Zemin, during a speech at the National People's Congress in 1998, endorsed the film *Titanic* (1997) and encouraged his fellow political leaders to study it. Despite acknowledging the \$200 million budget as an example of the excesses of capitalism,

he believed China could “learn from capitalism” and invited his comrades of the Politburo to watch the movie not to promote the system but to better understand it as their opposition. Jiang’s statement underscored the West’s allure and its ability to persuade people, reminding Chinese officials not to think they are the only ones who know how to do so (Schwartzel 2022). Rupert Murdoch, whose Fox studio released *Titanic*, went to China to thank Jiang for his support after the movie’s release. *Titanic*’s success in China convinced Hollywood executives that this new market might be worth their time, despite their initial reluctance to engage with China (Schwartzel 2022).

However, while China presented immense potential, it also was full of challenges. The country had the world’s largest population, but tens of millions of its citizens lived more than 100 miles from a movie theater, which presented an obstacle to increasing moviegoing (Schwartzel 2022). Additionally, one of the biggest problems Hollywood faced in China was piracy (Su 2016). It was not just widespread in the country but also the preferred mode of consuming entertainment. A sophisticated supply chain had formed in the 1990s, starting with video copies recorded in American theaters that were then subtitled or dubbed by Chinese pirates (Schwartzel 2022).

For years Chinese officials had ignored piracy, but, with the turn of the century, China’s economy was booming, and the country was preparing to join the World Trade Organization. Hollywood saw an opportunity to expand its reach and lobbied for changes that would benefit the industry (Schwartzel 2022). As China made deals and concessions to gain acceptance to the WTO, Hollywood studios seized the opportunity to push for intellectual property protections and an increase in the number of movies allowed into Chinese theaters each year (Schwartzel 2022). These changes would have a significant impact on the future of China-Hollywood relations, as I will debate next.

In this section, I examined the complex and nuanced dynamics in the historical relationship between China and Hollywood. The films produced by Hollywood about China have oscillated in a pendular movement between seduction and repulsion, reflecting the broader relationship between China and the United States. I also analyzed how some of these China-themed films perpetuated stereotypes, leading to protests from both Chinese officials and the public. When the Communist Party of China came to power in 1949, American films were banned in China until the 1990s, but Hollywood films produced during this period continued to reflect the relationship between the two countries. In the 1990s, Hollywood’s return to China was driven by mutual interests: Hollywood wanted to expand its market, while China sought to revive its stagnant film industry. During this time, some traits that would continue to shape the

China-Hollywood relationship for years became progressively apparent, such as the intersection between politics and economics in the film industry, with China using its growing market as leverage to influence the images produced in Hollywood films. This relationship intensified after China entered the WTO in 2001, which brought increased pressure to open up the Chinese market. I will further explore this topic in the next session.

## **2.2. Building the World's Largest Film Market: China-Hollywood Relations Post-2001**

The China-Hollywood relationship in the twenty-first century is characterized by alternately competitive and collaborative cooperation. China had shrewdly leveraged Hollywood resources in the 2000s to upgrade its film industry. Up until the middle of 2017, this cooperation had even reached a rare honeymoon phase, which was characterized by a reverse flow of finance from China, the purchase of Hollywood studio shares, and a record-breaking number of film co-productions. This pattern reached its apex in the first half of 2017 when Chinese finance sponsored 25% of Hollywood exports to China. In this phase, “Hollywood’s hunger for the Chinese market and capital was met halfway with Chinawood’s ‘going out’ strategy to promote Chinese cultural soft power” (Su 2022a, 343). The partnership, nevertheless, actually planted the seeds for a severe crisis and collapse. 2017 saw the relationship between Hollywood and China reach a turning point. The U.S.’s long-standing engagement with China policy was abruptly altered by newly-elected President Donald Trump and his administration, leading to a trade war (Su 2022a).

In the following sections, I will analyze all these phases.

### *2.2.1. The expansion of the China-Hollywood relationship*

The 2000s are an important milestone in China-Hollywood relations since only after China’s 2001 entrance to the WTO did major legal pressure to globalize the PRC’s foreign film and media production infrastructure begin (Kokas 2017). In the early 2000s, China was seeking acceptance into the World Trade Organization (WTO), which required a U.S. endorsement and

prompted a shift in how China conducted business with American industries. Hollywood, among others, saw this as an opportunity to influence the Chinese market (Schwartzel 2022). Studios lobbied for greater intellectual property protections to combat piracy and called for an increase in the number of movies allowed in Chinese theaters each year, which was then capped at ten. In November 1999, the U.S. and China reached an agreement that paved the way for China's entry into the WTO in 2001. The agreement opened a once-impenetrable market to dozens of industries eager for a share of the new Chinese disposable income, including Hollywood. As a result of the agreement, the number of movies allowed into the country each year doubled from ten to twenty, marking a significant win for Hollywood in accessing the world's largest film market (Schwartzel 2022).

In this context, Warner Bros. sought to boost Hollywood's box office earnings in China by building attractive movie theaters to compete with pirated videos. This strategy had been successful before in Europe, where Warner Bros. identified a foreign market with potential and created a theatrical ecosystem to increase its overseas profits (Schwartzel 2022). In China, they partnered with Dalian Wanda Group, the country's largest shopping mall developer, to create Warner Wanda Cinemas (Schwartzel 2022). The theaters would feature amenities like concession stands and surround sound, and Warner Bros. shared its technical expertise with Wanda to ensure the success of the venture.

According to Schwartzel (2022), initially, the deal between Wanda and Warner Bros. stipulated that the studio would secure a 51 percent ownership stake after seven years, with the intention to potentially sell the venture at a profit to another firm. However, the Chinese government's protectionist measures included rules against foreign companies holding a majority position in domestic companies, creating an unfair playing field according to Warner Bros. executives. Unfortunately, shortly after announcing the partnership, Warner Bros. learned that the terms had changed, and the new conditions were non-negotiable. Consequently, Warner Bros. had to accept a minority stakeholder position, making it exceedingly difficult to continue their business relationship with Wanda. In response, Warner withdrew from the theater deal, but concerns arose as Wanda's chairman already had access to Warner Bros.' blueprints and business plans for enhancing movie theaters (Schwartzel 2022).

Schwartzel (2022) also recounts how Hollywood executives faced concerns beyond financial terms in Chinese deals, as they had to consider what films would be allowed in China and which content would contradict Chinese ideology. Even seemingly innocuous films could be rejected by Chinese authorities, apparently because they were linked to the Chinese government's fear that certain premises (such as the underdog narrative, a hallmark of

Hollywood) could undermine stability in the country (Schwartzel 2022).

Besides censorship, there are other measures aimed at limiting Hollywood's influence in China. The Chinese government has implemented certain steps, such as imposing a cap on the number of Hollywood movies allowed in the country each year and mandating the screening of Chinese propaganda films alongside American movies. These measures aim to protect the country's cultural products from being overshadowed by foreign media. As highlighted by Schwartzel (2022), this approach bears similarities to protective measures implemented in other markets, such as France. The ChinaPower Project (2019) provides additional insights, citing examples like South Korea, where all cinemas are required to show domestic films for at least 73 days a year, and Spain, which demands domestic films to be shown between 73 and 91 days a year.

It is essential to recognize a fundamental difference between these approaches: in European markets and South Korea, quotas are imposed to promote domestic films, whereas in China's case, foreign films, especially American ones, are prohibited from entering the market. Nevertheless, the comparison underscores that protecting the domestic film production through quotas is not exclusive to China. Similar measures are in place in other countries as well.

Stanley Rosen (2017) also analyzed these dynamics, stating that, in addition to this quota system, there are still other limitations to the foreign presence in the Chinese film market. Among them, the reservation of dates in which only Chinese films are allowed (usually in the busiest times of the year); the release of two blockbusters at the same time, so that they cannibalize themselves and have a lower box office, or the delay in the release of blockbusters so that the frisson and the demand are reduced; a "benign negligence" of the film piracy problem; the withdrawal of films that are still making success; and the manipulation of box office data in favor of domestic films, especially "patriotic" films that have trouble to succeed only with popular demand (Rosen 2017, 367–68).

Finally, another major difficulty frequently highlighted is censorship. Aynne Kokas wrote that all films shot or distributed in China were subject to approval by the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT), a regulatory body of the Chinese Communist Party, even though with different levels of control over production, depending on the format used, such as co-production, assisted production, etc. (Kokas 2018). In March 2018, there was an institutional rearrangement: SAPPRFT became responsible for the supervision of radio and television, and the Publicity Department, for cinema and print media. According to Stanley Rosen (2018), this reorganization is part of the centralization trends that have been developing since 2013, being a further indication of Xi

Jinping's emphasis on the central role of the Party in regulating all aspects of the cultural, social, and political life of China. For the professor, the allocation of cinema under the supervision of the Publicity Department reflects the Party's growing effort to control and unify the message by promoting Chinese soft power both internally and externally (Rosen 2018). In any case, the Publicity Department has the final say on all films entering China (Rosen 2018).

Schwartzel (2022) writes that, after the Tiananmen Square incident in China, in 1989, there was an increase in the production of pro-China films in the country. While some critics might consider movies like *Top Gun* or *Rambo* as American propaganda, the concept was embraced by Chinese authorities, who played a heavy hand in producing such films. Access to directors, writers, and actors was controlled by officials, who rewarded participation in propaganda features with easier approvals for commercial films in the future (Schwartzel 2022). While some Chinese audiences chose to watch Western entertainment in newly built theaters, others continued to consume state-run content in rural areas. However, the Chinese government still prioritized the production of propaganda films, creating an unfair advantage for state-sponsored content. Hollywood had to compete with a highly regulated market, with the Chinese government exerting greater leverage over the film industry than Hollywood executives were used to. Even executives from major companies like IMAX had to play the game of good business politics to maintain relationships with the government (Schwartzel 2022). As China's presence on the world stage continued to grow, it was clear that the confidence of Chinese leaders in demanding what they wanted would only increase. But, again, Hollywood would gain too: in the case of IMAX, in 2012, the quota of imported films, which since 2001 was limited to 20, increased to 34 films in 2012, to accommodate 14 3D and IMAX films (Su 2022a).

Even with its complications, Hollywood saw China as a lucrative market, especially since it was facing problems at home. The emergence of streaming platforms and declining DVD sales disrupted the industry's traditional revenue streams (Schwartzel 2022). Additionally, the rise of Hollywood franchises as the most expensive movies in history required global grosses of at least \$1 billion to break even. In this context, the Chinese market started to look even more appealing, as two-thirds of the grosses came from overseas audiences. It is interesting to point out that, according to Robert Daly (2018), it is precisely because Hollywood works with the blockbuster model – in which the film will only profit if it is also successful in large markets, such as China – that the major Hollywood studios have not approved, in recent years, proposals of films that would be questionable for China for treating the country or the Party in negative tones.

In any case, an example of how eager Western firms were for Chinese revenue can be



seen in how, according to Schwartzel (2022), Disney's CEO Robert Iger conceded to give up a majority stake in the Shanghai Disney Resort and drop its campaign for a Disney Channel in China, all to enter the Chinese market. Aynne Kokas (2017) takes the argument even further, noticing that Hollywood studios allocate over 50% of a project's budget to marketing, which makes them more of a commerce corporation than a production firm, especially when considering dollar-for-dollar expenditure. Moreover, Hollywood's presence in China is not only about movies but also the development of integrated media conglomerates. Given their marketing-driven nature, these studios increasingly rely on auxiliary revenue sources such as licensing, theme parks, and merchandising, as well as a strong brand identity to sustain their financial success across different platforms and markets (Kokas 2017).

Another important event of the period was the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics. The selection of directors for the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympic Games brought to light once again the complex relationship between creative industries and Chinese politics. Zhang Yimou, a member of China's top political advisory committee, was recruited to direct the the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympic Games along with Ang Lee and Steven Spielberg. Ang Lee's Oscar acceptance speech for *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) was censored by the Chinese government, removing references to the film's gay plot (Schwartzel 2022). In the case of Spielberg, political tensions arose when actress Mia Farrow criticized China's support for the Sudanese government, which was accused of genocide in Darfur (Schwartzel 2022). Spielberg requested a meeting with President Hu Jintao and a Chinese official lobbied for a UN peacekeeping force, but when progress was not made, Farrow called for Spielberg to drop out, which he did. Some Chinese critics claimed that Spielberg's decision reflected imperialist assumptions bred by living in the United States and that the idea of a "great power" controlling the internal affairs of sovereign nations was a U.S., not Chinese, assumption (Schwartzel 2022).

Despite cultural misunderstandings during the production (conducted by Ric Birch, a former television producer from Australia, working with a team of young Chinese nationals), the 2008 Olympics' opening ceremony was a triumph, showcasing China's rich cultural heritage and signaling its emergence as a major player on the world stage. The ceremony also served as a commercial for an alternative system of governance and economic organization and came at a time when American hegemony was being called into question (Schwartzel 2022). A year later, a Pew Research Center poll found that a majority of respondents in thirteen out of twenty-five countries believed that China would supplant the United States as the world's top superpower (Schwartzel 2022).

Schwartzel (2022) also tells the story of DreamWorks Animation's *Kung Fu Panda*

(2008), a case in which Hollywood inadvertently showed China the potential of movies to promote a nation's rise. DreamWorks CEO Jeffrey Katzenberg got the idea for the film during a holiday break in 2004 after seeing old kung fu movie stills and panda photography in coffee-table books. The creative team then immersed themselves in Chinese film history and philosophy to create a film that paid homage to kung fu movies and celebrated Chinese culture. *Kung Fu Panda* grossed \$416 million from international theaters, including a surprising \$26 million in China, demonstrating the power of film to connect people across different cultures and generations (Schwartzel 2022).

*Kung Fu Panda* was a huge success in China, but it also posed a challenge for Chinese leaders who questioned why they hadn't created a movie that featured their national treasure and cultural elements. Schwartzel (2022) states that trying to learn from the success of *Kung Fu Panda* and wanting to influence Chinese filmmakers, Chinese authorities used the tactic they were most comfortable with: legislating to change people's minds. For such an endeavor, they had been preparing the basis. The year before *Kung Fu Panda* was released, the 17th Communist Party Conference, where China's leaders announced a broad annual proclamation of national goals, named animation as an area to assist. Financial incentives promoted the creation of animated content, office parks were built to accommodate animation firms, and copyright regulations were improved to reassure producers that their work would be protected (Schwartzel 2022). The Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference statement from the summer of *Kung Fu Panda* went even further, recognizing that creative freedom was an important factor in the growth and global influence of the Chinese cultural industry, noting that "Although there is no secret ingredient to film-making success, the government ought to relax its oversight" (Schwartzel 2022). The Conference also added that "Opening more space for Chinese artists would allow more innovation, ultimately giving China great cultural influence abroad" (Schwartzel 2022). In this sense, they also acknowledged the need for creative freedom to foster innovation, cultural influence, and economic growth.

After *Kung Fu Panda* and the Olympics, *Avatar* took the Chinese box office by storm. The movie attracted record-breaking audiences, with tickets being scalped for US\$100 each, and even members of the politburo closed an auditorium to watch the movie in private (Schwartzel 2022). Schwartzel narrates that, for Chinese audiences, the Na'vi's struggle to save their land reminded them of rural residents across the countryside forced out of their homes for the government's mass urbanization campaign. In anticipation of the movie's success, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox executives lobbied Chinese officials to build more 3D screens in the country. However, less than two weeks after *Avatar*'s release, Chinese authorities pulled it from most of

its screens, replacing it with a biopic about Confucius (Schwartzel 2022). The move highlighted the tension within China's top ranks over which movies were suitable for the Chinese people, and officials were wary of the cultural influence of American movies like *Avatar*. Despite this, *Avatar* still grossed a record-breaking \$2.7 billion globally, with over \$200 million coming from Chinese theaters alone (Schwartzel 2022).

Schwartzel (2022) writes that China's attempt to restrict *Avatar*'s screening was adapted from a tactic used by the Soviet Union to promote films aligned with its propaganda efforts. Similarly, *Battleship Potemkin* was released in the Soviet Union in 1925 to entertain the people while promoting Soviet ideals, but Hollywood movies like *Robin Hood* (1922) provided stiff competition. Soviet officials manipulated attendance figures to make it appear that *Battleship Potemkin* was more popular than Hollywood's offerings. *Avatar*'s success in China helped to address the challenges faced by studios in their home market, including the demand for higher grosses, the stagnation of the US market, the new competition on TV, and the lost revenue from DVD sales. Despite being dropped from many screens, *Avatar* grossed over \$200 million in Chinese theaters alone, compared to the \$26 million earned by *Kung Fu Panda* just one year prior (Schwartzel 2022).

Aynne Kokas (2017) also comments on the case of *Avatar* in China and adds nuances to the analysis. According to Kokas, the results of cooperation between China and Hollywood are not always clear and predictable. For example, she mentions that Hollywood has helped promote the Chinese dream, since, although the central focus of Hollywood in China is the potential benefit for Hollywood itself, what happens in practice is that, by expanding the capabilities of Chinese cultural industries through FDI (Foreign Direct Investment), Hollywood ends up strengthening China's ability to create and promote its narratives. A concrete example, which I will expand on later in this chapter, is how *Transformers: Age of Extinction* (or *Transformers 4*, 2014) offered the PRC government a major promotion opportunity through its depiction of the Chinese Ministry of Defense and the relationship between mainland China and Hong Kong (Kokas 2017).

On the other hand, there are negative aspects for China deriving from this collaboration as well, as Hollywood films start to compete for audiences with commercial and patriotic Chinese movies. An example of the PRC government's ambivalence about the competition between China's growing international commercial film brand and domestic Chinese film production can be seen in the case of *Avatar* (2009) and *Confucius* (2010), when the Hollywood film was pulled from 2-D (though not from 3-D) screens after less than two weeks to increase box-office numbers for the State-supported Chinese film *Confucius*. Nevertheless, Kokas (2017)

highlighted that Cameron continued to invest in the Chinese market. The Cameron Pace Group China was formed in the northern port city of Tianjin by his Cameron Pace Group, a business that specializes in 3-D technology and production services, to provide technology to productions in China and elsewhere. Cameron's difficult coexistence with Chinese production draws attention to the ways in which Chinese government laws can both enable Hollywood companies to grow and constrain them. The incident further demonstrates how friendly foreign capital may not only cash Chinese box-office receipts but also introduce cutting-edge innovations to the market (Kokas 2017).

Therefore, we have seen how, after China entered the WTO, there was increased pressure on China to open up its market, and Hollywood saw an opportunity for growth. However, challenges remained, such as the limited number of cinemas in China. Hollywood companies sought partnerships with Chinese firms to build cinemas. Although not all collaborations were successful, Chinese firms such as Wanda acquired know-how. The Beijing Olympics (2008) showcased a China ready for the world, and the success of Hollywood films like *Kung Fu Panda* and *Avatar* demonstrated the Chinese public's growing appetite for Western productions. As the Chinese film industry and the market became stronger and more modern, a golden era of collaboration between China and Hollywood began, as I will debate next.

### 2.2.2. *China-Hollywood Golden age*

By the first decade of the twenty-first century, China had successfully modernized its film business by utilizing Hollywood resources. This alliance even saw an extraordinary honeymoon period between 2001 and the middle of 2017, which was characterized by a reverse flow of Chinese finance into the country, the purchase of Hollywood studio shares, and a record-breaking number of film co-productions (Su 2022a).

As in the 2000s, in the 2010s the Chinese film market was booming while the U.S. market was struggling. Schwartzel (2022) highlights how, in this period of rapidly growing in China's theater industry, AMC Entertainment Holdings, America's second-largest movie theater chain, was having trouble keeping up with the market. In that context, billionaire Wang Jianlin, owner of Wanda, aimed to dominate the global movie theater, commercial real estate, department store, and hotel industries. Wang hoped to take an American company public to

signal his intent to the world. Wanda acquired AMC for \$2.6 billion in 2012, which was among the largest acquisitions of a U.S. company by a Chinese firm in history (Schwartzel 2022). U.S. officials from the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States had concerns about the acquisition, but the deal was eventually approved. China's ambition to be a global player in entertainment was clear, and Hollywood executives were eager to maintain access to China's market. Some executives expressed apprehensions about the concessions Hollywood was making to keep this access, but others saw it as an opportunity to profit. As one studio distribution executive said in an interview with Schwartzel (2022): "I would not see myself as the standard bearer of Western democracy. I'm here to make money!"

Zhu (2020) also comments on Wanda's case. For the scholar, the situation was part of China's turn to sharp power, in which the country moved from image building to asset building. Zhu (2020) claims that the acquisition of movie studios and chains in the U.S., mainly through Dalian Wanda, was treated as business as usual for Hollywood, but seen as an existential threat to Western values by others in the U.S. As I already pointed out in the introduction of this dissertation, among those seen as an existential threat were sixteen Congressmen, from both the Republican and Democratic parties, who, in September 2016, sent a letter to the Comptroller General of the U.S., Gene L. Dodaro, head of the Government Accountability Office, in which they questioned the purchase of American company by foreigners, mentioning specifically the acquisition of Legendary Entertainment studio and the AMC movie-theater chain by China's Dalian Wanda Group. Zhu (2020) writes that, in addition to AMC, Wanda also proposed a \$1 billion take-over from the Dick Clark Production Company, which ended up not succeeding: there was resistance in the U.S., but also in China, within the scope of operations to combat tax evasion and corruption. Amid China's increasingly strict anti-corruption campaign, which has resulted in the downfall of high-ranking politicians and well-known business owners and the freezing of their assets, Chinese companies have aggressively invested in foreign firms in recent years as a means of transferring money out of China (Zhu 2020). Chinese regulators ordered Chinese banks to halt lending money to Wanda in July 2017, specifically for six transactions, including the \$3.5 billion purchase of Legendary Entertainment by the conglomerate (Zhu 2020).

Aynne Kokas also addresses what she considers a shift from soft power to sharp power in China. According to the academic, while in 2017, the relationship was one of attraction (soft power) of Hollywood by the Chinese market – and the desire to access this expanding market was responsible for changes in content –, currently, the relationship is one of threats (sharp power) by the Chinese government to cut access to this market (Kokas 2022). Furthermore, as

American media companies and brands encounter Chinese government constraints in a variety of industries, including theme parks, consumer goods, movies, and streaming services, this minatory strategy has grown more widespread and more effective (Kokas 2022). Another difference between soft and sharp power pointed out by Kokas is related to the time and place where each type of power is exercised. While soft power is perceived from the consumption side, when the public reads, listens or sees media content, sharp power is exercised on the side of content production and distribution (Kokas 2022). And production and distribution, in contrast to consumption, are the purview of corporate and governmental interests rather than those of the general public. Understanding how corporations and governments impose content control throughout production and distribution is necessary for responding to sharp power (Kokas 2022).

In any case, Wendy Su highlights that, during this period, China became a major investor in Hollywood, with over \$5 billion invested in the U.S. film industry through 13 projects between 2014 and 2016 (Su 2022a). Notable deals include Jack Ma's Alibaba partnering with Steven Spielberg's Amblin Partners, Dalian Wanda's acquisitions of Legendary Pictures and Carmike Cinemas, and Bona Film Group's investments in 20th Century Fox movies (Su 2022a). In 2015, TIK Films and Lions Gate Entertainment announced a \$1.5 billion joint investment in 50 co-productions. Among the hit movies TIK Films invested in was the Oscar-winning *La La Land* (2016). Bona Film Group cooperated with Studio 8 and TriStar Pictures to invest in Ang Lee's *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* (2016). Bona also established a partnership with 20th Century Fox Film Corporation, part of which involved injecting \$235 million into TSG Entertainment Finance LLC with whom Fox had a co-financing deal (Su 2022a). Chinese investment in Hollywood peaked in the first half of 2017, with Chinese funders financing 25 percent of Hollywood exports to China (Su 2022a). However, aggressive investment by Chinese companies eventually drew the attention of China's state regulators and caused serious concerns for the U.S. government. And, as I will point out in the next section, with the dramatically changing bilateral relationship and geopolitical concerns, the march of Chinese companies into Hollywood was abruptly interrupted in late 2017 and early 2018, and from late 2019 the COVID-19 pandemic further intensified tensions in bilateral relations leading to a standstill between the two countries (Su 2022a).

Another aspect of great relevance in this period is the impressive growth of the box office in China, and how it started to represent the biggest international revenue for Hollywood. In 1994, China implemented revenue sharing for 10 blockbuster imports annually. After joining the WTO in 2001, the quota rose to 20 films, with 3D and IMAX movies added in 2012 (Su

2022a). The growth of the quota contributed to Hollywood's worldwide revenue growth, as the Chinese box office became an increasingly significant portion of Hollywood's global gains. In 2015, China's box office increased by 49%, surpassing the next largest international market by nearly \$5 billion and accounting for close to 50% of the Asia-Pacific box office (Su 2022a). In 2017, global box office receipts hit a new record high of \$40.6 billion, with China's box office contributing \$7.9 billion, constituting 19.5% of the global total (Su 2022a). Despite a reversal in the trend in 2018, where the US/Canada box office increased, China remained the top overseas territory in 2019. According to MPAA data, China's market share of the top ten Hollywood exports was 17-18% between 2014 and 2016, identical to China's share of the entire global film market (Su 2022a).

Writing about the growing importance of the Chinese domestic film market after 1990, and especially in the 2000s, Zhu (2020) points to two effects. The first one is that "China can break or make a film" (Su 2022a, 107). To illustrate, Zhu mentions Jackie Chan's comments about the movie *Warcraft* (2016), which was a failure in the U.S. but a success in China, even guaranteeing a sequel. According to Chan, if China manages to make films that earn that much money, then film students around the world will learn Chinese, not English (Su 2022a).

The other point highlighted by Zhu (2020) is that, due to the importance of the Chinese market, accusations have increased that Hollywood has been called to promote Chinese values, to the detriment of Western ideas, which has alarmed the media and the U.S. government. According to Zhu (2020), from *Welcome Danger* (1929) and *The Good Earth* (1937) to more recent films such as *Transformers 4* (2014), *Mission Impossible 3* (2006), *The Martian* (2015), *Red Dawn* (2012), the power of cinema to shape perceptions and values has been on the radar of governments in both the U.S., and China. But, for Zhu (2020), it is still unclear whether Hollywood has given in to Chinese pressure. And the case of *Transformers 4* is paradigmatic. The film was criticized for being pro-China. However, even showing brave Chinese, they are only sidekicks, and in the end, it is the Americans who save China and the world. Moreover, the film was a box office hit in China, marking yet another success in promoting U.S. soft power (Su 2022a).

Aynne Kokas also analyzed the *Transformers 4* case, but from another perspective. She points out that, in some scenes of the Hollywood film, Chinese ships arrive in Hong Kong, and comments that there is in it a noticeable mixture of fiction and reality. According to Kokas (2017), Paramount Studios and the SAPPRFT jointly decided at a 2013 meeting in Beijing on a release date for the *Transformers 4* movie of Friday, June 27, 2014, the weekend immediately preceding the July 1 holiday, the date that marks Hong Kong's return to

China and when there are always protests. *Transformers 4* includes prominent scenes of a fictional PRC minister of defense sending ships into Hong Kong's harbor. The images appeared on screens around Hong Kong the weekend before large-scale demonstrations against PRC government authority there, which attracted more than 500,000 protesters (out of Hong Kong's seven million residents) and launched a string of pro-democracy demonstrations that came to be known as the Umbrella Movement (Kokas 2017). In the movie, the Chinese military occupies Victoria Harbor in Hong Kong, visibly extending its influence in a way that would be impossible at the time of the film's release from a political standpoint in actual Hong Kong (Kokas 2017). The movie also featured shots of Hong Kong's overwhelming police presence, which hinted at images of the police presence on the streets on July 1. *Transformers 4* exceeded record Chinese box office receipts in July 2014 while riots escalated in Hong Kong (Kokas 2017).

Kokas (2017) argues that *Transformers 4* illustrates the convergence of the Hollywood dream factory and the Chinese Dream. The film showcases the trend of horizontally integrated media conglomerates, promoting a successful U.S. commercial brand property that presents numerous ancillary media-branding opportunities for both Hollywood and Chinese media companies. In anticipation of the film's production, a Chinese reality show, featuring director Michael Bay, producer Lorenzo di Bonaventura, and star Megan Colligan in the promotion material, was aired in China to recruit Chinese actors, demonstrating how blockbuster film trades advance domestic cultural policies by generating domestic television content and promoting domestic media talent development through Hollywood investment. *Transformers 4* also emphasizes China's importance as a film location, highlighted by the scenes shot on the Great Wall of China, even if they do not appear in the final version of the film: the mere fact that the government allowed filming in these locations already has potential and generates interest (Kokas 2017). Hence, as Kokas points out, far from being an example of one-way cultural imperialism, Sino-U.S., blockbusters like *Transformers 4* reflect the needs of both US trade and investment and Chinese soft power through continual branding efforts between Chinese and Hollywood partners.

These collaborations between China and Hollywood are driven by mutual interests from both sides, as emphasized by Kokas (2017). Hollywood seeks to expand their brand in China, while China aims to address its perceived cultural trade deficit by increasing investments in their cultural industries, which in turn strengthens China's international influence. These joint ventures are part of a systematic and policy-driven effort by China to enhance its soft power, and therefore, Chinese media production has become a significant element in Shambaugh (2015)



called the “discourse war” between China and the West. Therefore, analyzing the content and films produced through this collaboration becomes crucial in comprehending these competing discourses (Kokas 2017).

Underscoring the significance of foreign media investment for China, Kokas (2017) cites three key benefits. Firstly, such investments help China compete and establish itself as a global player. Secondly, they provide an injection of capital into the local economy. Thirdly, leveraging Hollywood’s technical expertise helps promote the Chinese entertainment industry and spread images of contemporary China to the world (Kokas 2017). Kokas provides practical examples of the outcomes of media investments in China: for instance, the Shanghai Disney Resort houses the largest Disney castle in the world, requiring a total investment of over USD 5.5 billion. In addition, *Transformers 4*, which was partially shot in the PRC, earned more revenue at the Chinese box office than it did in the United States in 2014, injecting USD 320 million into the Chinese box office (Kokas 2017). Furthermore, foreign investments in the media sector have the potential to spread to other areas and from the central government to municipalities, resulting in a spillover effect. As a result, stakeholders are encouraged to boost collaboration to enhance China’s global cultural expansion (Kokas 2017).

Kokas also provides compelling examples that illustrate the interplay between cinema and politics, which is the core theme of this dissertation. In 2012, then-Vice Presidents Xi Jinping and Joe Biden convened to discuss increasing the quota of U.S. films entering China, resulting in an increase from 20 to 34 films per year, including 14 special format films such as 3D and IMAX (Kokas 2017). This agreement linked Hollywood’s technological advantages with China’s media policy of expanding its domestic media market and the number of cinemas while reducing piracy and increasing box office receipts, particularly for films shown in theaters. Chinese filmmakers who still worked in 2D were also protected. IMAX took advantage of this agreement and started to convert Chinese films to IMAX, utilizing special rooms during blackout periods (when just Chinese movies are exhibited), and eventually established a subsidiary, IMA China, listed on the Hong Kong stock exchange (Kokas 2017).

Furthermore, 2012 saw other meetings between government officials and private entertainment industry leaders, a more common occurrence in China than in the U.S. One such meeting was between Xi, Biden, and Katzenberg from DreamWorks, which resulted in the establishment of Oriental DreamWorks. According to Kokas (2017), this collaboration between a major U.S. corporation and the Chinese government and private-sector partners underscores the complex public-private collaboration between the PRC and the United States. In 2015, during an official visit by Xi to the U.S., Warner Bros, and China Media Capital announced a

co-venture, Flagship Entertainment, headquartered in Hong Kong, designed to produce content in both English and Chinese (Kokas 2017). This underlines the close relationship between state-level diplomacy and the global entertainment industries of China and Hollywood.

Kokas (2017) stresses that the guest list for President Barack Obama's state banquet during Xi Jinping's visit confirmed the focus on media and technology, with the media and technology sectors having the highest presence of any industry at the banquet. Notably, four of the eighteen guests at the head table were from media and technology companies, including Walt Disney Company CEO Robert Iger and DreamWorks CEO Jeffrey Katzenberg (Kokas 2017). However, Kokas argues that, as U.S. media and technology businesses, like Netflix and Facebook, still cannot lawfully operate all of their business units in China, this underscores the tenuous nature of Hollywood's investments in China. The extent of control that each government exercises over its respective media businesses varies inconsistently, which creates a very complex environment for the development of bilateral media policies (Kokas 2017).

In her analysis, Kokas (2017) explores how Sino-U.S. cinema collaborations are impacted by the trade policies of both countries. *Iron Man 3* (2013) is a key example, as the film's success in China marked a turning point in the intersection of Chinese media policy, U.S. media investment, and Sino-U.S. media culture. Initially intended as an official Sino-U.S. co-production, the film ultimately became a "faux-production," when either the producer or the Chinese government decided not to complete the co-production process. According to Kokas (2017), this occurred due to negotiations over co-production policy, resulting in the film being scrutinized and censured as a co-production but released as an imported film. Another example of a faux-production is the 2012 Sino-U.S. collaboration *Looper*, which was shot in Shanghai to take advantage of Chinese co-production policies but released in China as an import. Through these examples, Kokas (2017) underscores the limitations of the U.S. federal government lobbying on behalf of Hollywood in the Chinese market.

During production, *Iron Man 3* was subject to multiple stages of Chinese government review, with Chinese censors regularly visiting the set and giving notes on the script (Kokas 2017). This practice of censorship during production is common with film co-productions, which are treated like domestic Chinese films in the PRC market (Kokas 2017). Despite Marvel Studios not meeting the preconditions for a film co-production release, it accommodated the Chinese market by creating a special version of the movie specifically for PRC distribution. However, Chinese audiences reacted negatively to the added scenes, suggesting that influence over the production process does not necessarily result in gains in cultural soft power (Kokas 2017). Despite the negative audience reaction, Kokas (2017) argues that the ceding of control

in a Hollywood blockbuster to Chinese regulators and distributors marked a significant moment in Hollywood's relationship with China.

In her analysis of *Iron Man 3*, Kokas (2017) observes several changes made to the film's narrative, including the collaboration between the villain and the Vice President of the United States, compared to the collaboration between Iron Man and Chinese doctors in the Chinese version, highlighting the importance of technical-scientific cooperation and casting doubt on the U.S. government. The characters of Mandarin in *Iron Man 3* and Ancient One in *Doctor Strange* (2016) were also altered, raising questions about the strategic whitewashing of Hollywood films and avoiding drawing attention to sensitive political issues such as Tibet (Kokas 2017). Despite its financial success, *Iron Man 3* was not a full soft power or policy win for China. The "Chinese elements" were visibly forced into the narrative, and Marvel Studios claimed a share of the Chinese box office that could have gone to local Chinese films. However, the film marked a significant moment in the growing entwinement of Chinese and U.S. film industries, highlighting the need for compromises from both sides (Kokas 2017).

The case of *Doctor Strange*, mentioned by Kokas, is especially interesting because, afterward, some agents involved in the production talked about the changes in the script. C. Robert Cargill, a screenwriter related to the project, commented that others involved in the movie, notably director Scott Derrickson, decided to remove the character's Tibetan heritage (E. Wong 2016). He claimed that the main concern was losing the China market if the Chinese government became upset by the representation of the Ancient One. Cargill (2016) stated that "The Ancient One was a racist stereotype who comes from a region of the world that is in a very weird political place. He originates from Tibet, so if you acknowledge that Tibet is a place and that he's Tibetan, you risk alienating one billion people" (Cargill 2016). And added, "the Chinese government going, 'Hey, you know one of the biggest film-watching countries in the world? We're not going to show your movie because you decided to get political'" (Cargill 2016). Again, the interactions between politics and cinema could not be clearer.

Just as Schwartzel (2022) chronicled Disney's entry into the 1990s as an example of the dynamics between China and Hollywood, Kokas (2017) uses Disney's relations with China to demonstrate how Hollywood's expansion into China goes beyond media content and includes the creation of new landscapes for consumption and engagement with brands. This is important because brands are essential to the experience economy, and generating experiences is becoming an increasingly important part of the marketing-driven blockbuster film industry. The Shanghai Disney Resort is the single-largest China-Hollywood real estate co-venture to date and demonstrates how Sino-US joint ventures in media-related real estate investment negotiate

between Hollywood and China through the development of shared brandscapes (Kokas 2017).

In this context, Hollywood's objective is clear: expansion. Market and financial expansion. China's objective is to provide a stable environment for long-term investments, which encourages the arrival of other projects, such as studios (Kokas 2017). Other global media conglomerates are also building physical structures to grow into the world's largest market, including DreamWorks Animation, James Cameron's Cameron Pace Group, and China's Wanda Group (Kokas 2017). Shared investments in the brandscape advance the growth of Hollywood in China, private Chinese firms, and Chinese central and local government policies to enhance soft power (Kokas 2017).

Kokas (2017) also explores Disney's entry into China from another perspective, highlighting the company's use of thematic English schools as a means of strengthening its brand in the country. While teaching the language, these schools become screening spaces for Disney media products and help to create the Hollywood brandscape in China (Kokas 2017). This approach is not without its drawbacks, as it often falls short of meeting both PRC policy and U.S. corporate expansion priorities. Disney's strategy in the educational sector demonstrates its shared development of the China-Hollywood brandscape but also relies on using school supplies to turn children into consumers. Kokas notes that the similarities between the way Disney English schools and Confucius Institutes teach language may not be a coincidence. Disney operates a network of English-language schools in six Chinese cities, and regulators in China have also recognized the branding advantage of this approach. Like the Confucius Institutes, Disney English uses language teaching to drive brand awareness for Shanghai Disney Resort, a joint venture aimed at the same youth demographic as the language schools (Kokas 2017).

Kokas (2017) explores authenticity, storytelling, and soft power issues related to Disney in China. Despite attempts by Chinese newspapers and Disney officials to distance the Shanghai Disney Resort from Western commercial culture, the resort is called Shanghai Disney Resort, with the brand prominently displayed throughout the property, including the iconic Disney castle. This demonstrates the complexities of blending an iconic brand with the Chinese government's demands for increased soft power. The rise of Hollywood's brandscapes in China has occurred largely due to Chinese policy aimed at growing China's global competitiveness. While media brandscapes in China show how Hollywood is stamping its brand on Chinese land, the bigger picture is more complex, and the relationship between Hollywood and China is a tentative one (Kokas 2017). Losing access to media brandscapes in China would be dangerous for transnational media corporations interested in accessing the world's largest audience.

Therefore, Hollywood's growth in China is heavily infused with aspiration but tempered by uncertainty (Kokas 2017). This investigation into Disney in China will be particularly relevant to analyzing *Mulan* (2020) in future discussions.

In this section, I explored the "golden age" of China-Hollywood relations. The Chinese market grew to such a size that it became a defining factor for a film's success, and some movies that were only successful in China became global blockbusters. China's growing leverage in the film industry also led to accusations of changes in Hollywood films to appease Chinese audiences and officials. This period coincided with a Hollywood market crisis that resulted in Chinese companies investing in Hollywood. The dynamic between China and Hollywood during these years was characterized by different interests on both sides: Hollywood sought to increase profits, while China aimed to strengthen its soft power. However, with the change in geopolitical situations and Donald Trump's presidency, this honeymoon will be challenged, as I will debate in the next section.

### 2.2.3. *End of Honeymoon?*

During the Trump administration (2017-2021), the U.S. foreign policy took a severe turn, which had a significant impact on the U.S.-China bilateral relationship and the Hollywood-China partnership. According to Wendy Su (2022a), for almost 40 years, the U.S. and China had engaged in a grand bargain, where China sought to modernize by working with the U.S., while the U.S. sought to influence China's modernization in their own image. Despite this mismatch, the Hollywood-Chinawood partnership emerged as a positive outcome of this bargain, with Hollywood seeking the Chinese market and capital, and "Chinawood's 'going out'" strategy to promote Chinese cultural soft power (Su 2022a, 343). However, this bargain began to collapse as China defied the U.S.'s expectations, and the Trump administration reversed U.S. foreign policy towards China. Moreover, China's economy slowed down in 2017, and the government tightened control over capital flows, leading to complications for the Hollywood-Chinawood partnership (Su 2022a).

An article provides a telling example of how the changing political landscape has influenced the film industry. As previously mentioned in this dissertation's introduction, in 2018, *The New York Times* published a series of reports on China's rise as a superpower, covering topics ranging from economics and infrastructure to technology and society (*The New*

*York Times* 2018). Among these articles was one dedicated to cinema titled “How China Is Rewriting Its Own Script” (A. Qin and Carlsen 2018). The authors asked readers when they had last seen a movie with a Chinese villain, suggesting that this was no coincidence due to the size of the Chinese film market. They argued that large studios were no longer producing films that portrayed China negatively, citing examples such as the 2012 remake of the Cold War drama *Red Dawn*. In the original 1984 film, the Soviets invaded the U.S., but in the remake, the Chinese were the invaders. However, after the script was leaked, the Chinese state media became outraged, prompting MGM to spend \$1 million digitally removing any evidence of the Chinese Army and replacing it with North Koreans (A. Qin and Carlsen 2018). Another film mentioned was *Pixels* (2015). The studio involved in the production, Sony Pictures, had its emails leaked, revealing that the original plan was to have aliens breach the Great Wall of China. Sony executives, though, were concerned that such a scenario might prevent the film from being released in China, leading them to destroy instead India’s Taj Mahal, the Washington Monument, and parts of Manhattan, in what Aynne Kokas (2022, 94) considers “a fitting metaphor for the studio’s cooperation with Chinese regulators and the impact on freedom of expression in democratic nations around the world.” Qin and Carlsen (2018) also highlighted the cases of films such as *Doctor Strange* (2016), *Seven Years in Tibet* (1997), and *Kundun* (1997), all of which I already commented on in this chapter.

It is possible to notice from the date of the films that most of them were released during what is considered to be the honeymoon period of China-Hollywood relations. But now, with the changing political landscape, these altered scripts were starting to be more contested both in the press and in civil society organizations and political institutions in the United States.

An example in the civil society realm is the report published in 2020 by PEN America, “an anti-censorship organization dedicated to the celebration of open cultural and artistic expression” (PEN America 2020). The report *Made in Hollywood, Censored by Beijing* examines how Beijing’s censors have influenced and affected Hollywood and the global film industry. As PEN America notes, stories shape how people think, and Hollywood’s stories reach billions of people worldwide. The document highlights several examples of Hollywood’s cooperation with Chinese censors, such as *Red Dawn*, *Doctor Strange*, *Top Gun: Maverick*, and *Iron Man 3*. The report also mentions how leaked emails from Sony revealed that executives worried that *Captain Phillips* (2013) would not be approved by China’s censors because the U.S. military rescuing a single person could clash with Beijing’s emphasis on collective values. Additionally, during the production of *RoboCop* (directed by the Brazilian José Padilha in 2014), a Sony executive suggested minimizing the relationship between the villainous American

corporation Omnicorp and the Chinese government, leading to changes by Sony (PEN America 2020).

The report observes that Hollywood's self-censorship is impossible to detect or document because it involves movies that never had the chance to get off the ground due to fears that they would not be approved by China's censors. Michael Berry, director of the Center for Chinese Studies at UCLA, told PEN America that "the big story is not what's getting changed, but what is not ever even getting greenlit" (PEN America 2020).

The report also discusses prohibitions against specific movie ideas, such as those related to Tibet, Taiwan, Xinjiang, the South China Sea, Falun Gong, top Chinese leaders, and democracy protests (PEN America 2020). However, censors can also prohibit entire genres or categories of movie content, although they may waive these rules if the movie's overall message serves Beijing's interests or if the economic benefits of approving the movie outweigh the prohibition. For example, censors have traditionally banned time-travel stories and ghost stories, but they waived the ban for the Harry Potter series and Pixar's *Coco* because of their popularity with Chinese audiences (PEN America 2020).

One of the most debated aspects of Hollywood's new relationship with Beijing is its "pandering" strategy, also debated by the report (PEN America 2020). This strategy, as I already pointed out, involves deliberately incorporating specific scenes, characters, sets, or themes in films to better appeal to the Chinese audience. Hollywood studios have attempted to cater to the Chinese box office by ensuring that their flagship franchises, such as *Fast and Furious* and *Marvel*, include at least one Chinese character, scene, or subplot. They have also shifted set locations to China, added China-specific references to scripts, and portrayed China as a "good actor" in films. Some films have even included positive portrayals of Chinese officialdom, often showing them as saviors of humanity, such as in *2012* (2009), *Gravity* (2013), and *Arrival* (2016) (PEN America 2020). However, some of these attempts have been so obvious that they have been poorly received by Chinese audiences, who derisively refer to Chinese actors cast in insignificant roles as "flower vases." Despite the efforts to appeal to the Chinese audience, some films have faced criticism for not living up to their promises. For example, Zhang Jingchu's role in *Mission: Impossible – Rogue Nation* (a 2015 movie that received financial backing from the state-owned China Movie Channel as well as the Chinese conglomerate Alibaba) was promoted as a "major" and "leading role," but she received less than 40 seconds of screen time in the final cut. Similarly, Chinese social media users expressed frustration with *Kong: Skull Island* (a 2017 movie by Legendary Pictures and Tencent Pictures) for featuring Chinese actress Jing Tian prominently in its Chinese marketing but relegating her

character to a minor role in the final film (PEN America 2020).

The report once again mentioned the case of *World War Z*, but links it with the Coronavirus pandemic in an interesting way. It stressed how executives at Paramount Studios demanded a change in the dialogue of a scene to remove the reference to China as the origin of the virus – that turn people into zombies in the fictional history –, to pass the film’s review process in China (PEN America 2020). This change was not enough to secure a release date in China, causing some to wonder if the movie’s co-producer and star, Brad Pitt, was still suffering consequences for his 1997 performance in *Seven Years in Tibet*, or if Beijing’s restriction on supernatural themes in movies had more to do with the denial. The report suggests that this change may have seemed minor at the time, but the source novel’s author, Max Brooks, deliberately chose China as the epicenter of the virus that turn people into zombies to make a point about the dangers of an authoritarian regime with strong control over the press (PEN America 2020). Brooks refused to censor those chapters, which led to his book not being published in China. In a subsequent interview about COVID-19, Brooks reiterated that he chose to set the origin of the virus in China because such viruses are especially likely to have an undetected early spread in a country with no free press (PEN America 2020). He also explained that he was modeling *World War Z* on the first SARS outbreak, where China denied its part in the outbreak, and the virus quickly spread around the world. And, according to Brooks, the COVID-19 outbreak demonstrated the dangers of a virus emerging in a country with no press freedom and where authorities could quickly suppress those trying to raise the alarm (PEN America 2020).

PEN America’s report offers several recommendations for Hollywood. Some of those were: First, studios should pledge to only make changes to the Chinese version of their scripts, not the international one. Second, studios should also commit to transparency by disclosing any requests they receive to remove content. Third, the MPAA and major studios should take a greater leadership role in promoting these practices. Fourth, Hollywood should strive to include more Asian and Asian-American characters in their films, contributing to the diversity of representations on screen. Fifth, Hollywood should act in solidarity with dissident voices in China, such as smaller filmmakers at home and abroad (PEN America 2020).

On December 2, 2022, I interviewed James Tager, author of the report and Deputy Director of Free Expression Research and Policy at PEN America, at his office in New York. During the interview, I inquired about the studios’ response to the recommendations made by PEN America. Tager provided the following response:



There's been no uptake of our recommendations. Which, unfortunately, we're not surprised by. There's no meaningful incentive, really. The incentives are against the studios taking these recommendations. We made recommendations such as, for instance, if there is government interference with the film, just disclose it. But why would they? Especially because they'll be yelled at even more. There was feedback from some of our recommendations, and perhaps the trickiest thing about this issue is it could make it worse because it just pushes the self-censorship further back into the process. And while I stand by our recommendations and transparency, it really is, overall, a legitimate concern. And we saw with the [movie] *Pixels* example: the Sony hack revealed the reason why they changed the global release was because they were afraid that people would compare the Chinese release to the global release and be criticized. So frustratingly, the studios don't want to get caught compromising... So, again, and I used this phrase a lot when the report came out, movie studios just want this issue to go away. They don't want to engage. They see no benefits in engaging in it. They just want to keep the course. Studios like any multinational company are risk averse... They'll try to avoid anything that could be a stir.

The interactions between the creative economy and politics are once again evident. As Tager notes, studios are often hesitant to accept political recommendations due to their focus on profit and aversion to risk as multinational companies. Therefore, to fully comprehend the political implications and soft power effects of films, it is important to also consider their creative economy dimension. Although the studios did not adopt PEN America's recommendations, the report serves as an example of civil society's response in this politically charged climate.

In the political institution arena, Wendy Su (2022a) argued that the U.S. side had long expressed anxiety or even panic over a Chinese Communist takeover of Hollywood. As the two superpowers competed for world leadership, the U.S. increasingly feared China's rise and the Chinese threat and seems to be dragged into a Thucydides Trap (Su 2022a). According to the professor, in the new cold war against China, especially launched across the digital frontier with U.S. sanctions against ZTE, Huawei, and TikTok, the film industry could not evade politics and became a target as well (Su 2022a). Vice President Mike Pence, Senator Ted Cruz, and Attorney General William Barr all joined the crusade, as I highlighted at the beginning of this chapter, pointing fingers at China's censors, accusing Hollywood of kowtowing to Beijing, and proposing a law to punish studios that changed their films to appease the Chinese (Su 2022a).

Su (2022a) asserts that Disney's 2020 remake of *Mulan*, which I will analyze in the following section, was also compromised by politics. Especially when the film's lead actress Liu Yifei voiced her support for the actions of the Hong Kong police against the pro-democracy movement, and Disney acknowledged receiving help from "publicity departments" in Turpan and the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, both of which house forced reeducation camps (Su 2022a). Su (2022a) points out that, in September 2020, the political offensive found a new target: Netflix's adaptation of Liu Cixin's *The Three-Body Problem*. Accusing the Chinese

author Liu Cixin of openly support China's mass internment of Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang, a group of Republican senators opposed Netflix's high-profile plan to have *Game of Thrones* creators David Benioff and D. B. Weiss adapt Liu's best-selling sci-fi trilogy *The Three-Body Problem* (Su 2022a). Dean Garfield, Netflix's VP of Global Public Policy, responded that the company does not agree with Liu's statements because they have nothing to do with his book or this Netflix program and that Netflix evaluates each initiative on its own merits (Su 2022a).

According to Su (2022a), the struggle between opposing ideologies and value systems in this new cold war is intense. And, with the argument that the US entertainment industry is meant to be a bearer of American values and shouldn't do business at the risk of sacrificing those values, U.S. lawmakers are increasingly bringing politics into business (Su 2022a). One example of this is the *Stopping Censorship, Restoring Integrity and Protecting Talkies Act*, or *SCRIPT Act*, proposed by Republican Senator for Texas Ted Cruz in 2020. According to a press release on Ted Cruz's website, the legislation aims to cut "off Hollywood studios from assistance they receive from the Department of Defense if those studios censor their films for screening in China," being "part of Sen. Cruz's comprehensive push to combat China's growing influence over what Americans see and hear, which includes legislation targeting information warfare from the Chinese Communist Party across higher education, sports, films, radio broadcasts, and more."<sup>21</sup> According to Rebecca Davis, the *SCRIPT Act* "asks American companies to give Congress a list of all titles submitted to Chinese authorities for approval in the past decade for review", reporting that one top film executive with deep ties to China laughed and said "Good luck with that" (R. Davis 2020a). Davis says that business leaders on both sides of the Pacific have so far dismissed Cruz's idea as political posturing that cannot be implemented in light of the deteriorating U.S.-China ties. This is because it focuses on film distribution rather than development, making it difficult to enforce (R. Davis 2020a). Chinese companies actively participate in the production of the movies they finance, providing creative input early in the scripting process to ensure that the content will adhere to local standards and laws. This is an unregulated, behind-closed-doors procedure (R. Davis 2020a).

Although the *SCRIPT Act* was still not in effect (as of the time of writing of this chapter, July 2023), a "watered-down version" of it is (Y. Zhao 2023). A recently enacted military bill contains a little-known clause that prohibits the United States government from funding films that have been altered to comply with Chinese government demands to be sold in the Chinese market (T. Johnson 2023). The results of such an act are uncertain, as the actual number of

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<sup>21</sup> Available at: <https://www.cruz.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/sen-cruz-to-introduce-legislation-cutting-off-hollywood-studios-over-complicity-in-chinese-censorship>

movies that seek Department of Defense cooperation is small, and some in the industry see the provision as symbolic, another way to target left-leaning Hollywood in the culture wars (T. Johnson 2023). As stated by Schuyler Moore, corporate and entertainment finance attorney at Greenberg Glusker in Los Angeles, “It’s a very silly political statement that has no real-world application” (T. Johnson 2023).

Regardless of its possible inoperativeness, there is an interesting aspect of the legislation: it ultimately cleared Congress with overwhelming bipartisan support (T. Johnson 2023). According to USC professor and China expert Stanley Rosen, that “is of course not surprising, since the only thing Democrats and Republicans seem to agree on these days is that China is evil and must be contained” (T. Johnson 2023). Rosen’s comment reinforces the notion that the honeymoon between China and Hollywood may be ending, as it suggests that resistance to China is becoming a consensus within the American political sphere. As a result, it may become more challenging to use Hollywood as a means of promoting Chinese narratives, making it difficult to achieve China’s foreign policy objectives.

Wendy Su (2022a), however, highlights that the situation is not better on the other side of the Pacific Ocean either. In late 2016 and early 2017, the Chinese government increased its control over outflows of money due to worries about the slowdown in China’s economic growth and the devaluation of the yuan. The Chinese government severely restricted IPOs because it was concerned that expensive acquisitions by entertainment companies might harm the Chinese stock market. These rules barred businesses from other industries that had recently acquired entertainment assets from registering as entertainment corporations and making substantial profits. The Dalian Wanda Group’s international deals in particular were viewed as being overvalued and underachieving. Once China’s state-owned banks stopped lending to the company and reevaluated its international purchases in 2017, the company withdrew from the world arena (Su 2022a).

The expansion of the Chinese film industry started to decrease in 2018. Even while the box office increased that year by 9 percent over 2017, it was still deemed moderate growth compared to the 13.5 percent the year before, reaching RMB 60.98 billion (\$8.87 billion) (Su 2022a). The box office proportion of homegrown films increased to 62 in 2018 percent thanks to a few successful domestic Chinese blockbusters. These positive indications and any sense of triumphal atmosphere, however, were quickly eclipsed by hard reality as Chinese film and television production entered a period known as the “cold winter,” which I shall discuss in more detail in Chapter 4. A few patriotic films’ National Day theater attendance in 2019 briefly increased the domestic film market and amplified the year’s total box office income. Conversely,

the market share for Hollywood films fell to 31% or less, contradicting Hollywood's initial hopes of seizing the chance to widen its prominence in China (Su 2022a).

The COVID-19 pandemic outbreak in 2019 caused catastrophic damage to China's film industry. 5,328 film and television firms had their business licenses revoked or canceled as of April 2020 (Su 2022a). Three significant theater chains, Wanda, Jiyi, and Xingfulanhai, collectively suffered a financial loss of 800 million yuan (approximately \$114 million) in the first quarter of 2020. In a similar vein, the U.S. economy lost \$7 billion over the course of the six months starting in March 2020, and 93% of exhibition companies had to deal with losses of 75 percent in the second quarter of that year.

According to Su (2022a), despite the harsh reversal of U.S.-China relations and the financial impact of the pandemic on the film industries of both countries, Hollywood's increasing reliance on the Chinese market has remained a major continuity in their partnership after 2017. Hollywood movies that underperformed in the U.S. found success in China, such as *Rampage* (2018), *The Meg* (2018), *Venom* (2018), and *Aquaman* (2018). And many superhero movies were released earlier or synchronously with their U.S. releases in an attempt to replicate the success of *Aquaman*, such as *Captain Marvel* (2019), *Shazam!* (2019), *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), *Spider-Man: Far from Home* (2019), *Dark Phoenix* (2019), and *Frozen 2* (2019). However, the 70th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China in 2019 saw nationalistic movies take a larger market share, reducing Hollywood's portion to 31% with only two Hollywood movies featuring among the top ten highest-grossing titles in China that year – *Avengers: Endgame* and *Fast and Furious: Hobbs and Shaw*. Despite this, the performance of Hollywood films in China demonstrates their continued attraction to Chinese audiences and their importance to the overall Chinese film economy (Su 2022a).

Su (2022a) also narrates that, unexpectedly but not surprisingly, Hollywood's biggest chance to profit from the Chinese market comes from China's increased censorship. The Chinese government tightened its domestic film control before the state's 70th-anniversary celebration, which made room for Hollywood productions and allayed concerns about the impact of the U.S.-China trade war on the American film industry (Su 2022a). The delayed release of *The Eight Hundred* (2020), because of its depiction of Kumingtang warriors battling the Japanese invasion, and *The Last Wish* (2019), because of concerns over depicting a dying teen's desire to lose his virginity, left a gap in the market (Su 2022a). Hollywood films were imported in greater numbers, exceeding the annual quota with 40 and 42 films in 2017 and 2018, respectively, to cover this gap and satisfy audience demand (Su 2022a).

COVID-19 made the Chinese market even more crucial for Hollywood's finances.

Cinemas in China reopened in October 2020 with 75% seating capacity, and when *The Eight Hundred* was finally released it became the biggest global epic of 2020, grossing over \$460 million worldwide, nearly all of which came from ticket sales in China (Su 2022). Disney's live-action remake of *Mulan* (2020) premiered in China instead of North America, but performed disappointingly (which I will debate next), while Christopher Nolan's *Tenet* (2020) took \$20 million in China compared with North American ticket sales of just \$36.1 million (Su 2022). And, in October 2020, China overtook North America as the world's biggest box office (Su 2022a).

Finally, Wendy Su (2022a) highlights new challenges and trends in China-U.S. relations. Hollywood films are losing their glamor in China as domestic movies, together with those from Korea, Japan, India, and Europe, are increasingly popular and competing in the market. The success of homegrown movies such as *Wolf Warrior 2* (2017), *Dying to Survive* (2018), *The Wandering Earth* (2019), *The Eight Hundred* (2020), and *Hi, Mom* (2021) shows that Chinese people are proud of their motherland and are concerned about domestic social issues (Su 2022a). The tastes and viewing habits of the Chinese audience are shifting, and they are increasingly embracing more diverse content. For Hollywood, there is good news as their exports still enjoy a favorable position in the Chinese market despite fading popularity (Su 2022a). However, Chinese audiences are wanting more than special-effects-laden action or sci-fi movies: they appreciate stories that are relatable to them through universal values and great storytelling (Su 2022a). Film co-productions continue to pose a big challenge for filmmakers of both countries, and both industries need to experiment with new storytelling modes and techniques to better incorporate Chinese cultural elements into Hollywood-style blockbusters (Su 2022a), a topic I will explore further in Chapter 3. Lastly, both sides need to pay more attention to streaming services, digital production, distribution, and marketing, as these are reshaping the global power structure and transforming the media industries. To take its relationship with China forward, Hollywood must face these digital challenges and find new ways of collaboration (Su 2022a).

In this changing environment, some analysts pose that China-Hollywood relations may be moving even further, in a way that "Hollywood won't budge for Chinese censors anymore" (Toh 2022). Mainly for three reasons. First, as the Chinese market faces some difficulties and does not show as much potential as in the past, studios are starting to rethink script changes, knowing that this could bring criticism in the West. Some examples mentioned include, in addition to *Top Gun: Maverick*, the case of *Lightyear* (2022), Disney and Pixar animation, in which Disney refused to remove a brief, same-sex kissing scene, and *Spider-Man: No Way Home* (2021), in which Sony Pictures refused requests from Chinese regulators to "cut out or

minimize the appearance of the Statue of Liberty in a scene” (Toh 2022). As Aynne Kokas declared to Michelle Toh, studios are on an unpleasant tightrope due to such requests: “[For producers,] there’s not a guarantee that I’ll be able to double my profits, and I might actually damage my US market... I mean, removing the Statue of Liberty is something that could potentially draw negative attention to your film in a highly polarized US political environment” (Toh 2022). As a counter-example, Kokas pointed to the decision in 2022 by Warner Bros. to remove footage alluding to a gay relationship in the Chinese version of its latest *Harry Potter* movie, *Fantastic Beasts: The Secrets of Dumbledore* (2022) (Toh 2022). A Warner Bros. spokesperson told CNN Business it was “committed to safeguarding the integrity of every film we release,” adding that “A six-second cut was requested and Warner Bros. accepted those changes to comply with local requirements, but the spirit of the film remains intact” (Toh 2022). Michelle Toh (2022) adds that, in Western markets, that kind of conduct runs an increased risk of blowback. This goes in the direction of what James Tager said in the interview he gave me in December 2022, about how studios don’t want to engage with the topic and just want it to go away.

Second, Hollywood executives also worry about China’s potential refusal to release their films in theaters, censored or not. Also, producers are very aware of how quickly the political climate might change. Two examples brought by Kokas: Marvel’s *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* (2021) and *Eternals* (2021), which were expected to be big hits in the Chinese market, given their ethnic Chinese-led casts and crew and, in the end, were not released in mainland China (Toh 2022). According to Kokas, the prevailing theories about the reasons why the movies did not secure a mainland release were that Simu Liu, the superhero star of *Shang-Chi*, and Chloe Zhao, director of *Eternals*, both received the cold shoulder after reportedly criticizing the Chinese government years ago (Toh 2022). In this sense, Kokas also argues that “there used to be much more transparency on the part of Chinese regulators” about what they would accept (Toh 2022).

In a 2022 paper titled “How Beijing Runs the Show in Hollywood,” Aynne Kokas provides another example of this audacity by Chinese regulators and censors. The first official Chinese version of David Fincher’s anarchic 1999 film *Fight Club* was released by the Chinese streaming service Tencent in early 2022, but it had a significant deletion. The ominous final shots of the movie, in which explosives cause tall city skyscrapers to collapse in flames, were among the scenes that were cut. Instead, the text “the police immediately found out the full plan and apprehended all crooks” was what spectators saw on television. Tencent restored eleven of the twelve minutes removed (still left out scenes with nudity) after widespread online mockery

and a public uproar from Chinese users who were aware of the movie's true ending thanks to pirated DVDs that have been circulating in the PRC for decades (Kokas 2022). Unlike other instances of censorship, in this particular case, the backlash originated from China.

The third reason why Hollywood will not budge for China anymore is that, given that Chinese moviegoers have recently shunned foreign films in favor of alternative options, such as patriotic propaganda war pictures, which have dominated the domestic box office, it is uncertain whether Western films will succeed even if they are released in China (Toh 2022). And since Chinese audiences are no longer a guarantee to Hollywood, there are those who speculate whether Hollywood still needs China, or vice versa (Toh 2022). There are a few examples of movies that recently skipped Chinese releases and still enjoyed huge commercial success, suggesting that dependency may no longer exist: *Top Gun: Maverick* became the highest-grossing movie of 2022, crossing the billion-dollar mark in global box office revenue, and *Spider-Man* also enjoyed a record-breaking debut, and in December 2022 became the first movie to hit the billion-dollar milestone since 2019 (Toh 2022). In any case, according to Kokas, while the performances were promising, it is too early to write off Hollywood's dependence on the world's second-largest economy (Toh 2022). The many pages on the complex relationship between China and Hollywood throughout this chapter tend to suggest that Kokas is right.

This section examined the end of the honeymoon period between Hollywood and China. The election of Donald Trump as President of the United States and the growing consensus among both Republicans and Democrats to contain China led to increased tensions in the U.S.-China relationship. This tension was also reflected in the relationship between Hollywood and China, with American studios facing pressure to resist altering their scripts to please the Chinese market and government. On the Chinese side, the government's crackdown on Chinese businessmen investing in Hollywood, coupled with the slowdown of the Chinese film market, contributed to the end of the honeymoon period. Additionally, the rise of nationalism in China has led to the popularity of domestic productions with patriotic themes, reducing the demand for Hollywood films. The COVID-19 pandemic further complicated the situation by causing cinema closures. As the relationship between China and Hollywood deteriorates, it becomes increasingly difficult for China to use Hollywood films to promote its narratives and to achieve its foreign policy goals. The counter-argument I put forward in the introduction of this dissertation, that China's growth provokes resistance, making it challenging to employ cinema for soft power, seems to prevail in this case.

In the next section, I will analyze *Mulan* (2020) as an example of the phases that the China-Hollywood relationship have gone through.

### 2.3. An analysis of *Mulan* (2020)

Few films exemplify the transition that the relationship between China and Hollywood underwent, as explored in the previous sections, quite as effectively as the U.S. movie *Mulan* (2020). The production of *Mulan* began in 2015 during the golden era of China-Hollywood relations, but its release in 2020 coincided with heightened tensions between the two countries. These tensions are noticeable in the reactions regarding the film and exemplify the relationship between politics and cinema. The film is also a Disney production, which, as we have seen in this chapter, has invested for years in its relationship with China because of possible gains in the Chinese market. Thus, *Mulan* also exemplifies the relationship between creative economy, global politics, and power in China-U.S. relationships.

To begin, I will provide a historical and contextual overview of the film's production. Next, I will analyze the movie itself, examining its themes, messages, and representations. Finally, I will draw conclusions about the lessons that *Mulan*'s case may offer both to China and the United States, particularly in relation to China's use of cinema as a tool for disseminating strategic narratives and achieving its foreign policy goals.

#### 2.3.1. History and contextualization of *Mulan*

In March 2015, Disney announced that it was developing a live-action adaptation of its animation *Mulan*, originally released in 1998. The decision followed the success of similar projects like *Alice in Wonderland* (2010), *Maleficent* (2014), and *Cinderella* (2015) (Ford 2015). Other Disney's live-action films were also in production, including *The Jungle Book* (released in 2016), *Beauty and the Beast* (released in 2017), and *Dumbo* (released in 2019). *Mulan* was initially slated for release on November 2, 2018, but was ultimately pushed back to March 27, 2020, and further postponed due to the pandemic (Galuppo 2020; Rubin 2020). In September 2020, Disney announced that the film would be released on Disney+ and, in regions where the platform was unavailable or where theaters were open (i.e., China), it would receive a theatrical release (D'Alessandro 2020). In the context of this dissertation, the significance of the film's



delayed release is that it coincides with a period of heightened tension between the U.S. and China (Su 2022a), which will have a significant impact on the film's reception and box office performance.

The film's production process also had an important aspect that is related to the political environment in a broader sense. The search for a director and lead actress was one of them. As soon as Disney announced its intention to reboot the film, the company faced an online petition not to "whitewash Mulan," which emerged after a series of accusations that Hollywood movies featured white actors in Asian roles (*BBC News* 2017). The Chinese epic, *The Great Wall*, starring Matt Damon as the lead character, was among the films accused of whitewashing (*BBC News* 2017), a topic I will analyze in Chapter 3. Curiously, the story about the petition even reverberated in China, as an article in *China Daily* took the opportunity to inform that "Hollywood has a history of casting Caucasian actors for its live-action adaptation of animated hits where the race of the animated protagonist is anything but white" (*China Daily* 2015).

When finally the Chinese actor and singer Liu Yifei was picked out of nearly 1,000 candidates for the role of Mulan, the announcement was met with delight on Twitter as well as on Sina Weibo, as many online celebrated it as a win for diversity in Disney films (*BBC News* 2017). The *CGTN America* also reported that the "casting choice was met with celebration in China. As one woman put it, 'I think this is something great for China. I think this is a very good thing and something for us, the Chinese people, to be proud of'" (*CGTN America* 2017). Liu was already immensely popular in China, after debuting in a string of successful television dramas in the middle of the 2000s while still a teen attending the Beijing Film School (Sun and Ford 2017). Additionally, Liu is fluent in English, having spent a portion of her youth living in Queens, New York, and has performed in English-language films such as *The Forbidden Kingdom* (2008) with Jackie Chan and Jet Li and *Outcast* (2014) with Nicolas Cage and Hayden Christensen (Sun and Ford 2017). So there was even more expectation for the movie.

As for the choice of director, Disney wanted it to be ideally an Asian person. The Taiwan-born and Oscar-winning director Ang Lee was approached, but he had to pass due to a prior commitment to another film, not without adding that "It'd be great to see an Asian do it, of course" (A. Lee 2016). In the end, Niki Caro was chosen to direct *Mulan*, becoming the second woman at Disney to direct a movie budgeted at over \$100 million (Sun 2017). In the news, it was highlighted that "Disney and producers Chris Bender, Jason Reed and Jake Weiner are taking pains to assure fans that *Mulan* will be culturally authentic" (Sun 2017). The news also emphasized that "In addition to extensive conversations with Chinese cultural consultants and working closely with Disney's own China-based team, the studio is bringing on Hong

Kong-based super-producer Bill Kong as executive producer” (Sun 2017). Kong is known as the producer of some of the most successful Chinese films internationally, such as *Hero* (2002), *House of Flying Daggers* (2004), and the Oscar-nominated *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), as well as many of China’s biggest hits, including *Monster Hunt* (2015), *Wolf Totem* (a 2015 Chinese-French co-production, directed by Jean-Jacques Annaud, the same director banned from China in the 1990s for *Seven Years in Tibet*) and *Journey to the West* (2013) (Sun 2017).

As the production advanced, more news about differences between the 2020 live-action and the 1998 animation became available, adding to the anticipation. One of them was the exclusion of Mushu, Mulan’s dragon sidekick, voiced in the animation by Eddie Murphy. According to producer Jason Reed, the choice was based on considerations of Chinese culture: “The dragon is a sign of respect and it’s a sign of strength and power, and that sort of using it as a silly sidekick didn’t play very well with the traditional Chinese audience” (Szany 2020a). Another difference that was motivated by thinking in a global audience (especially the Chinese audience) regards Mulan’s hair. In a classic scene from the 1998 animation, Mulan cuts her hair to pass as a man. That would not happen in the live-action, because, according to producer Reed, “Chinese warriors wore their hair long... Since we’re doing the live-action version, because we’re looking at the worldwide market, we thought we had to bring that level of cultural accuracy to it” (Szany 2020a).

One more significant change was related to Captain Li Shang’s absence. “Li Shang’s bond with Mulan’s male alter-ego Ping speaks volumes for the LGBTQ community,” and the character is considered a “bisexual icon” (Szany 2020b). According to the producer Reed, the decision to rework the character, splitting into two roles, was influenced by the #MeToo movement: “I think particularly in the time of the #MeToo movement, having a commanding officer that is also the sexual love interest was very uncomfortable and we didn’t think it was appropriate” (Szany 2020b).

Thus, politics played a crucial role in the production of the movie *Mulan*. This was clear regarding both domestic U.S. concerns, such as the increasing impact of the #MeToo movement, and international matters, such as the need for better representation of Chinese culture (as with the dragon Mushu) and the inclusion of Asian actors and directors in the production process. And politics will once again become a significant factor when the lead actress was involved in the Hong Kong issue.

In August 2019, during a period of heightened tension in Hong Kong with widespread protests and police crackdowns, Chinese actress Liu Yifei posted a message on Weibo

expressing support for the Hong Kong police: “I support the Hong Kong police. You can all attack me now. What a shame for Hong Kong” (Yeung 2019). Other Chinese celebrities, including Jackie Chan, also adopted a nationalist discourse in this context and faced criticism on social media (Yeung 2019). In the case of *Mulan*, however, this triggered a series of protests to boycott the Disney film, when it was finally released: “This film is released today. But because Disney kowtows to Beijing, and because Liu Yifei openly and proudly endorses police brutality in Hong Kong, I urge everyone who believes in human rights to #BoycottMulan,” tweeted prominent Hong Kong activist Joshua Wong (Kaur 2020). The protests to boycott *Mulan* have also spread to activists in Thailand and Taiwan – propelled in large part by the #MilkTeaAlliance, an online movement uniting pro-democracy protesters in Hong Kong, Thailand, and Taiwan with concerns about China’s influence in the region (Kaur 2020).

When asked to comment on Liu Yifei’s political views, Disney’s President of Production, Sean Bailey, emphasized that the company is focused solely on the film and her performance, stating that “Yifei’s politics are her own” (Ford 2020). However, the importance of the Chinese market for the success of *Mulan* cannot be denied, as highlights Comscore analyst Paul Dergarabedian, noting that “It’s a huge blow for Disney if it doesn’t release in China” (Ford 2020). Disney’s apprehensions extended beyond just this particular film, as Schwartzel (2022) underscores, “Disney had the box-office grosses of future movies to consider. It had toy sales to keep in mind. It had a theme park to worry about.”

Despite Liu’s controversial statement drawing criticism globally, some experts speculate that it could actually increase support for the film in China. USC professor Stanley Rosen underlined that the Chinese government has publicly supported the film and is likely to downplay the impact of any boycotts: “There’s a real impetus on the part of the Chinese government to make this work. I’m sure the government is going to try to show that the boycott has had no effect” (Ford 2020).

If adapting to major markets is not a new strategy for Hollywood or Disney, as I pointed out throughout this dissertation, the current situation with China has its own particularities. U.S.-based media conglomerates, such as Disney, DreamWorks Animation, and Universal, have invested in Chinese facilities, making these businesses more vulnerable to pressure from Chinese officials (Kokas 2022). These studios have physical entertainment venues in China, and while local partners are majority stakeholders, the studios’ exposure remains substantial, as losing favor in China threatens visits to costly theme parks in Beijing or could even lead to the shuttering of production studios in Shanghai (Kokas 2022). Additionally, media firms often use their content to draw crowds to their physical venues. For instance, Shanghai Disney Resort

urged fans of *Mulan* to visit for “World Princess Week” and enjoy a ride and sculpture gardens featuring characters from the film. The Royal Banquet Hall restaurant even had a *Mulan*-themed dining room (Kokas 2022).

However, these promotional efforts, known in trade jargon as “cross-platform synergies,” overlook the questionable actions media firms take to gain and maintain access to the Chinese entertainment market (Kokas 2022). And, again, *Mulan* provided an illustrative example. Disney shot parts of *Mulan* in Xinjiang with the support of entities such as the Turpan Municipality Public Security Bureau, which is closely associated with the PRC’s “vocational centers” (considered as forced-labor internment camps by many in the world) for Xinjiang’s Uyghurs. Disney even included a “special thanks” to Turpan Public Security Bureau onscreen, when the governing body had already been placed on the U.S. Commerce Department’s “Entities List” for “acting contrary to the foreign policy interests of the United States” (Kokas 2022). Disney was heavily criticized for this (Murat 2020; Bond 2020; *BBC News* 2020; Kuo 2020) but still defended the credits, stating that “It is standard practice across the film industry worldwide to acknowledge in a film’s credits the cooperation, approvals, and assistance provided by various entities and individuals over the course of a film’s production” (R. Davis 2020e). And even this response was only offered after the PRC had banned all mention of *Mulan* from Chinese media (Kokas 2022), “in an order issued after controversy erupted overseas over the film’s links with the Xinjiang region” (*Reuters* 2020). As stated by Disney CFO Christine McCarthy when addressing the controversy over *Mulan*, the uproar has created “a lot of issues” (Hayes 2020).

Indeed, *Mulan* had a lot of issues. And it failed to attract Chinese audiences, which was one of its main goals. The reasons for that are mainly related to the film itself, and I will analyze them next. But, to conclude the production side of *Mulan*, it is relevant to point out that, as stated by Aynne Kokas (2022), the power of Chinese regulators to jeopardize a brand’s bottom line is one of their most effective tools. Media businesses that rely on having access to the Chinese market will not be ardent supporters of free speech. Brands will consider how much it will cost to be excluded from the enormous Chinese market that the CPC so carefully guards before criticizing China (Kokas 2022). It is also worth noting that political debates completely took over the production of the film, even before its release. While some of the backlashes could have happened before 2017, especially regarding the Xinjiang issue, the end of the honeymoon environment between Hollywood and China only amplified these tensions.

In the upcoming section, I will explore the themes, messages, and representations depicted in *Mulan*, along with their connection to China’s strategic narratives. Furthermore, I

will address the reasons behind the film's inability to resonate with Chinese audiences.

### 2.3.2. *Mulan: the film*

Hua Mulan (played by the Chinese actress Liu Yifei): But how can you fight...

Hua Zhou (played by the Hong-Kong-American actor Tzi Ma): I am the father. It is my place to bring honor to our family on the battlefield. You are the daughter. Learn your place.

(...)

Xianniang (played by the Chinese actress Gong Li): Join me. We will take our place together.

Hua Mulan: I know my place. And it is my duty to fight for the kingdom and protect the Emperor.

(...)

Emperor (played by the Chinese actor Jet Li): Rise up. You are a mighty warrior. Rise up like a phoenix. Fight for the kingdom and its people.

The 2020 live-action remake of *Mulan* was highly anticipated by fans of the original 1998 animated film, which is considered a beloved classic by many. And even in China, there was an expectation of a remake “with Chinese characteristics” (Liu 2020). However, the movie received a mixed reception upon its release. In the West, Rotten Tomatoes<sup>22</sup> gave it a 72% rating, praising its visual appeal while criticizing its lack of depth. *The New York Times* was more positive, extolling the film's portrayal of a strong female lead (Dargis 2020), while the *BBC* called it “humourless and sombre” and not as good as its animated predecessor (Barber 2020).

In China, on the other hand, the movie was widely seen as a failure. The main reasons, according to the Chinese press, are related to the film *per se*: “The unpopularity of the film has nothing to do with the West's defamation, which the Chinese audience do not care about. It is just the poor art level it showcases and misunderstandings of Chinese culture that disappointed the market” (L. Song and Xie 2020).

In the next paragraphs, I will analyze which are the misunderstandings of Chinese culture and which issues were treated at a poor artistic level. I will also address some criticisms made in the West about how the film could represent China's delegation of the task of promoting its narratives to Hollywood.

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<sup>22</sup> Available at: [https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/mulan\\_2020](https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/mulan_2020).



**Figure 1:** Chinese poster of *Mulan*. **Source:** promotional material.

The well-known story about the extraordinary adventures in the military world of a female soldier named Hua Mulan is one of the many tales and traditions that have been part of China's rich cultural heritage for hundreds of years, if not millennia (A. Wang 2022). In the story, Hua Mulan cross-dresses in order to take the place of her old father in the imperial army. After displaying bravery on the battlefield, she declines the emperor's offer of an official position in favor of a family reunion. Via a variety of elite and mainstream genres, the essential plot of Mulan has reached both social echelons (A. Wang 2022). Additionally, over the years, numerous film adaptations of Mulan have been produced, each offering unique interpretations of the legendary tale. Some of these adaptations include Yueh Feng's *Lady General Hua Mulan* (1964), Lili Qiu and Lang Xiao's *Saga of Mulan* (1994), Peter Fernandez's *The Secret of Mulan* (1998), Darrell Rooney and Lynne Southerland's *Mulan II* (2004) – a sequel to Disney's 1998 *Mulan* –, Jingle Ma and Wei Dong's *Mulan: Rise of a Warrior* (2009), and Chen Cheng's

*Matchless Mulan* (2020).<sup>23</sup>

Wang (2022) highlights that the Poem of Mulan, written in the fifth century, is the earliest and most well-known rendition of the story of Mulan, and, because it has been included in school textbooks for many years, this work has influenced how the majority of Chinese people view Mulan. Wang stresses that the film *Mulan* (2022), however, exhibits disparate core values from the Poem of Mulan, leading the movie to meet its Waterloo in her homeland. Significantly, the idea of meeting its Waterloo was echoed in Chinese media referring to *Mulan* (2020): a “work aimed at Chinese audiences that met its Waterloo in the region” (Wu 2021).

In the live-action film adaptation of *Mulan*, set in an unspecified ancient Imperial China (from fourth to sixth century), when the Emperor orders one man from each family to serve in the army to fight Rouran warriors led by Böri Khan, who is helped by a witch named Xianniang, Hua Mulan disguises herself as a man to take her elderly father’s place in the army. Mulan overcomes initial obstacles to training as a soldier and aids in the defeat of the Rourans by creating an avalanche. After being exposed to be a woman and banished from the army, Mulan discovers that the Rourans’ true strategy is to capture and kill the Emperor. Returning to alert the soldiers, she leads a squad to save the Emperor and, with the self-sacrificing Xianniang’s assistance, kills Khan. Mulan rejects the Emperor’s invitation to join his private guard and goes back to her family’s house.

Which were the disparate core values from the Poem of Mulan exhibited by the movie that made it meet its Waterloo in China? Wang (2022) claims that the poem concentrates on feminism and being true, whereas the movie emphasizes filial piety and devotion. The poetry, which is free of supernatural displays and interventions and is influenced by Confucian agnosticism and atheism, contrasts with how the film portrays Mulan as a quasi-witch with powerful *qi* that cannot be used by females. The movie also presents historical and cultural facts that seem counterfactual to Chinese viewers, which is seen as disrespectful of and misunderstanding Chinese culture (A. Wang 2022).

In this sense, Ji Yuqiao (2020) wrote in the *Global Times* that Disney’s live-action remake of *Mulan* was met with criticism from Chinese audiences for several reasons. One issue was related to the makeup worn by lead actress Liu Yifei and other female characters, which was seen as inaccurate for the period and made viewers uncomfortable. Another issue was the portrayal of architecture: Mulan is shown living in a storied building that emerged in the eleventh century, while the story takes place in the fourth to sixth century. Additionally,

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<sup>23</sup> Mulan Film Adaptations. *IMDB*, Aug. 11, 2020. Available at: <https://www.imdb.com/list/ls081088582/>.

Disney's attempt to incorporate auspicious beasts like the Chinese dragon and phoenix fell short of expectations. Although in the film the statues of these two auspicious mythological creatures were featured in front of a Chinese palace, according to Chinese tradition, stone lions are typically used to guard entryways (Ji 2020).

Despite the criticisms, Ji Yuqiao (2020) also highlighted some positive aspects of the film. One of them was its updating of a traditional Chinese folk tale. Disney's promotional event on Sina Weibo to find "real Mulans" in modern times was seen as an excellent way to showcase the power of Chinese women and their contributions. The film's spiritual core, which emphasized loyalty (Zhong), courage (Yong), and truth (Zhen), resonated with modern Chinese women. During the event, there were mentioned examples of Chinese women like Fang Yurong, a doctor who was loyal to her duties during the fight against COVID-19, Ye Ziyi, a photographer who showed courage in pursuing her dreams, and Li Xiaomeng, a female e-sports athlete who stayed true to herself and chased her dreams in the male-dominated industry. These women embodied the values of loyalty, courage, and truth that the film highlighted, making it a positive portrayal of Chinese women in modern times (Ji 2020). Additionally, Ji (2020) said that the film crew traveled to several locations in China to find the most breathtaking scenes to include in the film and showcase the beauty of the nation. Certain places, like Zhangye Danxia National Geological Park in Gansu Province of northwest China, left a lasting impression on viewers everywhere (Ji 2020).

At this point, it is worth noting highlighting the accomplishments of Chinese women and presenting Chinese locales to the world aligns with China's strategic narratives. This can be seen when analyzing Chinese leaders' discourses about those issues. For instance, regarding the empowerment of women, Xi Jinping (2020) emphasized in his address at the High-level Meeting on the Twenty-fifth Anniversary of The Fourth World Conference on Women, that:

Equality between men and women is a basic state policy in China. We have put in place a legal system comprising over 100 laws and regulations for fully protecting women's rights and interests. As a matter of fact, China is recognized by the World Health Organization as one of the ten fast-track countries in women's and children's health. In China, the gender gap in compulsory education has been largely closed. Women account for over 40 percent of the country's workforce, and more than half of China's Internet start-up businesses are set up by women (Xi 2020).

Moreover, Xi Jinping (2022) underscored in his speech at the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China that the nation "will remain committed to the fundamental national policy of gender equality and protect the lawful rights and interests of women and children."



The theme of gender equality is woven into various scenes of the film. One particularly poetic instance is when Mulan returns from a ride on her horse, Black Wind, and tells her family, “Black Wind and I run alongside two rabbits running side by side. I think one was a male, one was a female. But you know, you can’t really tell when they’re running that fast.”

In the realm of tourism and cultural heritage, Xi (2022) articulated a commitment to putting “more effort into protecting cultural artifacts and heritage, better protect and preserve historical and cultural heritage in the course of urban and rural development, and build and make good use of national cultural parks.” Additionally, he emphasized that the country “will encourage positive interplay between culture and tourism and advance deeper integration of the two sectors” (Xi 2022).

In this context, it may not be coincidental that one of the highlighted locales was associated with the ancient Silk Road. As reported by Schwartzel (2022), “Disney had tried its best to get Chinese moviegoers on board with the new movie, spending months on historical research and setting scenes along the ancient Silk Road that Xi was rebuilding.” Therefore, Disney’s interest in utilizing renowned settings to captivate Chinese audiences could indeed have been genuine. However, among these settings, as previously mentioned, was Xinjiang. As underscored by Eva Xiao (2023), “The Xinjiang government’s promotion of tourism is also aligned with Beijing’s political and ideological goals of instilling a sense of patriotism in ethnic minorities, many of whom live in border regions like Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia, and Yunnan, and inducing them to embrace a unitary Chinese identity, instead of strongly identifying with a distinct culture or ethnic background.”

Xiao (2023) further points out that government officials have explicitly emphasized the use of tourism to achieve this goal in public speeches. In 2022, a Chinese article in the People’s Daily featured Xu Ruijun, the head of the Xinjiang Department of Culture and Tourism, stating that his department did a good job of “telling the story of China’s Xinjiang.” He emphasized that the cultural and tourism efforts of the region must firmly grasp the central theme of nurturing a shared consciousness of Chinese nationality (Xiao 2023).

Consequently, the presence of these very narratives within a Hollywood production, strategically aimed at garnering favor with both Chinese audiences and authorities, stands as an illustration of how China can harness Hollywood films to advance its strategic narratives.

In any case, there was more criticism of *Mulan* in China. Another report in the *Global Times*, by Song Lin and Xie Wenting, underscores yet other failures of the movie. It mentions Shi Wenxue, a film critic, who told the *Global Times* that the poor box office performance of *Mulan* in the Chinese mainland was not surprising because it failed to tell a Chinese story

accurately and attractively. In addition to the architectural misunderstanding, already mentioned, Shi said that “The general in the movie played Taichi – which was created in the Yuan Dynasty (1279-1368),” while *Mulan* is from the Northern Wei Dynasty (386-534) (L. Song and Xie 2020). He concluded that “It also blended conventional settings of traditional Western fairy tales incompatible with Chinese historical stories. Disney failed to do enough research on non-Western elements and stories. That led to many silly mistakes in the movie” (L. Song and Xie 2020). Hence, there exists a preoccupation with accuracy, a concern that does not seem to be shared by Disney.

The report also quotes Yun Feiyang, a Chinese movie critic with more than 1.51 million followers on Sina Weibo, who said: “Instead of a Chinese story, it may be more appropriate to call it a Disney princess story, such as *Frozen*” (L. Song and Xie 2020). This comment brings us back to an analysis by Greene (2014) I debated earlier in this chapter, which is significant in understanding Hollywood’s representation of China. Yun argued that Hollywood films about China were not really about China at all but rather about the United States itself. The films often portrayed a clear division between Westerners and Easterners, with the East being exoticized and portrayed as the “other” (Greene 2014). Even in cases where this division seems to disappear, it is often replaced with an erasure of the other, with China being transformed into a nostalgic version of “early America.” Greene further claimed that even when examining more recent Hollywood productions, such as the first *Mulan* (1998) and the first *Kung Fu Panda* movie (2008), “Both films create a mythic, one-dimensional China in which everyone thinks and behaves like Americans. Far from destroying binary divisions, then, all these works create a world in which the self has engulfed the other” (Greene 2014, 12).

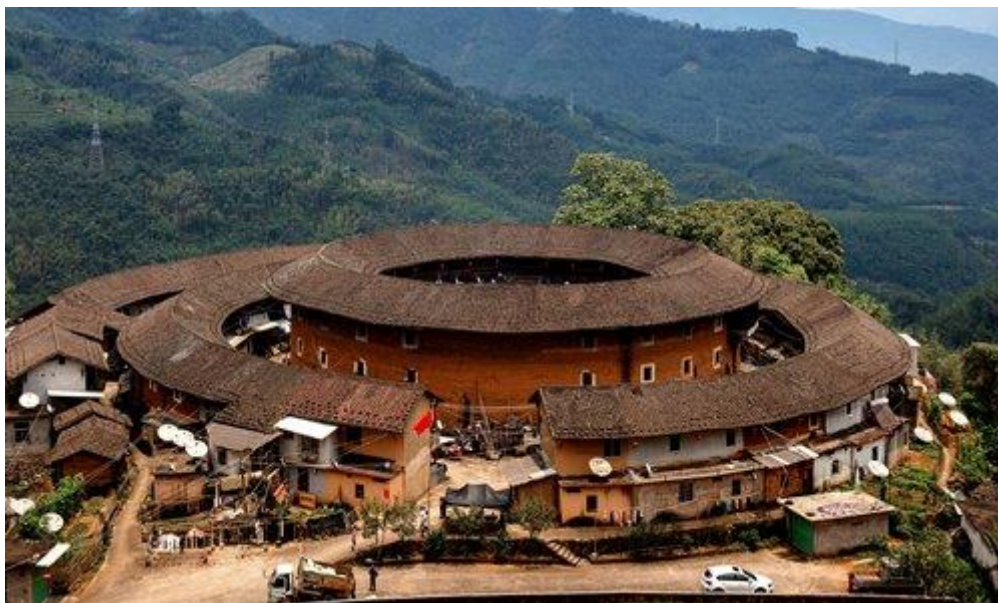
This point raises an important question about the effectiveness of using Hollywood films to promote Chinese soft power. If Hollywood movies about China ultimately end up being more about the United States than about China, as suggested by Greene’s analyses, or if they are perceived as typical Disney princess stories, do they truly contribute to advancing China’s foreign policy goals? The disappointment surrounding *Mulan*’s reception in China may stem from the realization that these types of films may not be effective in achieving those objectives.

In any case, even in the West, some have pointed out that the criticism of the film *Mulan* in China was not primarily focused on political issues but rather on the film’s own merits. Rebecca Davis addressed this perspective in her article titled “China Hates Disney’s ‘Mulan,’ but It Has Nothing to Do With Politics” (R. Davis 2020c). Davis cited comments from Chinese social media, where users expressed their dissatisfaction, saying, “The Americans invited all the famous Chinese actors they could think of and piled together all the Chinese elements that

they could find to create this car crash,” and highlighting how *Mulan* is “full of Western stereotypes and conjectures about China, and particularly ancient China” (R. Davis 2020c). Additionally, one comment mentioned *The Great Wall*, the movie I will analyze in Chapter 3, stating, “Even ‘The Great Wall’ is better than this... After watching ‘Mulan,’ I want to apologize to [‘Great Wall’ director] Zhang Yimou and [its star] Jing Tian” (R. Davis 2020c).

Many Chinese viewers expressed disappointment with Disney’s portrayal of Mulan in the live-action remake, citing a fundamental flaw in the character’s depiction. In particular, they felt that the film’s decision to give Mulan superhero-like abilities from childhood, thanks to her control of *qi*, removed the relatable, everywoman appeal of the character. This left her with little room to develop and grow as a character, according to many viewers in China (R. Davis 2020c). And some Western critics saw in the *qi* a reference to the *Star Wars* movies, because of the idea that her strength derives from her *qi* if only she could learn to control it (Debruge 2020a).

This aspect is also mentioned by a *New York Times* article, which reported that the film’s portrayal of *qi* as some specific magic ability typically found in boys struck viewers as particularly strange. *Qi*, the essential life force that permeates all things in the cosmos, is a concept from traditional Chinese philosophy (A. Qin and Chien 2020). The article also emphasized the “litany of complaints” that the film faced in China, including the fact that the filmmakers tried too hard to appeal to Chinese audiences while not making enough effort to get their historical facts correct, that *Mulan* was overly westernized while still succumbing to Orientalist stereotypes, and that they cast well-known Chinese actors but gave them English lines that felt awkward in a Chinese context (A. Qin and Chien 2020). Architecture also continued to draw criticism. Many complained that the “genuine” Mulan, who was described as coming from the northern steppes of China in the original poem, would never have resided in a *tulou*, the circular, earthen structures that are the typical houses for the ethnic Hakka people in the extreme south (A. Qin and Chien 2020).



**Figure 2:** A Fujian *tulou* in East China’s Fujian Province. **Source:** Chen (2019).

The article also underscores that there is a big difference between, for example, *Mulan* and the DreamWorks Animation series *Kung Fu Panda*. Unlike *Kung Fu Panda*, an original story about the adventures of a spunky panda named Po that has been a runaway success in China, *Mulan* is a well-known figure to many Chinese, and these geographic and historical inconsistencies will certainly not go unnoticed (A. Qin and Chien 2020).

But the movie has drawn criticism from historians and observers outside of China as well, for catering to Communist Party policies that support nationalism and ethnic Han Chinese chauvinism (A. Qin and Chien 2020). *Mulan*, who is portrayed as a Han heroine in the film, fights against the darker-skinned, black-clad Rouran invaders in an endeavor to save Jet Li’s character, the emperor. However, scholars have noted that *Mulan* was most likely of the Xianbei ethnicity, a tribe from the northern Chinese steppes, rather than being Han, and that she would have been ruled by a Khan rather than an emperor (A. Qin and Chien 2020). As emphasized by Aynne Kokas (2020b), “The way the villains are discussed, the placeless-ness of the west of China, the sumptuousness and the perfection of the imperial city – there’s this rewriting in order to fit a very specific imperial narrative.” And the scholar concludes: “Hollywood has a very illustrious history of making faceless, Turkic villains itself, so it’s almost the perfect collaboration” (Kokas 2020b).



**Figure 3:** A poster of *Mulan* depicting the villain, Bori Khan. **Source:** promotional material.

This point is especially relevant, as it speaks directly to China’s goal of using Hollywood films to promote its narratives. According to Kokas (2020b), “We’re accustomed to thinking of Hollywood as a vehicle of U.S. soft power. ‘Mulan,’ though, exemplifies how Beijing has deputized it to advance China’s political interests and national narrative.” The scholar explains that, although *Mulan* (2020) was initially praised for “embracing diversity” and “pushing themes of identity and girl power,” the real antagonist of the movie is not the patriarchal society that prevents Mulan from realizing her true identity and potential. It is, rather, the ethnic “others,” who are subtly shrouded in black and work to undermine the Han Chinese ethnostate (Kokas 2020b).

The dialogue I have introduced at the outset of this section effectively highlight this aspect. Amidst the ongoing discourse about gender equality and the recurrent exploration of women’s roles in society, it is noteworthy that when Mulan finally assumes her position, it is as a defender of the kingdom and protector of the Emperor against Northern invaders.

Kokas (2020b) mentions the importance of the Chinese market for Hollywood studios, pointing out that, until *Mulan* (2020), the signs of Beijing’s influence mostly have been subtle, if controversial. As in the case of *Top Gun: Maverick*, which I already debated, and of the animation *Abominable* (2019), which showed a map reflecting China’s South China Sea maritime claim, one disputed by both its neighbors and the U.S. government. *Abominable* is a

China-Hollywood co-production, and I will investigate the topic and the animation further in Chapter 3.

Kokas (2020b) emphasizes that *Mulan* loses the subtlety, though. The scholar compares *Mulan* and *Hero*, a 2002 historical fantasy by Zhang Yimou, for their themes, visual aesthetics, and overt nationalism. Kokas writes that *Mulan* mimics Zhang's lavish visual design, which includes aerial images of Chinese warriors covered in brilliant colors. Additionally, in *Mulan*, members of the imperial guard abandon their fortified citadel to attack the Rouran, with countless soldiers dying on the battlefield, just as in *Hero*, characters sacrifice themselves for the spirit of *tianxia*, referring to the heavenly mandate of Chinese leadership. Even the actor, Jet Li, who portrayed the rebel turned imperial ally in *Hero* and plays the yellow emperor in *Mulan*, appears in both films (Kokas 2020b).

Several lines from *Mulan* aptly illustrate the concept of resolute leadership to confront invaders and safeguard both the Chinese populace and kingdom. Upon learning of the Rouran's assault on the Northern garrisons, the Emperor declares: "We'll destroy this Rouran Army and their witch. Here's my decree. We'll build a mighty army. Every family will supply one man. We'll protect our beloved people and crush these murderers. Deploy the Imperial Army. The dynasty will not be threatened." Approaching the movie's conclusion, when challenged to a duel by the antagonist Bori Khan, the Emperor, in response to concerns of danger, asserts: "Silence! My people have suffered enough. Now I must act."

But Kokas points out that *Mulan* flips the script from *Hero*. Zhang's film was a Chinese studio production that was praised on the Chinese mainland and broke box office records but received harsh criticism for its authoritarian themes when it was released overseas (Chan 2004). *Mulan*, on the other hand, was created by an American studio, which is in the unprecedented position of having to promote Han nationalism in China (Kokas 2020b). In this sense, Kokas says that it is "not altogether unsurprising, then, that when lead actress Liu Yifei spoke out in support of the police suppressing protesters in Hong Kong, Disney stayed quiet – or that, when #BoycottMulan became the film's leading hashtag in the United States on the day of its release, Disney said nothing" (Kokas 2020b).

This comparison made by Kokas between *Mulan* and *Hero* is relevant, as there are divergent reviews of Zhang's film. As mentioned in Chapter 1 of this dissertation, Gary D. Rawnsley (2007) proposes a detailed reading of *Hero*, arguing that it discusses themes and concerns that have strong political overtones and imagery and are equally relevant to understanding contemporary China as they are to the Warring States era that serves as the movie's historical backdrop. Rawnsley (2007) analyzed the film's overlapping narratives and

how they relate to relevant political issues in modern China. Rawnsley (2007) argued that the film allows debates about whose voice is heard, whose version of history is legitimate, and how the powerful deal with narratives that challenge the official version of the story. The scholar also discussed censorship and official truth in contemporary China and the director's biography. Although some critics accused Zhang Yimou of praising a strong and authoritarian government in *Hero* – one of such critics was Evans Chan, who wrote an article entitled *Zhang Yimou's Hero and the Temptations of Fascism* (Chan 2004) –, Rawnsley disagrees. He argues that the film's apparent praise for a strong government actually contains several criticisms. Like the character Nameless, who tells different versions to approach the Emperor, Zhang Yimou could have made a film that appears to praise the government to approach it and show his story, which, in some layers, criticizes it (Rawnsley 2007).

In any case, what matters most for the purpose of this dissertation is that now is Hollywood advancing these narratives. Because of this, Kokas (2020b) claims that *Mulan* will go in perfectly with current Chinese blockbusters, where it has become fashionable to portray Han Chinese civilization as the model of good governance that is constantly in danger from foreign invaders. And the scholar cites two examples: Zhang's 2016 fantasy epic *The Great Wall* (analyzed in Chapter 3 of this dissertation), in which Chinese leaders (as well as Matt Damon's character) defend a border fort from literal monsters, and Wu Jing's *Wolf Warrior 2* (analyzed in Chapter 4 of this dissertation), in which retired Chinese soldiers protect a Chinese-run factory in Africa from terrorists. Such movies give Han Chinese leadership a timeless quality. And Kokas (2020b) concludes that it is “particularly perverse to conscript the legend of Mulan to advance this political narrative: In the story's original text, the Khan is China's leader, not its enemy.”

In *Mulan*, yet another significant theme emerges: the Confucian concept of filial piety (孝, *xiào*, translated as “devotion to family”). After having saved the kingdom and the Emperor's life, Mulan receives a personal invitation from the Emperor to join the Imperial Guard. Politely declining the offer, Mulan expresses,

Your Majesty, I'm deeply honored by this immeasurable invitation, but with humble apologies, I cannot accept it. I left home under cover of darkness and betrayed my family's trust. I made choices I knew would risk their dishonor. Since then, I have pledged an oath to be loyal, brave, and true. In order to fulfil this oath, I must return home and make amends to my family.

In response, the Emperor acknowledges, “Very well, Hua Mulan. Devotion to family is an essential virtue.”

Subsequently, Mulan returns home. Following a heartfelt reunion with her family, the Imperial Guard pays her a visit, reaffirming the invitation and presenting her with a gift from the Emperor: a sword.

Imperial soldier: As befits a great warrior, the sword is marked with the pillars of virtue.

Hua Zhou: Loyal, brave, true.

Hua Zhou: What is this fourth virtue I see?

Commander Tung: Read it out loud, Mulan.

Mulan: Devotion to family.

Father: You have brought honor to us all.

The Chinese character that is translated as “devotion to family” is 孝 (*xiào*). According to Qian Tingting and Tang Lijun (2023), the movie portrays Mulan as embodying one of the most significant Chinese virtues – patriotism and filial piety – which are regarded as the primary standards for assessing an individual’s honor. The scholars emphasize that, within the context of Confucian philosophy, filial piety embodies the virtue of showing deep respect towards one’s parents, elders, and ancestors. Confucian culture places immense importance on filial piety, considering it as the foundational element for all virtuous qualities and a fundamental tenet of Confucianism (Qian and Tang 2023).

Sin Wen Lau and Shih-Wen Sue Chen (2020) also explored the topic of filial piety. According to the scholars, in Disney’s rendition of *Mulan*, the character is rewarded for knowing her place and embodiment of her *xiào*: by conforming to the prevailing patriarchal structure, she evolves into a woman who can ostensibly achieve it all (Lau and Chen 2020). The authors underline that, within the film, the character Xianniang, serving as the antagonist, presents a striking contrast to Mulan. Xianniang urges Mulan to unite and rebel against the Emperor, aspiring to forge a realm where strong women like them are embraced for their authentic selves. However, Mulan’s response is a resolute “I know my place,” emphasizing her commitment to the service of her Emperor. In the climax, Xianniang selflessly sacrifices herself to safeguard Mulan. Through her rejection of the confines of the established system, Xianniang’s tragic end becomes symbolic of the limitations of her radical approach. Consequently, as per Lau and Chen (2020), rather than promoting a narrative of female empowerment, *Mulan* instead propounds the idea that women must prioritize male authority figures over their own aspirations to garner acknowledgment.

The authors highlight that the narrative of *Mulan* has not always conveyed this message. In a version penned by seventeenth-century author Chu Renhuo, set during the twilight of the Sui Dynasty (581-618), Xianniang emerges as a warrior princess who becomes Mulan’s sworn



sister. Together, they lead a contingent of female soldiers, embarking on joint ventures. This camaraderie is absent from Disney's adaptation (Lau and Chen 2020).

The notion of filial piety is intricately interwoven with my Chapter 1 analysis of Qin Yaqing's relational theory. According to Qin (2018), Chinese society, unlike Western societies dominated by rationalism and individual self-interest, is fundamentally grounded in relationships. A central aspect of Qin's argument is Confucius' emphasis on these social connections. In this regard, Qin posits that the logic of relationality guides social actors to meticulously consider relationships before acting, diverging from instrumental rationality, which requires well-defined relationships.

Qin (2018) contends that norms play a pivotal role in steering societal actions, especially within relationship contexts. For each of Confucius' five cardinal relationships – father-son, emperor-minister, husband-wife, brothers, and friends – a corresponding norm exists, governing and directing the specific ties. For example, Qin explicates that filial piety regulates the father-son connection, while sincerity governs friendships. Additionally, Qin highlights that, among these Confucian cardinal relationships, the father-son bond stands as the most intimate and significant. All these norms emerge from relational contexts, underlining the dominance of relational logic over consequences and appropriateness, effectively redefining rationality within a relational framework (Y. Qin 2018).

As argued by Qin (2018), these assumptions constitute a significant segment of the relational theory. This paradigm envisions the world as an intricate tapestry of relationships, wherein human connections shape the societal fabric. This viewpoint bestows crucial ontological status upon "relation" and asserts humanity as the cornerstone for understanding the societal landscape. Hence, it is intriguing that a Disney film precisely accentuates these pivotal ideas that Qin proposes the Western world should grasp more deeply.

Furthermore, an intriguing correlation arises with Qin Yaqing's argument regarding the significance of culture, defined as the background knowledge of a society, in the context of diversifying International Relations. According to Qin (2020a), a more profound comprehension of diverse cultures broadens perspectives within IR, given that IR theories are inherently influenced by the cultural milieu in which they originate. Unlike Confucian societies such as China, where filial piety is deeply ingrained, Western societies generally lack this facet in their foundational understanding. Hence, the promotion of these narratives by a Hollywood film becomes noteworthy, aligning with the broader aim of Chinese authorities to increase global recognition of China's narratives.

Crucially, it must be underscored that this does not inherently imply that the Hollywood

film aims to align with Qin Yaqing's theory or intentionally promote a society that emphasizes Chinese values of filial piety. Furthermore, Chinese leader's speeches, such as those related to gender equality, are not being taken at face value. The contention here is that the mere inclusion of these Chinese ideas in a Hollywood film contributes to the progression of strategic Chinese narratives, thereby fortifying China's soft power.

In this section, we have explored the journey of *Mulan* from high expectations to disappointment. While the film received mixed reviews in the West, it was considered a failure in China. Despite Disney's claims of authenticity, the Chinese audience pointed out several inconsistencies in the film, from historical inaccuracies to changes in Mulan's character. Consequently, many felt that *Mulan* was more like a typical Disney princess story set in China, rather than an authentic Chinese story. This raises questions about the feasibility of using Hollywood films to promote Chinese narratives. However, some analysts noted that the modified storyline of the film coincided with the narratives promoted both by Chinese government and blockbusters, which idealize Han Chinese civilization as a wise leader under constant threat from outsiders. Furthermore, *Mulan's* portrayal of Chinese women's achievements and the presentation of Chinese locales on the global stage also align with China's strategic narratives. There is also the promotion of the Confucian value of filial piety as an essential virtue. In this sense, China could indeed utilize Hollywood to propagate its narratives. Nevertheless, the film's failure in both the domestic and global markets reveals the challenges and lessons that can be learned from *Mulan*, which I will address in the next section.

### *2.3.3. Possible lessons from Mulan for the future of China-Hollywood relations*

The production of *Mulan* (2020) offers important lessons for the future relationship between China and Hollywood. Firstly, the rapidly changing political environment can have a significant impact on films and their box office performance, as well as their use as instruments of soft power. *Mulan* began production in 2015 during the "honeymoon" period of China-Hollywood relations but was released in 2020 during a time of heightened tensions between the U.S. and China. This political change has made China less receptive to Hollywood productions and the U.S. government and population more critical of changes made to films to appeal to the Chinese market, complicating the China-Hollywood relationship.

Moreover, the politically charged environment highlights the need for greater attention

to cultural authenticity, including more involvement of Chinese actors, consultants, writers, and directors, as well as more dedicated research. The Chinese market and audience are increasingly demanding in terms of the products they consume. The issue of diversity and representativeness is also crucial. Although *Mulan* was intended to be a significant milestone for representation in Hollywood, featuring an all-Asian cast and a female director with a budget of \$200 million, it revealed the complexities of representation in a world of intricate geopolitics. Despite Disney primarily casting Asian actors to appeal to Chinese audiences, the film was rejected by Chinese viewers as inauthentic and American. Furthermore, the film's production was further complicated by politics when Liu Yifei, the actress who played the character of Mulan, expressed support for Hong Kong police during the 2019 protests. Additionally, Disney thanked government bodies in China's Xinjiang region, implicated in human rights abuses against the Uyghur population, in the credits. *Mulan* highlights the challenges of creating multicultural content with global appeal in 2020, exposing the vast disconnect between Asian Americans in Hollywood and Chinese nationals in China. It also reveals how Hollywood fails to recognize differences in aesthetics, tastes, and politics between the two groups, revealing the limits of the American conversation on representation in a global context.

Finally, *Mulan* also exemplifies the future challenges of China-Hollywood dynamics in terms of the propagation of Chinese narratives and the strengthening of Chinese soft power through cinema. The movie's impact on Chinese narratives and soft power is complex. China was frustrated that a Disney story set in China had very few Chinese stories, making it difficult for Chinese narratives to propagate through feature films. However, many analysts criticized Disney for including topics that coincide Chinese strategic narratives, such as nationalism, the portrayal of Han Chinese civilization as a sagacious leader perpetually besieged by external threats, the empowerment of Chinese women, and the promotion on Chinese locations. These inclusions can potentially help to propagate these narratives and strengthen China's soft power. Thus, there is a balance between the two arguments: the stronger China becomes, the more it can shape the narratives produced and increase its soft power, but the stronger China is, the greater the resistance to its efforts. *Mulan* illustrates the limits of the relationship between China and Hollywood and offers a glimpse of the challenges to come.

In this chapter, I explored the complex and long history of cooperation and competition between Hollywood and China. I pointed out how, during the Republican era, Hollywood dominated the Chinese market; but, after the Communist Party came to power in 1949, it was forcibly removed from the nation. For Hollywood to return to China, talks started in the 1980s, and Hollywood was crucial to the development and expansion of the Chinese market. Pressure

to allow Hollywood movies into the Chinese market rose when China joined the World Trade Organization in 2001. The relationship between China and Hollywood intensified in the 2000s, notably in the 2010s, with a honeymoon period and benefits for both parties. Hollywood wanted to enhance its market and profits, and China wanted to lessen its perceived cultural disadvantage and boost its soft power globally to promote its strategic narratives. This changed in 2017, though, when the Trump administration took office and the so-called trade war started, which also targeted the movie industry. Also, China started to place additional restrictions on Hollywood as it grew more mindful of its market dominance. The notion that Hollywood was pandering to Chinese interests as a result of this hostile atmosphere made it harder for China to spread its narratives through film and constrained its capacity to increase its soft power. Another obstacle to China's capacity to achieve its foreign policy objectives through cinema is the COVID-19 outbreak, as well as the passing of a new U.S. bill that seeks to limit cooperation between Hollywood and Beijing.

I also debated how *Mulan* (2020) demonstrated this trajectory. *Mulan*'s filming began in 2015, during the peak of Hollywood-China relations, but its release in 2020 came at a time of heightened hostilities between the two nations. These tensions are evident in the responses to the movie and serve as an example of how politics and cinema interact. The movie is also a Disney production, which, as we have seen in this chapter, has spent years cultivating its ties to China in an effort to potentially capitalize on the Chinese market. *Mulan* also serves as an example of the connection between the creative economy, international politics, and power in the China-U.S. relationship.

In the next chapter, I will explore yet another Chinese strategy to use films as soft power: the China-U.S. co-productions.

### **CHAPTER 3 – CHINA-U.S. CO-PRODUCTIONS: ABSORBING HOLLYWOOD TALENTS TO MAKE CHINESE STORIES**

In 2017, the Chinese American Film Festival served as the backdrop for a very high-profile event, the U.S.-China Co-Production Conference, held in Hollywood. This significant conference brought together esteemed industry experts from both nations, aiming to explore practical strategies for fostering increased collaboration in co-productions (*China Daily* 2017b). The gathering was propelled by the recognition that China needed Hollywood to better tell its stories on a global stage. Gu Guoqing, president of China Film Promotion International, acknowledged that China possessed a wealth of stories spanning 5000 years, but acknowledged the need to learn U.S. film technology to effectively present them. Stu Levy, Chair of the International Committee of the Producer's Guild of America, recognized the various challenges of co-producing with China, such as language barriers, cultural and storytelling differences, working styles, permit requirements, and financing, among others. However, he remained optimistic that dedicated collaboration between both sides could overcome these obstacles and pave the way for success. Wei Xiandong, CEO of Shanghai Project Banana Films, expressed confidence that a winning formula for successful U.S.-China co-productions would emerge within the next year or two, resulting in a significant industry upswing. He emphasized the importance of China's global expansion, noting that the United States had invested considerable resources in creating a worldwide market for Hollywood films, and China needed to pursue a similar path. Gu Jin, Cultural Counselor of the Chinese Consulate-General in Los Angeles, underscored the immense potential for cooperation between the two largest markets globally. He emphasized that while the United States possessed a more mature film system with seasoned professionals, China had the opportunity to learn valuable skills from the United States, while the United States could gain deeper insights into Chinese people and culture (*China Daily* 2017b).

The comments above outline some of the challenges and expectations for the China-U.S. co-production sector. Although recognizing difficulties, such as navigating the cultural differences between the two countries and between Asian and Western cultures to please diverse audiences, there was great anticipation regarding the potential of the market in China's film industry and the global film market, which could embrace these new productions and media content. Furthermore, the Chinese intended to use these co-productions to learn how to tell Chinese stories, promoting Chinese strategic narratives using Hollywood techniques.

However, since then, the geopolitical landscape has shifted, and policies regarding Chinese investment and resources in the U.S. film industry have tightened. This impacted the co-production sector, with *The Great Wall* (2016), an epic action-fantasy film co-produced by the Hollywood studio Legendary Entertainment (later purchased by a Chinese conglomerate) and the China Film Group, being a prime example of this trend. Despite high expectations and a substantial budget, the film received mixed reviews from both Chinese and American audiences and failed to make a significant impact.

In this chapter, I will debate the main models and motivations behind co-productions both internationally and in China, providing a concise history of co-productions in this Asian country and between China and Hollywood. I will examine the successes and challenges faced in these partnerships, specifically the high expectations of the 2000s and early 2010s, and offer reasons for failures post-2017. Additionally, I will explore other possibilities for China-Hollywood co-productions. Furthermore, I will analyze the movie *The Great Wall* (2016) in the context of the China-Hollywood relationship, examining the main themes and narratives portrayed in it and their reception by the public, also discussing the possible lessons that the film can teach about using cinema as a tool for China's soft power and foreign policy objectives. I will argue that although the film was not a box office and critical success, and in that sense failed to broadly deliver strategic narratives for China, the use of a co-production with a Hollywood studio to convey Chinese messages highlights the prevalence of the argument that as China grows stronger, it gains greater influence over the narratives produced and enhances its soft power.

Next, I will start by debating the models, reasons, and history of co-productions in China.

### **3.1. Co-production in China: Models, Reasons, and History**

In this section, I will initially point out the main co-production formats, and the specificities, advantages, disadvantages, and challenges of each one. I will then discuss the main reasons for co-producing both on the side of China and its international partners. Finally, I will present a brief history of co-productions in China, highlighting how the country has related to international partners, especially the U.S., to tell its stories, enhance its film-making capabilities, and expand the global reach of its strategic narratives.

### 3.1.1. Co-productions: definitions and formats

As this dissertation is being developed in an Institute of International Relations rather than a Department of Media or Film Studies, I strive to steer clear of overly technical discussions on cinema. Nonetheless, I find it crucial to provide definitions of co-production models. The co-production format plays a pivotal role in determining China's ability to manage the narratives being produced, which directly relates to the central question of this dissertation on China's use of cinema to promote its strategic narratives.

Peng (2015) notes that discussing co-productions involving China poses a challenge due to differences in terminology. Specifically, the language used within China to describe co-productions does not always align with that used outside of the country. Internationally, co-productions are typically categorized as either "official" or "unofficial." "Official" co-productions are films made by international partners under the terms of a formal co-production treaty or agreement between two or more countries, and are also referred to as "treaty co-productions." "Unofficial" co-productions, on the other hand, encompass any other type of collaborative film production between filmmakers that are not governed by a co-production treaty (Peng 2015).

According to Peng (2015), in the official rules governing film production between Chinese and international partners, the general term to describe all types of collaboration is "Sino-Foreign Cooperative Film Production." In Chinese, this is often shortened to "*hepai*" or in English, "co-production." The rules identify three types of cooperative production: Joint production (also somewhat confusingly called official co-production), in which both Chinese and non-Chinese partners invest in production, contribute creatively to the production, and are involved in the actual production process, both under the terms of a formal international co-production agreement and without such an agreement; Assisted production (*xiezuoshezhi/xiepai*): in which a foreign party bears the cost of production in China and Chinese companies are contracted to provide services to foreign filmmakers working in China; Entrusted or commissioned production: in which a foreign party bears the cost of production and contracts Chinese filmmakers to produce the film in China (Peng 2015).

The English version of the 2014 China-International Film Co-production Handbook,<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Available at: [https://www.mpa-apac.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Co-Production\\_Handbook\\_English.pdf](https://www.mpa-apac.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Co-Production_Handbook_English.pdf).

published by the China Film Co-production Company (CFCC), defines co-produced films subject to preferential policies in the Chinese marketplace as joint productions. Since 2012, joint productions need to meet three criteria to be approved as official co-productions if not under a treaty: first, the Chinese party's capital contributions should be no less than one-third of the budget; second, a Chinese actor should be cast in one of the main roles; and third, some parts of the movie should be shot in China (Peng 2015). Treaty co-productions comply with the rules of a treaty or agreement between governments, although the requirements may vary from one agreement to another.

The English version of the 2017 China-International Co-production Handbook<sup>25</sup> contains the same predictions, and it is the most recent version available. Published by the China Film Co-Production Corporation (CFCC), the Handbook delineates, on page 5, various types of co-production. As per the document, a co-produced film is defined as “a film shot by a China-based film producer and a foreign producer that features joint investments (including funding, labor and materials), joint filming, and joint sharing of both benefits and risks.” It also states that such films “are subject to preferential policies that are typically applied to domestic Chinese films within the Chinese market.”

An assisted film, on the other hand, “is a foreign-invested film that is produced in a China setting. The Chinese partner assists a foreign producer in providing settings or film locations, facilities, and labor at the cost of the foreign producer, but will not own the copyrights as an assisting party.” As such, the “assisted film must go through import formalities as an imported film and is not subject to the preferential policies typically applied to domestic Chinese films.”

Finally, there is also an entrusted film, “a film in which a foreign party has fully entrusted a Chinese party to produce according to specified content and technical requirements. The Chinese party completes all work at the expense of the foreign party, but will not own copyrights.” Thus, a “film of this type is thoroughly considered an import entering the domestic market and is not subject to the preferential policies typically applied to domestic Chinese films.”

Peng (2015) summarizes the differences between these three types of co-productions with a useful table, which I adapted below:

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<sup>25</sup> Available at: <https://www.mpa-apac.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/2017-China-Co-Production-Handbook.pdf>.



Key points	Joint Production	Assisted Production	Entrusted Production
Funds	Jointly invested by the parties	Invested by the Foreign Party	Invested by the Foreign Party
Equipment and Facility	Determined in the agreement	Provided by the Chinese Party	Provided by the Chinese Party
Site of Production	Inside or outside China	Inside China	Inside China
Labor	Determined in the agreement	Provided by the Chinese Party	Provided by the Chinese Party
Profit	Shared by the parties	The Foreign Party rents and employs the Chinese Party	The Foreign Party contracts the Chinese Party
Loss	Jointly absorbed by the parties	Undertaken by the Foreign Party	Undertaken by the Foreign Party

**Table 2:** Types of Sino-Foreign Co-productions. **Source:** the author, based on Peng (2015, 80).

Aynne Kokas, in her definition of co-productions, cites Doris Baltruschat (2010), a film and media scholar, who defines Euro-American film co-productions as projects that are governed by official treaties or involve co-venture arrangements between producers during the entire process of film or television production and distribution. Peng (2015) also references Baltruschat (2010), who argues that although there is a distinction between treaty co-productions and non-treaty co-productions, they are often used interchangeably. Non-treaty co-productions, which are more appropriately referred to as co-ventures, encompass collaborative business ventures between countries that lack a treaty and co-productions that do not meet the specifications outlined in a treaty.

Kokas and Peng both agree that definitions of co-productions in China differ from the international ones. In China, according to Kokas (2017), there is no clear distinction between official treaty-based co-productions and co-venture arrangements, as co-productions are considered policy agreements regulated by the CFCC on behalf of the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT), the country's primary broadcast regulator. Any legal production activity in China requires official approval, and collaborative production under Chinese oversight is the most direct way for foreign producers to enter the Chinese market (Kokas 2017). The SAPPRFT treated official film co-productions as "local" films for distribution purposes, allowing them to bypass China's film import quota. Consequently, co-production has become a market-access tool for foreign filmmakers seeking to distribute their films in China. Additionally, foreign producers receive a greater share of

domestic Chinese distribution revenue from co-produced films than from imported films. The SAPPRT and the CFCC did not consider financial co-ventures as co-productions unless they had received official approval (Kokas 2017). There were some changes in these structures, specifically in the role and format of the SAPPRT and the CFCC, which I will debate later in this chapter, but the dynamic of co-production remains basically the same in China.

Kokas (2017) also examines the distinctions that exist within the Chinese co-production process, particularly emphasizing the subtleties and subjectivity involved. For instance, Zhang Xun, former president of the CFCC, in her speech to the Asia Society U.S.-China Film Summit in 2013, openly discussed various content that should be avoided in Sino-U.S. co-productions, such as sexual and violent themes, as well as religious and politically complicated issues involving other nations. Furthermore, representations of China that did not accurately reflect the country's economic growth over the past thirty years were also discouraged. Zhang expressed her doubts about Hollywood's attempts to cater to Chinese regulators by making minor changes to their projects, calling them superficial. Although Zhang's tenure as head of the CFCC ended in May 2014, it lasted for seven years of growth and change, and her words still present the challenges faced by Hollywood filmmakers when creating movies in China. Kokas (2017) also highlights another critical concern related to censorship in Chinese co-productions. The scholar notes that censorship measures are implemented early on in the co-production process, which can create a chilling effect on the content and limit creative freedom. In this process, Chinese film officials and American film producers work together to create films with global appeal, particularly for Chinese audiences. This dynamic underscores the fact that co-production in China is not just a financial or policy-driven decision but also a catalyst for shaping a new cultural milieu in the filmmaking industry.

Kokas (2017) compares the Chinese and Hollywood co-production styles, highlighting their differences in definition and government oversight. Hollywood's co-production process does not require state participation and encompasses both general co-ventures and official co-productions. In contrast, the Chinese co-production model involves policy and finance-based decisions and state oversight. Kokas (2017) notes that the absence of a centralized U.S. federal government definition for film co-production has led to varying understandings of co-production by American studios and their Chinese counterparts. Hollywood producers often face difficulties navigating the policy-driven Chinese model, leading to a cultural disconnect in managing the co-production process. Kokas (2017) points out that experienced U.S. film co-production professionals are skilled at identifying multiple funding sources from overseas, but not dealing appropriately with China's central government film authorities can lead to a failed

deal or the film not being allowed to screen in mainland China.

Kokas (2017) also discusses the different co-production models in China, including assisted productions, which allow for more creative freedom during production but face distribution limitations. These productions are filmed in China using local studio facilities, but do not have official government approval for distribution in China, nor do they receive financial support from the country. Despite this, they still need to be approved by regulatory bodies like SAPPRFT and CFCC. In these productions, Chinese film workers and locations are part of the film but are not essential for the filmmaking process. Kokas (2017) cites examples of such films, like *Code 46* (2003) by Michael Winterbottom, *Ultraviolet* (2006) by Kurt Wimmer, and *Her* (2013) by Spike Jonze. Unlike co-produced films that directly depict China, these three films use Shanghai as a generic representation of life in the near future. While they varied in box office success in the United States, none of these films were released in mainland China (Kokas 2017).

Kokas (2017) also emphasizes the importance of receiving both production approval and import approval from SAPPRFT for assisted productions to be released in the Chinese market. This can present challenges in the collaboration process, particularly if the first approval process does not go smoothly. Kokas (2017) provides as examples *Mission: Impossible III* (2006) and *Skyfall* (2012), both of which faced delays and censorship issues during their release in China. In the case of *Mission: Impossible III*, problems with permits during production complicated the relationship between SARFT (the former name of SAPPRFT) and the film's production team. SARFT delayed the film's release and censored certain content, such as a scene of elderly Shanghainese playing mahjong and a scene of the main character killing a Chinese henchman. Similarly, *Skyfall* was delayed by two months due to a scene where James Bond kills a security guard in Shanghai and a scene depicting prostitution in Macao. These instances demonstrate the financial penalty paid for depicting controversial content on screen, and how it can lead to reduced demand for the movie upon its eventual release in China. Unlike official co-productions, assisted productions have no guarantee of being distributed to mainland screens at all (Kokas 2017). These examples also underscore the importance of understanding co-production models in this research, since the type of co-production influences the capacity of China to shape the story being told, which is related to China's ability to spread its strategic narratives.

Additionally, Kokas (2017) debates the concept of faux-productions in China, a term she coined, which are films that have co-production status at some point during the production process but are not ultimately distributed in China as local films. These films may start as co-

productions as early as pre-production and continue into post-production, but they are not subject to the same content restrictions as official co-productions. Faux-productions can be a means for Hollywood filmmakers to test the waters of the Chinese market and explore the feasibility of working with Chinese partners (Kokas 2017). However, these films are still subject to Chinese regulatory guidance at any stage of production where they have co-production status, and Kokas (2017) emphasizes that the Chinese government's influence on these productions highlights their growing role in the global film industry.

Kokas (2017) cites *Iron Man 3* (2013) and *Looper* (2012) as examples of unsuccessful faux-productions that tested Chinese content restrictions for co-productions, leading the SAPPRT to refine its parameters for what qualifies as co-production activity. While high-profile faux-productions can be instructive for filmmakers in understanding the commercial and creative limitations of Sino-U.S. film collaboration, they also demonstrate the regulatory power that China holds over the global film industry. Even when films start as co-productions but are not ultimately released as such, they are still subject to Chinese censorship and content restrictions (Kokas 2017).

Wendy Su (2017) has discussed the concept of “fake productions,” which the scholar defines as films with primarily Hollywood storylines, some Chinese investment, minor supporting roles played by Chinese actors or actresses, and a limited amount of Chinese scenery. Su (2017) highlights a comment by Zhang Pimin, then Deputy Director of SAPPRT, who argues that these “fake co-productions” compete with the domestic market but do not promote Chinese culture, thereby reducing the control of Chinese film studios. Su (2017) provides examples of co-produced movies that have lost their “official” co-production status due to the lack of significant Chinese roles, stories, and culture, including *Iron Man 3* (2013), *Looper* (2012), *Transformers: Age of Extinction* (2014), and *Cloud Atlas* (2012).

Peng (2017) also highlighted the issue of fake co-productions in Hollywood, exemplified by films like *Looper* (2012) and *Iron Man 3* (2013). These movies marketed themselves as joint productions but incorporated contrived Chinese elements only in the Chinese versions. For instance, *Looper* was influenced by Chinese investment, leading to changes in the setting to Shanghai and the addition of Chinese actress Xu Qing. The Chinese cut featured an extended montage set in Shanghai. Similarly, *Iron Man 3*, co-produced by DMG and Marvel Pictures, included superficial Chinese content but faced criticism and poor reception in China (Peng 2017). DMG CEO Dan Mintz had hoped to secure distribution rights and attract other studios to China with *Iron Man 3*, but the film did not meet expectations. Despite some scenes being shot in China, the director and stars did not visit the country. Mintz

attempted to balance the Chinese government's requirements with Hollywood's preferences, but the resulting film failed to gain favor from both the government and Chinese audiences (Peng 2017).

These fake co-productions prompted increased scrutiny, with SARFT tightening its review policy to distinguish between "real" and "fake" co-productions (Peng 2017). Nevertheless, Hollywood continued incorporating Chinese elements in films to appeal to Chinese audiences and gain favor with the China Film Group (CFG), which controls foreign film imports. They also aimed to pass the review of the China Film Co-Production Corporation (CFCC) and receive certification as a domestic film, granting a larger share of revenue in China. Successful examples include the 2014 movies *The Amazing Spider-Man 2*, *X-Men: Days of Future Past*, *Godzilla*, and *Transformers 4* (Peng 2017). I will debate further the dynamics and history of China-U.S. co-productions later in this chapter.

In this section, I have provided an overview of the international definitions of co-production and how they apply in China. I have also outlined the main types of co-production in China, including joint productions, assisted productions, entrusted productions, and the concept of fake co-productions or faux-productions. This highlights the complexities and idiosyncrasies of the Chinese film market, including questions regarding censorship and government oversight. Understanding these co-production formats is crucial because they can give China greater control over the film production process, allowing it to dictate the images produced and disseminate its narratives more effectively.

In the next section, I will debate the main motives and reasons that drive co-productions in general, with a specific focus on co-productions involving China.

### *3.1.2. The reasons for co-producing*

Co-production agreements between countries serve a range of cultural, economic, and diplomatic goals. The film industry has traditionally engaged in international co-productions, but there has recently been a surge in interest in them globally, being particularly used to creating products that can serve the global market (Yin 2018). Filmmakers collaborating on the development and production of a film can combine their creative, financial, and technical resources and access support and benefits in both countries (Peng 2015). Co-productions have become an essential strategy to solve financial problems and to increase budgets by combining

various sources of money from the public and private sectors (Morawetz et al. 2007). They also help firms gain access to global talent and resources, and through co-producing big-budget films with local producers, firms can ultimately distribute films in both home and host countries, and even expand to other larger global markets (Lorenzen 2007). The trend of leading firms specializing in certain activities in the value chain, while outsourcing others to external specialized suppliers, provides more opportunities for firms from emerging countries to join the leading ones' value chain (Rosnan, Ismail, and Daud 2010). To qualify as an international co-production, a film must meet specific criteria set by the relevant treaties and approval systems of the participating countries (Baltruschat 2010; Peng 2017; Yin 2018).

Canada is an interesting example of a country actively involved in co-production agreements. Baltruschat (2010) emphasizes the cultural significance of co-productions, citing the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage, which emphasizes the potential for cooperation and coordination. However, Baltruschat also notes that some co-production treaties signed by Canada prioritize economic or diplomatic goals over cultural ones. Yin (2018) highlights that countries with smaller film industries, such as Canada, and some European countries, such as France, are very active in securing official treaties for the development of their national film industries. According to Rosnan, Ismail, and Daud (2010), US producers could move their shooting locations to Canada and Mexico to take advantage of the low-cost labor and alluring incentives offered by the host nations. As of 2015, Canada had negotiated 57 treaties with 53 countries, although many had yet to be activated (Peng 2015).

In contrast, the U.S. does not typically sign such agreements, largely because of its dominant position in the global film industry and reluctance to acknowledge the cultural significance of film in co-production treaties. Instead, the U.S. sees these treaties as potentially conflicting with its multinational free trade agenda, which organizations like the World Trade Organization promote (Peng 2015). However, Hollywood's collaboration with China represents an exception to this trend, as the Chinese government uses co-production agreements to exert soft power in its relations with the U.S. (Peng 2015).

In the case of China-Hollywood co-productions, Kokas (2017) highlights that the low cost of production labor, resulting from the absence of production unionization, further enhances the financial incentive for co-production, particularly for films with large period sets and numerous extras. The market-driven nature of Chinese co-productions underscores the need to consider their long-term cultural implications, especially in the realm of Sino-U.S. co-production, where American filmmakers are often more motivated by profits than cultural exchange (Kokas 2017).

Peng and Keane (2019) argue that the Western film industry sees significant benefits in China's vast and rapidly growing domestic market. However, due to China's film quota on foreign movies, co-productions have become an attractive option to bypass this restriction and gain privileged access to the Chinese market. Chinese policymakers actively encourage collaborations with international filmmakers to revitalize their own film industry and address the cultural export deficit (Peng and Keane 2019). As stated in the beginning of this section, co-productions facilitate the exchange of creative ideas, technology, knowledge, and professional skills, serving as a platform for skill transfer and learning. Examples include Korean companies entering the Chinese film market and the introduction of 3D technology by Cameron Pace Group. Emerging film producers value co-productions as a means to acquire valuable knowledge, and these collaborative efforts have had a positive impact on China's film industry (Peng and Keane 2019). Thus, Peng and Keane (2019) emphasize the importance of establishing co-production memorandums with multiple countries to facilitate ongoing and extensive knowledge transfers.

Also focusing on the Chinese side, Kokas (2019) posits that these endeavors are part of a broader initiative by the Chinese central government aimed at reducing China's cultural trade deficit – the perceived lack of influence on commercial culture worldwide. These projects represent a deliberate policy-driven attempt to promote investment in China's cultural industries and bolster the international cultural standing of the People's Republic of China (Kokas 2019a). Meanwhile, Wendy Su (2019) argues that the Chinese state leverages Hollywood's resources to bolster the domestic film industry and enhance China's soft power. However, this approach faces ongoing challenges from Hollywood, necessitating a continual reassessment of the state's role and cultural policies (Su 2019).

Peng and Keane (2019) highlight that film co-productions in China involve collaboration with the state, raising questions about the role of trusted foreigners in China's rejuvenation. While co-productions are not openly discussed as a means of enhancing China's soft power, since it would underscore the importance of foreign entities in this process, scholars and participants in the film industry speculate about the potential benefits (Peng and Keane 2019). Peng and Keane (2019) mentioned the case of Li Ruigang, head of China Media Capital, who, speaking to a panel at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, in 2017, said that "China is using its market size to influence Hollywood's way of thinking and how they make films" (Peng and Keane 2019).

Peng and Keane (2019) assert that China has sought to transform its global image from a low-cost manufacturing powerhouse to a country with a rich and valued culture. However,

Chinese popular culture remains largely unknown to the world, except among the Chinese diaspora. To address this, scholars in China advocate for cultural self-confidence. The Chinese government considers co-production treaties as a strategic approach to enhance China's cultural presence and become a "strong cultural nation" under President Xi Jinping's promotion (Peng and Keane 2019). While Chinese cinema co-productions have facilitated the exchange of human capital, technology, and knowledge, heavy censorship and a focus on mainland themes limit the resonance of Chinese film culture with international audiences. As a solution, the Chinese government aims to expand China's cultural influence by translating Chinese projects into other cultural idioms, particularly in southern and central Asian territories. Despite government support and investment, the co-production model has not yet achieved the anticipated global recognition for Chinese films (Peng and Keane 2019).

Parc (2020) debates co-productions within the European film industry, and his analysis is relevant to this dissertation for several reasons. Firstly, the author focuses on Europe rather than China. Parc (2020) notes that the primary objective of co-productions in Europe after World War II was to contain the dominance of the United States and Hollywood in cinemas. Parc (2020) argues that while UNESCO values the opportunities for diversifying narratives presented by co-productions, the original intention was to revive European film industries and confront Hollywood's dominance in cinema. Although the paper does not cite China, this emphasis on strengthening the domestic film industry through co-productions, resisting Hollywood's dominance, and increasing the international presence of co-productions is also relevant in the Chinese case.

The author notes that European national states grant subsidies for co-productions to strengthen their film industries (Parc 2020). However, instead of diversifying narratives, these subsidies limit them, benefiting only a small group of industries capable of competing for these subsidies and carrying out co-productions. Parc (2020) takes a pro-market view, arguing that allowing moviegoers to decide which movies are the best and rewarding the best productions at the box office would bring about diversification of productions and narratives. However, this position can be questioned since many countries, from several political and economic inclinations, China being just one among them, apply entry quotas for foreign films to counter Hollywood's dominance in cinema and strengthen their national industries.

The author also raises the issue of a "cultural test" that some co-produced films have to pass. He cites the example of two co-produced films, *Gravity* (2013) and *Okja* (2017). *Gravity* depicts the story of two American astronauts attempting to return to Earth after their space shuttle is damaged. Although the actors wear U.S. flag-marked uniforms and speak in American



English, the film was directed by a Mexican and won six awards at the British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA), including the award for “Outstanding British Film.” Despite significant creative involvement from British companies and being filmed in the UK, *Gravity* passed the “cultural test” and qualified for state funds for co-production. In contrast, *Okja*, which explores animal ethics was directed by a Korean and funded by a U.S. company, featuring a multinational cast with scenes in both English and Korean. Regardless of its multinational elements, the majority of the international media referred to *Okja* as a Korean film. While *Okja* expressed Korean visual elements, *Gravity* is perceived as a U.S. film despite British funding. Nevertheless, *Gravity* earned significantly more revenue globally, with UK co-production partners likely receiving a large share of the profits. *Okja*, on the other hand, only earned \$2 million, and some theaters refused to screen it due to its Netflix release format.

Parc (2020) contends, then, that to meet this cultural test, producers will artificially include scenes, narratives, and themes, which would amount to collective censorship of the authors’ creativity. To put it differently, European companies self-censor their co-produced films with Hollywood to conform to market demands and make profits. This underscores that despite the significance and vastness of the China-Hollywood case, many of the issues are not unique to these relations but rather exist in several other instances of the film industry.

Parc (2020) also highlights that, in the European case, the use of big Hollywood studios and stars is also necessary for the co-production model because, as films do not have a secured return, aligning with famous studios and actors would guarantee international success. Those dynamics, once again, are present in the China-Hollywood relationship as well.

As already emphasized in other parts of this dissertation, it is clear that China uses a repertoire of actions that are widespread in the international market and other countries that also co-produce. I wrote about this issue elsewhere, discussing how Chinese cultural diplomacy seems to largely adopt traditional strategies in its actions, with differences in emphasis and control capacity (Ramos and Menechelli 2019).

In the Chinese case, censorship is not only the collective one pointed out by Parc (2020), with European filmmakers seeking to please studios and tell stories that have greater repercussions. It is also linked to terms and debates that would escape the strategic narratives that the Chinese government wants to tell. Thus, while the Chinese model of cultural diplomacy draws on strategies employed by Hollywood and other countries, there are notable differences that warrant detailed examination within the specific context. This dissertation is dedicated to that purpose.

In this section, I have explored the diverse motivations that drive countries to engage in

co-productions, encompassing cultural, economic, and diplomatic factors. It is evident that co-productions have experienced a global surge, influenced by the forces of globalization, specialization, and localized labor. Examples range from Canada, Mexico, and France to China.

Focusing on the China-Hollywood relationship regarding co-productions, I pointed out a disparity between the interests of each side. While Hollywood primarily seeks economic benefits driven by the growth of the Chinese film market, China's motivations extend beyond mere economic factors to encompass political objectives. The Chinese government actively leverages the film industry as a means to promote strategic narratives, with co-productions playing a vital role in this pursuit. Through co-productions, the government exercises greater control over the narratives produced within China and influences the portrayal of narratives in these collaborative projects. Moreover, China's film industry benefits from the transfer of technical expertise and knowledge from the more advanced Hollywood industry. As a result, co-productions enable China to enhance its control over international content and narratives while simultaneously strengthening its ability to convey its own stories and perspectives.

Additionally, I have compared the Chinese and European co-production scenarios. I highlighted the origins of the co-production model in the post-World War II relations between France and Italy, which aimed to counter Hollywood's dominance in cinemas. However, over time, the objectives shifted from strengthening domestic industries to attaining cultural diversification. It is important to note that in many countries, these two goals of cultural diversification and economic gains coexist, and the joint utilization of economic, financial, and technical resources from other countries stands as a significant motivation for engaging in co-productions. Furthermore, I discussed the potential side effects of co-productions, such as challenges in language diversification, concentration amidst diversification efforts, and the potential adverse effects stemming from government subsidies for co-productions. I also referenced Park's (2020) concept of a cultural test for co-productions, which can influence a film's classification, as exemplified by the comparison between *Gravity* and *Okja*. Lastly, I mentioned that the relationship between China and Hollywood shares similarities with other countries in terms of utilizing international collaborations to protect their domestic markets, expand internationally, and counterbalance the dominance of U.S. productions.

In the next section, I will provide a historical overview of co-productions in China.

### 3.1.3. A brief historical overview of co-productions in China

The history of Chinese movie co-productions is closely related to the process of reforms that the Chinese film sector underwent (which I narrated in the previous chapter) and to the search for the international promotion of Chinese narratives (the central topic of this dissertation). The purpose of this section is to examine the beginning of this story.

At the 2020 Beijing International Film Festival (BJIFF), Liu Chun, general manager of China Film Co-production Corporation, announced that the total number of film co-productions from 1979 to 2019 was 1,127 (R. Zhang 2020). Most of those movies were co-productions with Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan,<sup>26</sup> and only 266 co-productions were made with companies based in foreign countries and regions in the past four decades (R. Zhang 2020). Notably, there has been a notable acceleration in the number of co-productions, particularly from 2000 to 2019, during which 244 Sino-foreign co-productions were successfully completed and released. Additionally, during the same period, there were 49 co-productions that achieved a box office gross of over 100 million yuan in the Chinese mainland (R. Zhang 2020).

The 2017 China-International Co-production Handbook includes a table, which I have adapted below, outlining the dates of the 20 international co-production agreements signed by China thus far, along with notable highlights of some of these agreements.

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<sup>26</sup> Within the realm of co-productions, Chinese authorities, agents, and documents usually regard Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan as co-production partners. As exemplified in the previously mentioned article (R. Zhang 2020), Liu Chun, the general manager of China Film Co-production Corporation, pointed out that “Since the beginning of 2020, 39 co-productions have been established, most with Hong Kong film companies.” In this case, Liu Chun clearly established Hong Kong as an international co-production partner of China. Another instance of this can be seen in the 2017 China-International Co-Production Handbook: “Recently, more and more films’ box office has exceeded 100 RMB million, thus benefiting co-productions. As most co-productions are made by mainland China and Hong Kong, Hong Kong films have had a large influence on film type.” Again, Hong Kong is treated as a co-production partner. On the other hand, Peng (2005) highlights that since the Mainland and Hong Kong Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement (CEPA) was signed in 2003, Sino-Hong Kong co-productions are automatically considered domestic Chinese films. In fact, the 2017 China-International Co-Production Handbook states that “Mainland-Hong Kong films have emerged as the main force in Chinese co-productions. They have benefited from CEPA (Mainland and Hong Kong Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement) signed in 2003. Before 2003, Hong Kong films and Mainland-Hong Kong co-produced films were treated as imported films. After 2003, mainland-Hong Kong co-produced films could be treated as domestic films, and Hong Kong films were no longer limited by import quotas. With the promotion of CEPA, Mainland-Hong Kong co-produced films have rapidly developed and occupy an important position in the Chinese film market, as seen from the distribution of regions. Mainland-Hong Kong co-produced films account for more than half of the total number of co-productions.” As I already discussed earlier in this chapter, being considered a domestic or local production to bypass import quotas is an advantage extended to all countries that perform an official co-production with China, being actually one of the main incentives for this type of production. Thus, this is not related to the status of Hong Kong concerning China. China’s relations with those regions are complex, and only related to this dissertation when concerning films, soft power, and strategic narratives. Thus, I will explore these issues just when needed to advance the topic of this research.

Date	Agreement	Highlights
1987.02	Agreement on Sino-Canada Film Co-Production	The first film agreement
2004.12	Agreement on Sino-Italy Film Co-Production	CFCC evaluates the investment ratio from both parties to determine if the film meets the criteria as a co-production
2007.09	Agreement on Sino-Australia Film Co-Production	
2010.04	Agreement on Sino-French Film Co-Production	For encouragement, the income generated by the Chinese and foreign films in China is taxed only of 10%
2010.07	Agreement on Sino-New Zealand Film Co-Production	
2010.07	Agreement on Sino-Singapore Film Co-Production	
2012.04	Agreement on Sino-Belgium Film Co-Production	
2014.04	Agreement on Sino-Britain Film Co-Production	Proposed upper/lower limits for the amount of investment
2014.07	Agreement on Sino-South Korea Film Co-Production	Supplemented the technical terms for cooperation
2014.09	Agreement on Sino-India Film Co-Production	
2014.09	Agreement on Sino-Spain Film Co-Production	Allowed the introduction of third parties, but with limited proportions of investment
2015.07	Agreement on Sino-Malta Film Co-Production	
2015.10	Agreement on Sino-Netherlands Film Co-Production	
2016.04	Agreement on Sino-Estonia Film Co-Production	
2017.04	Agreement on Sino-Greece Film Co-Production	
2017.05	Agreement on Sino-Denmark Film Co-Production	
2017.06	Agreement on Sino-Luxembourg Film Co-Production	
2017.06	Agreement on Sino-Kazakhstan	

	Film Co-Production	
2017.07	Agreement on Sino-Russia Film Co-Production	1. The co-production investment proportion of the third-party countries shall not exceed 30% of the total budget 2. Each co-producer should contribute at least one creator, one starring role, and one supporting role
2017.09	Agreement on Sino-Brazil Film Co-Production	%Under special circumstances, the upper and lower limits of each partaker's participation in the investment can be adjusted from 80% and 20% to 90% and 10%

**Table 3:** Sino-Foreign Film Co-Production Agreements in the History of Chinese Cinema.

**Source:** the author, based on the 2017 China-International Co-production Handbook.<sup>27</sup>

The China Film Co-Production Corporation's website shows that China has co-production agreements with 22 countries, including Japan and Tajikistan, in addition to the 20 countries mentioned in the previous table. Through the website,<sup>28</sup> it is possible to access information about the date and scope of individual co-production agreements.

In any case, besides the absence of the U.S., which, as discussed earlier in this chapter, does not sign co-production agreements, it is significant the presence of Brazil in this group. Brazil and China signed a co-production agreement on September 1, 2017, providing that co-productions involving Brazilian and Chinese companies will be treated as national projects in both territories, which ensures they have access to public financing mechanisms in both countries and are considered national products in both markets (Secretaria Especial da Cultura 2017). According to an official statement released by the Brazilian Ministry of Culture, it was expected that the agreement would boost cooperation between productive sectors in both countries, "in sync with the proposition to expand circulation of Brazilian works in the international market and to promote international productions involving Brazilian creators and producers" (Secretaria Especial da Cultura 2017).

Nevertheless, as of April 2023, the time of writing of this chapter, the Film Co-Production Agreement between the Government of the Federative Republic of Brazil and the Government of the People's Republic of China is still not in effect. According to a survey in

<sup>27</sup> Available at: <https://www.mpa-apac.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/2017-China-Co-Production-Handbook.pdf>.

<sup>28</sup> Available at: <http://www.cfcc-film.com.cn/policeg/content/id/2.html>.

the Concordia platform,<sup>29</sup> from the Brazilian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the agreement is still being processed internally by the Brazilian federal public administration.<sup>30</sup> This, in a way, reflects the low relevance given to culture during the government of Jair Bolsonaro, a subject that goes beyond the scope of this dissertation.

Returning to the history of co-productions in China, although Liu Chun, the general manager of China Film Co-production Corporation, emphasized their significance from 1979 onwards, an earlier co-production took place before that. According to Peng (2015), *The Chinese Kite* (1958) was the first joint film produced by China and the French Garance company after the establishment of the PRC. After that film, the period between 1958 and the late 1970s saw no co-productions due to economic, political, and social instabilities caused by the Great Leap Forward (1958-1962) and the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) (Peng 2015). With Deng Xiaoping's rise to power in 1978 and the subsequent Reform and Opening period, the film industry in China underwent changes. The China Imports and Exports Company and the China Film Co-production Corporation were founded in 1979, as noted by Zhang (2004). The former dealt with acquiring foreign films and distributing Chinese films abroad, while the latter facilitated co-productions between China and other countries. The China Film Co-Production Corporation aimed to assist or co-produce films with overseas producers to promote the strategic goals of the United Front and propaganda (Peng 2015). Initially, the China Film Group Corporation, Beijing Film Studio, and seven other state-owned agencies were the first Chinese producers allowed to participate in co-production ventures (Peng 2015). To meet the growing demand for co-productions, the Ministry of Radio, Film, TV occasionally approved additional quotas (Peng 2015).

During the 1980s, assisted co-production was the primary method of collaboration in which the Chinese partner provided non-cash services, such as locations, equipment, and labor, without involvement in creative development or direct investment (Peng 2015). Fourteen co-produced movies were completed early in the 1980s, with thirteen involving Hong Kong and one with Japan. In 1985, the Ministry of Broadcasting, Film and Television introduced a new regulation to streamline the project submission, evaluation, and content selection process for

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<sup>29</sup> Available at: <https://concordia.itamaraty.gov.br/detalhamento-acordo/12024?TituloAcordo=acordo%20de%20coprodu%C3%A7%C3%A3o&tipoPesquisa=1&TipoAcordo=BL,TL,ML>.

<sup>30</sup> An intriguing aspect to note is that, even in the absence of a formal co-production agreement between China and Brazil, some films were created using a co-production framework and consequently labeled as such during their respective releases. Notable instances include the film *Destino*, helmed by Brazilian director and actress Lucélia Santos, hailed in 2008 as the “first film co-production between Brazil and China” (*Cidade de São Paulo - Comunicação* 2008), and *Plastic City*, directed by Hong Kong's Yu Lik-wai, a Brazil-China-Japan co-production predominantly shot in São Paulo (Morisawa 2008).

co-produced films. Additionally, the Ministry of Culture issued a notice in the same year restating the guidelines for co-production submissions. The following year, the Film Bureau mandated that all co-produced films must first receive approval before being submitted to the China Film Co-production Corporation (Peng 2015). This rule aimed to address copyright protection and prevent potential international disputes, marking a significant milestone in the history of film co-production (Peng 2015).

The number and scale of co-produced films increased between 1986 and 1990, with 59 projects completed during this period. Examples include *The Silk Road* (1988) co-produced with Japan, *The King of Sulu and the Emperor of China* (1987) with the Philippines, *Tommy Tricker and the Stamp Traveller* (1988), and *Bethune: The Making of a Hero* (1990) with Canada (Peng 2015). *The Last Emperor* (1987), co-produced with Italy, received nine Academy Awards (Oscars), including Best Picture and Best Director. While most co-produced films during this period followed the assisted co-production model, Chinese partners started participating in the creative process of a few movies, gaining domestic distribution rights and revenue. *Bethune*, for instance, marked the first film where China actively participated in script creation and writing. Initially, the Canadians provided the original script, but the Chinese felt it did not portray the soldier of internationalism in a sufficiently heroic light. After numerous rounds of negotiations, the Canadians eventually agreed to revise the screenplay (Peng 2015).

Ding (2021) writes that as the mainland Chinese cinema market opened up throughout the course of the 1980s, there was a rise in co-productions with Hong Kong and other foreign partners, followed by a turnback to mainland-focused filmmaking. Early on, mainland Chinese cinema companies assisted in the production of movies for Europe and the U.S., like *Empire of the Sun* (1987) and *The Last Emperor* (1987) (Ding 2021). As time went on, they increased their cooperation with Hong Kong, creating a highly integrated film workforce for both sectors. Co-productions of *The Shaolin Temple* (1982), *Burning the Imperial Palace* (1983), and *Reign Behind a Curtain* (1983) sparked a boom in mainland Chinese, Hong Kong, and Taiwan productions. The Fifth Generation of Chinese directors rose to prominence on the world film scene and were recognized with prizes at important festivals. Hong Kong's technology, mainland talent, and Taiwan's financial resources came together in a novel way (Ding 2021).

Ding highlights the impact of Deng Xioping's Reform and Opening on the Chinese film industry, where film studios were forced to face the market and accept outside feedback on their work. Co-production subsequently became the cornerstone of the Chinese film market. In 1993, co-produced films and Hong Kong entertainment films dominated the mainland film market. This included 33 films such as *The Tai Chi Master* (1993), *Flirting Scholar* (1993), and *King*

of *Beggars* (1992), which achieved unprecedented box office success through cooperation between 14 mainland film studios and 30 Hong Kong counterparts. As marketization continued, young filmmakers aimed to pursue their artistic vision by seeking co-production opportunities with the support of overseas funding. This involved raising funds, producing high-quality films that could win international awards, and captivating audiences (Ding 2021).

Zhu (2002) also addresses this dominance of co-productions in China during this period, discussing the topic within the context of the crisis and reform process that the Chinese film industry underwent from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s. According to the scholar, by 1993, film production had shifted towards co-productions, with studios mainly receiving licensing fees from overseas producers. Compared to 1992, the exhibition of domestic films in 1993 decreased by 50%, audiences decreased by 60%, box office returns decreased by 40%, and distribution income decreased by 40%. Nine out of the ten highest-grossing films were co-productions, mostly with production companies from Taiwan and Hong Kong (Zhu 2002).

Peng (2015) outlines some key regulatory and administrative changes that took place in the 1990s with regard to co-production in China. The Ministry of Broadcasting, Film, and Television introduced a new regulation on July 5, 1991, called the “Administration of Sino-Foreign Cooperation in Film Production.” This regulation provided a basic framework for cooperative film projects in China. Subsequently, several other legal documents were implemented, including “Rules of the Constitution of Creators in Domestic Feature Films and Co-Produced Films” and “Temporary Rules of Management about Film Base,” which established rules for co-production in China and contributed to better industry management. Additionally, standards for language usage, English subtitles, and film length were established (Peng 2015).

These regulations encouraged Chinese producers to invest in co-production arrangements, resulting in an increase in both the number and scale of co-productions. Between 1991 and 1995, a total of 168 films were produced, with the annual number of co-productions rising from 14 to 41 in 1995 (Peng 2015). While most of the co-productions were with Hong Kong, some were also made in partnership with other countries such as Japan (1991’s *Mandala*, 1992’s *Yang Guifei*, and 1990’s *Ju Dou*), Mongolia (1992’s *The Tragic Tale of Grassland*), the UK (1995’s *On the Beat*), and the Philippines (1995’s *Tough Beauty and the Sloppy Slop*) (Peng 2015). Some of these co-productions were well-received by audiences, and most of them were assisted co-productions.

Zhu (2002) also notes that the 1990s brought significant changes to China’s film industry, including rapid corporatization, conglomeration, and the rejuvenation of old state



studios. Additionally, there was a reform of the distribution-exhibition system, and the country's screen industry increased its transnational activities through co-productions and joint ventures with outside investment. Amidst this structural transformation and corporate strategies, the China Film Group Corporation (CFG) emerged as the most prominent case. As the largest media conglomerate and state-owned enterprise, CFG is responsible for carrying out state policies, including propaganda functions, market cultivation, and co-production development (Zhu 2002).

Yeh and Davis (2008) provide a historical account of the evolution of China Film Group Corporation (CFG), noting that it originated as China Film Management Corporation in 1951, with a mandate to handle film distribution throughout China. By 1958, it was renamed the China Film Distribution and Exhibition Corporation. In 1971, it underwent consolidation with the China Film Archive and China Film Equipment Corporation, culminating in the establishment of the China Film Corporation (CFC). Although this consolidation dissolved a few years later, the CFC name endured (Yeh and Davis 2008).

According to Yeh and Davis (2008), during the period of a centralized, planned economy, CFC had three main responsibilities. Firstly, it acted as a wholesale agent, acquiring films from state-owned studios that were solely focused on production. CFC covered the costs of film circulation nationwide, which involved relaying films through a hierarchical distribution system. Secondly, CFC imported socialist films from the Soviet Union, Vietnam, Cuba and other revolutionary film industries. Lastly, CFC exported Chinese films abroad to festivals, art houses, and educational programs (Yeh and Davis 2008). The government fully subsidized CFC, ensuring that it purchased all films made by the studios. In 1986, CFC's supervision was moved from the Ministry of Culture to the newly established Ministry of Radio, Film and Television (MRFT), reflecting film's reclassification as a cultural industry. However, despite allowing local distributors to become stakeholders in the business, the centralized system faced significant financial losses and continued to lose audiences to television, home video, and other forms of entertainment (Yeh and Davis 2008).

Yeh and Davis (2008) asserted that in the film market reform of the 1990s, China Film Corporation (CFC) strengthened its ties with Hollywood and adopted the Hollywood system, particularly in terms of corporate structure. To maintain government control over the thriving market and prepare for China's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO), a powerful and integrated industry player was necessary. Yeh and Davis (2008) suggested that as China prepared to open its markets, it also needed to safeguard its domestic interests against foreign competition. To address these issues, China Film Group Corporation (CFG) was established

under the recently restructured State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT), which replaced MRFT in 1998. In February 1999, eight previously separate entities<sup>31</sup> were merged to create the CFG, China's largest media corporation (Yeh and Davis 2008).

Thus, it was clear the Chinese film industry in general and the co-production sector, in particular, were reforming and improving their practices, trying to gain the international market. Then there was *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), a movie that received more than 40 international awards and made more than \$128m in the global market, initiating a new phase in Chinese film co-production. According to Peng (2015), the project was initiated by director Ang Lee and producer Jiang Zhiqiang in 1998, with the participation of Chinese studios. The Chinese partners had the domestic rights and profits of the film. The film combined creative inputs from abroad with financial and human resources from mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Hollywood (Peng 2015). This film was also the last one that CFCC invested in directly. After that, the role of CFCC changed. Instead of being an investor in co-produced films, it became an administrative body. It was affiliated with the China Film Group by its company constitution, and SARFT was responsible for its daily operations. CFCC's main function was to manage, coordinate and provide service to co-productions (Peng 2015).

Erich Schwartzel (2022) also discusses the significance of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. According to the author, the film represented an effort by Chinese officials to export their culture abroad, as the U.S. did in the twentieth century. A modern adaptation of the traditional Chinese martial arts genre known as *wuxia*, created by renowned filmmaker Ang Lee, the film's spectacle, which showed fighters flying and jumping into trees, was novel and impressive for most Western audiences. Taiwan submitted the film to the Academy Awards, even though it was a co-production with China, denying China the prestigious Oscar (Schwartzel 2022). However, the film failed to achieve the elusive goal of appealing to both Chinese and Western audiences. Chinese audiences preferred Hollywood movies and found the mix of Chinese and Western storytelling to be confusing, and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* had a poor box office performance in China. That, according to Schwartzel (2022), highlighted the challenge of making a film that could successfully cross the cultural gap between China and the West. American movies that had just been allowed into China were subject to any restrictions that the Chinese government imposed, but no rules could completely overcome taste.

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<sup>31</sup> Those eight entities were: China Film Corporation, plus Beijing Film Studio, China Children's Film Studio, China Film Co-production Corporation, China Film Equipment Corporation, China Movie Channel, Beijing Film Developing and Printing & Video Laboratory, and Huayun Film & TV Compact Discs Company (Yeh and Davis 2008).

Chinese viewers flocked to the movies in the first decade of new American productions in China because they were curious to see what the West was good at (Schwartzel 2022).

Zhang (2004) debated the case of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* as well. Zhang (2004, 281) quoted James Schamus, the film's executive producer, and screenwriter, who said that the film "is really bringing together almost every conceivable idea you could have of China." The film was shot in various scenic locations, such as the Gobi Desert and the Taklamakan Plateau in western China. It also used studios in Beijing, music recording in Shanghai, vocals in Los Angeles, and post-production in Hong Kong (Y. Zhang 2004). According to the scholar, Ang Lee's case illustrates both the immense appeal of mainland China for filmmakers and audiences and the inevitable blurring of geopolitical boundaries in the era of globalization. The case also shows the prevalence of a cosmopolitan perspective in Taiwan or Taiwan-co-produced films (Y. Zhang 2004).

In relation to the film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, an article penned by Henry Chu in 2001 for the Los Angeles Times offers a pertinent insight into the initial courtship between China and Hollywood. This occurred in the context of China's anticipated entry into the World Trade Organization, which will mark a phase identified by Wendy Su as a honeymoon period between China and Hollywood. Chu (2001) emphasized that despite drawing packed audiences to U.S. theaters, the film left viewers in the country where its story is set underwhelmed. He highlighted that the movie's lackluster performance in China served as a warning of the potential hurdles ahead for Hollywood as it eagerly awaits China's entry into the WTO, which will gradually open the Chinese market. Chu (2001) contended that, akin to numerous industries, the entertainment sector can falter due to miscalculations regarding consumer preferences, Communist Party politics, and the unpredictable behavior of Chinese officials, whose actions are difficult to anticipate and impossible to disregard. Additionally, the rampant video piracy prevalent in the region likely means that the majority of the film's critics only paid a fraction of the ticket price to view it (H. Chu 2001). Looking back, it becomes evident that many of the factors now central to ongoing discussions about China-Hollywood relations – such as the challenge of satisfying audiences on both sides of the Pacific while navigating the intricacies of the Asian country's political and economic landscape – were already at play decades ago.

Peng (2017) highlights the presence of Western studios in China and their importance in co-production initiatives. According to the scholar, Sony Pictures Tristar was the first major studio to recognize the potential of the Chinese market and established Columbia Pictures Film Production Asia (Columbia Asia) in Hong Kong in 1998. The aim was to produce Chinese films

for global distribution, especially for Chinese and culturally similar audiences, as part of a long-term localization strategy. Columbia Asia collaborated with Beijing New Pictures and Guangxi Film Studio to co-produce *The Road Home* (1999), and with Huayi Brothers and Taihe Film Investment Co., as well as United China Vision from the United Kingdom, to co-finance and co-produce *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000). The international success of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* motivated Columbia Asia to seek more Chinese partners for developing co-productions (Peng 2017).

In 2001, significant reforms were introduced in the Chinese film industry following China's membership in the World Trade Organization (WTO), according to Peng (2015). SARFT implemented the "Advices about Further Reformation of the Film Industry," which established film groups and proposed the creation of share-limited film companies, granting private companies legal rights as independent entities in co-production. The "Interim Provisions on the Access of Operational Qualifications for Movie Production Distribution and Screening and Administration of Sino-foreign Cooperation in Film Production" were also introduced, reducing the requirements for Chinese actors and the obligation of a domestic production team (Peng 2015).

During this period, the film industry was officially recognized as an industry, allowing private companies to produce and distribute films (Peng 2015). Foreign companies gained the ability to produce, distribute, and cast Chinese domestic films, expanding investment sources and boosting film co-production. Private companies gradually gained decision-making power in co-production, shifting it from overseas to Chinese domestic players (Peng 2015).

From 2004 to 2010, several co-productions took place, including 16 with the U.S., fourteen with the UK, twelve with Japan, six with South Korea, four with Germany and Singapore, three with Canada, and others with various countries (Peng 2015). Notably, co-produced films have been highly successful in generating revenue, and private companies gained experience by collaborating with state-owned agencies in co-production during this period (Peng 2015).

Cooperation shifted from bilateral to multilateral, driven by risk aversion and market expansion. Domestic partners included both state-owned and private institutions, while overseas partners often involved multiple countries. The proportion of co-productions with Hong Kong decreased, while cooperation with the U.S. became more frequent and influential (Peng 2015). Joint productions significantly contributed to Chinese films' export earnings, rising from 58.8% in 2006 to nearly 100% in 2010, highlighting the crucial role of co-production in China's global film industry growth. As a result, the Chinese government is

prioritizing joint productions and encouraging more collaborations between Chinese and foreign entities (Peng 2015).

In this section, I presented a brief history of co-productions in China, demonstrating that such collaborations intensified in the late 1970s, 1980s, and particularly in the 1990s, coinciding with efforts to reform and strengthen the Chinese film market. I highlighted how this strategy aligns with the approach taken by other countries worldwide – such as Canada, Mexico, and France – to boost their domestic market and expand the global reach of their cinema. Moreover, I illustrated that as the Chinese film industry grew more robust, co-production models became more diverse, evolving from assisted productions that relied on Chinese labor and locations to joint production models that allowed China to engage in the creative process. This enhanced China's ability to shape the stories told in co-produced films and promote Chinese narratives.

Throughout this subchapter, I examined the primary co-production modalities, including both international and those prevalent in China. I showed that the selected co-production format determines China's ability to influence the narratives in films, further reinforcing their capacity to communicate their strategic narratives. I then discussed the main reasons countries engage in co-productions, highlighting how China's efforts align with those of other nations that use this model to strengthen their domestic markets and enhance their global presence. Finally, I delved into the history of co-productions in China, demonstrating that although earlier co-productions were made especially with Hong Kong and Taiwan, Hollywood has been China's primary partner in co-productions in recent years.

Therefore, in the next sub-chapter, I will specifically focus on co-productions between China and Hollywood.

### **3.2. Ups and downs of the model: China-Hollywood recent co-productions**

In this section, I will explore how the relations between China and Hollywood in the twenty-first century have oscillated between collaboration and competition. Following Wendy Su (2022a), I point out that this relationship can be divided into two stages, separated by a turning point in mid-2017. Initially, the two film industries enjoyed a mutually beneficial partnership, marked by an influx of Chinese capital into Hollywood, the acquisition of stakes in Hollywood studios by Chinese companies, and a record number of film co-productions, with high profits for Hollywood studios. This trend peaked in the first half of 2017 when 25% of

Hollywood's exports to China were funded by Chinese investors, and Hollywood's desire for the Chinese market and money matched China's strategy of expanding its cultural soft power abroad. After 2017, however, the relationship entered a new phase of challenges and uncertainties. The Trump administration's trade war and hostile rhetoric towards China changed the tone of the bilateral ties. China also shifted its focus from investing in Hollywood to pursuing the Belt and Road Initiative, which reduced its involvement in the U.S. film industry. Moreover, the Chinese film industry faced a tax scandal and an economic slowdown that affected its financial resources. As the political climate became more tense and unpredictable, the two film industries were caught in the crossfire. Co-productions between China and Hollywood also reflected this changing environment. A notable example is *The Great Wall* (2016), which was released in China in December 2016 and in the U.S. in February 2017. The film can be seen as a symbol of the transition from cooperation and optimism to disappointment and difficulties. In the following sections, I will analyze both stages of the relationship, as well as propose some possible future scenarios for co-productions between China and Hollywood and how they can allow China to convey its strategic narratives to the world.

### 3.2.1. *The promised land*

In this section, I will explore the co-productions between China and Hollywood during the 2000s and 2010s, specifically up until 2017. These collaborations carried distinct significance for each side involved. Hollywood aimed to tap into the burgeoning Chinese film market, while China sought to acquire new techniques and enhance the global reach of its own films through these productions. I will highlight noteworthy cases from this period and explore the factors that led to a shift in the landscape of co-productions following 2017.

I already underscored that most of the Chinese co-production during history was made with Hong Kong and that only recently the China-Hollywood relationship has been gaining preeminence. But the difference is not only limited to timing and quantity: there is a clear distinction in the roles played by these co-productions. As noted in 2012 by Zhou Tiedong, the ex-manager of China Film Promotion International (CFPI), quoted by Yin (2018, 119), "co-productions with Hong Kong have promoted the development of domestic film for the past ten years; the co-productions with the United States will support us for fifty years in the future." Thus, the sustainable growth of Sino-U.S. film co-productions should be a key factor in both

the development of the Chinese film industry and the globalization of its market (Yin 2018).

Wendy Su (2017) also notes the continuous growth of U.S.-China film co-productions, accompanied by increasing Chinese investments in Hollywood and U.S. cinemas. According to the scholar, this transformative trend has not only altered the global power dynamics but also reshaped the structure of the global media landscape. These co-productions possess the potential to foster a new global culture and innovative communication models, but realizing these possibilities necessitates persistent efforts from generations of filmmakers. Transnational co-productions have allowed Hollywood studios to get around strict import quota restrictions while simultaneously becoming a major source of domestic box office revenue and the backbone of China's film industry (Su 2017). And while historically most Chinese co-productions were created with Hong Kong, in 2015 Hollywood was China's most common co-production partner and the number of overseas co-productions permitted by China exceeded the sum of all co-productions over the previous three years. Co-productions received a record-breaking 89 shooting licenses in 2016, up 11% from the 2015 total (Su 2017).

Su (2017) also states that co-productions are one more site of negotiation of power between China and the U.S. If reciprocal advantages are the basis for co-production between the United States and China, then the main source of conflict is stemming from disparate aspirations and objectives. Hollywood's main goal is to make money, so Asian and Chinese themes are employed to increase the attraction of Hollywood to Asian audiences and to grow its fan base in China and other parts of Asia. But China wants more than just money. Its partnership with Hollywood is an extension of the twenty-first-century technique of "going to sea by borrowing a boat," which has been used for many years (Su 2017, 6). In other words, China intends to develop its local film industry, export Chinese culture, and strengthen its soft power globally by utilizing Hollywood resources (Su 2017).

According to Su (2017), co-production between the United States and China has been a prominent trend since the start of the twenty-first century, and after 2012, that movement started speeding up and exhibiting new characteristics. Hollywood studios have poured into China in search of massively scaled collaboration opportunities, and Chinese corporations have aggressively expanded into the Hollywood industry, as evidenced by Wanda's buying spree, suggesting a counterflow in the global cultural economy (Su 2017).

Peng (2017) and Yin (2018) have also highlighted distinct stages in the evolution of collaborative processes between China and the United States. Initially, as previously emphasized, during the 1980s and 1990s, China primarily provided support to U.S. partner firms by offering equipment, shooting locations, and production-related services, without active

involvement in creative activities or financial investment. The authors suggest that a significant transformation occurred in 2001 when China became a member of the World Trade Organization, leading to further opening up and deeper reforms in the cultural industries. This created opportunities for private companies to enter the film industry, while simultaneously encouraging greater collaboration between Chinese and U.S. firms (Peng 2017; Yin 2018).

During the 2000s, the Chinese side became more engaged in financial investment and talent contribution. Co-ventures in the first ten years of the twenty-first century were distinguished by higher involvement in money and talent from the Chinese side compared to Sino-U.S. collaboration in the 1990s. Beijing New Pictures, a company that worked with Zhang Yimou, made movies including *Hero* (2002), *House of Flying Daggers* (2004), and *Curse of the Golden Flower* (2006) during this time (Peng 2017). Additionally, some state-owned film companies, like CFG and Shanghai Film Group, were actively looking at the prospects afforded by Sino-U.S. co-ventures. Box office successes included movies like *Kung Fu Hustle* (2004), *Fearless* (2006), *Lust, Caution* (2007), *Red Cliff* (2008), and *The Karate Kid* (2010). Despite some differences, experience has built a solid foundation for future China-U.S. film co-production partnerships (Peng 2017). However, co-produced films were predominantly funded by the U.S. side, with Chinese companies playing a production role focused on the domestic market. As a result, these films displayed limited international influences. Conversely, successful co-produced films in the overseas market were typically led by U.S. firms, with assistance from their Chinese counterparts (Peng 2017; Yin 2018).

A significant turning point occurred with the signing of the Sino-U.S. Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) in 2012, marking a new stage in Sino-U.S. co-productions (Peng 2017; Yin 2018). The relaxation of Chinese policies and the rapid growth of the film industry greatly encouraged investment by U.S. filmmakers in China, leading to the establishment of more subsidiaries dedicated to facilitating co-productions. The establishment of Oriental DreamWorks in Shanghai, the China headquarters of Cameron-Pace Group in Tianjin, and News Corp.'s investment in Bona Film all signaled the transition of Sino-U.S. cooperation into a new phase (Peng 2017). Simultaneously, Chinese filmmakers expressed a strong desire to enter the global market and enhance their international influence through collaboration with U.S. firms (Peng 2017; Yin 2018). A notable example illustrating this desire is the film *The Great Wall* (Yin 2018).

Kokas (2017) also emphasized the significance of the 2012 MOU in the China-Hollywood relationship. Since China's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, efforts to open up China's media market have faced difficulties. While certain agreements



were reached within the WTO, negotiations regarding film distribution in China were left to bilateral discussions. The 2012 U.S.-China Film Agreement played a crucial role (Kokas 2017). This agreement required an expansion of China's revenue-sharing import quota to include fourteen special-format films (such as 3-D and IMAX) in addition to the existing twenty films permitted by Chinese law, thus allowing a total of thirty-four imported films in the Chinese market. The agreement also stipulated a review of enforcement in 2017, five years after the initial MOU, highlighting the long-term nature of policy negotiations surrounding Hollywood's influence in China (Kokas 2017). This review never happened, and officially the Agreement is currently out of date (R. Davis 2022).

Nevertheless, Kokas (2017) pointed out that the 2014 Report to Congress on China's WTO Compliance indicated that China had not fully implemented its commitments outlined in the MOU. In a public hearing on China's WTO Compliance held by the Office of the United States Trade Representative, it was further explained that only a few films could secure import quota slots, and additional distribution options were limited due to the influence of Chinese state-owned enterprises, opaque censorship processes, and protected periods for the distribution of local films. These practices were deemed to be in violation of the 2012 U.S.-China Film Agreement (Kokas 2017).

The 2022 Report to Congress on China's WTO Compliance, published in February 2023 by the United States Trade Representative,<sup>32</sup> highlights that, although United States and China "signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) providing for substantial increases in the number of foreign films imported and distributed in China each year, along with substantial additional revenue for U.S. film producers," "China has not yet fully implemented its MOU commitments, including with regard to critical commitments to open up film distribution opportunities for imported films. As a result, the United States has been pressing China for full implementation of the MOU." The report adds that:

In 2017, in accordance with the terms of the MOU, the two sides began discussions regarding the provision of further meaningful compensation to the United States in an updated MOU. These discussions continued until March 2018, before stalling when China embarked on a major government reorganization that involved significant changes for China's Film Bureau. Discussions resumed in 2019 as part of the broader U.S.-China trade negotiations that began following a meeting between the two countries' Presidents on the margins of the Group of 20 Heads of State and Government Summit in Buenos Aires in December 2018. To date, no agreement has been reached on the further meaningful compensation that China owes to the United States. The United States will continue pressing China to fulfill its obligations.

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<sup>32</sup> The report is available at: <https://ustr.gov/sites/default/files/2023-02/2022%20USTR%20Report%20to%20Congress%20on%20China's%20WTO%20Compliance%20-%20Final.pdf>.

This document holds significance in showcasing the broader connection between cinema and the political landscape, particularly in the context of China-U.S. relations. It emphasizes the ongoing relevance of this topic, which remains subject to pressures from both sides.

In any case, according to Kokas (2017), from the Chinese side, China's State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT) initially established regulations for co-productions in 2004, three years after China's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO). These regulations, known as "The Stipulation of the Administration of Chinese-Foreign Film Co-production," were adopted at an executive meeting on June 15, 2004. When the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT) was formed in 2013, it absorbed SARFT and continued to enforce the existing co-production policies.

However, Kokas (2017) noted that until July 2015, the official SAPPRFT website displayed an imported film master contract that reflected a policy from 2009, specifying particular domestic Chinese film distributors for foreign and co-produced films, contradicting the 2012 ruling. This discrepancy suggests that although the website had been updated following the merger of SARFT into SAPPRFT in 2013, it still retained the 2009 policy instead of reflecting the 2012 ruling. This tension between increased access to the Chinese market and ambivalence about market openness reflects the challenges faced by both China and the United States in their collaborative efforts (Kokas 2017).

In March 2018, there was yet another institutional rearrangement: SAPPRFT became responsible for the supervision of radio and television, and the Publicity Department, for cinema and print media. According to Stanley Rosen (2018), this reorganization is part of centralization trends that have been developing since 2013, being another indication of Xi Jinping's emphasis on the Party's central role in regulating all aspects of China's cultural, social, and political life. For the scholar, the allocation of cinema under the supervision of the Publicity Department reflects the Party's growing effort to control and unify the message by promoting Chinese soft power both internally and externally (Rosen 2018). In any case, the Publicity Department has the final say on all films entering China (Rosen 2018).

Co-productions have emerged as an appealing alternative for Hollywood due to the challenges of accessing the Chinese film market. Rosen (2017) highlighted that, in addition to the quota system, previously discussed, there are still other limitations to the foreign presence in the Chinese film market. Among them, the reservation of dates in which only Chinese films

are allowed to be screened (usually in the busiest times of the year); the release of two blockbusters at the same time, so that they cannibalize themselves and have a lower box office, or the delay in the release of blockbusters so that the frisson and the demand are reduced; a “benign negligence” of the film piracy problem; the withdrawal of films that are still making success; and the manipulation of box office data in favor of domestic films, especially “patriotic” films that have trouble to succeed only with popular demand (Rosen 2017, 367–68).

The film co-production policy implemented by the Chinese government enables foreign films that meet specific criteria in terms of Chinese talent and financing to be treated as local productions (Kokas 2017). With the Chinese film market valued at USD 6.8 billion in 2015, Hollywood producers have strong incentives to comply with Chinese co-production policies right from the pre-production stage to ensure market access (Kokas 2017). However, as highlighted by Kokas (2017), while co-productions provide U.S. film companies with a crucial entry point into the Chinese market, the central government maintains final authority and control over the editing and distribution approval process for any film considered an official Chinese product, including co-productions. This means that films produced under the Sino-U.S. co-production policy are subject to a complex political landscape of approval for distribution within China, starting even before production begins. By utilizing co-production policies, China can tap into Hollywood’s expertise to enhance its domestic media industry and strengthen its national brand (Kokas 2017).

Su (2017) also highlights the various stages involved in U.S.-China film collaborations. The scholar examines how this phenomenon, seen as a significant aspect of global cultural exchange, has been interpreted by political economists through the lens of the New International Division of Cultural Labor (NICL). According to this perspective, China is positioned as a provider of cheap labor and a low-cost, low-end component within the global capitalist economic system and the commodification of culture. In these collaborations, Hollywood typically takes the lead and maintains dominance throughout the production process, while China and other countries contribute with labor, facilities, settings, and sometimes investment (Su 2017). This perspective finds support in China’s historical interactions with Hollywood. Su (2017) mentions that Ren Zhonglun, the President of Shanghai Film Group, reinforces this argument by highlighting the group’s previous role as a provider of labor and facilities in their collaborations with Hollywood over nearly three decades. However, recent years have witnessed significant changes, with the group taking control of activities ranging from pre-production preparation to screenwriting and cast selection, signifying a shift in their level of involvement (Su 2017).

Examining this context, Michael Keane (2013) identifies that Chinese policymakers, academics, and even ordinary citizens aspire for the country to transition from being a producer of cheap imitative products for overseas markets to becoming a “creative nation.” The involvement of foreign filmmakers in China brings not only ideas but also investment, technology, and expertise. By allowing these film players to contribute their ideas and solutions, policymakers aimed to rejuvenate the stagnant Chinese film industry (Keane 2013). In this sense, co-producers are willing collaborators because China is striving to elevate its position in the value chain (Keane 2013; Yecies, Keane, and Flew 2016). Additionally, the technological gap between China and developed economies is rapidly narrowing due to the transfer of knowledge and the movement of human capital (Keane 2016).

In this scenario, to export Chinese culture, the Chinese government uses a strategy that involves utilizing Hollywood resources, including co-productions, to transform the country’s film industry and create international networks (Su 2017). Cultural industries thus serve as an essential tool for promoting Chinese culture and enacting Chinese soft power (Su 2017).

Su (2017) further analyzed the driving forces behind the extensive collaborations between the United States and China. Hollywood’s main motivation is gaining access to the Chinese market and securing additional financing sources to manage rising production costs. China, on the other hand, aims to nurture global talent, enter the international market, and to establish global connections. Chinese producers are driven by profit generation and risk mitigation through co-productions, as well as the desire to learn from Hollywood’s expertise (Su 2017). Esteemed Chinese filmmaker Zhang Yimou (director, among others, of *The Great Wall*) openly acknowledged the valuable lessons that can be gleaned from Hollywood: “Hollywood’s filmmaking industry is quite mature, so there’s a lot we can learn. They have professional teams in different stages of filmmaking. And we can also learn about financing, marketing and distribution from them. But meanwhile, we have our distinctive culture” (CCTV 2016).

Su (2017) also emphasizes that the success of co-productions relies on finding universal storylines and genres that resonate with both Chinese and international audiences. Sci-fi, fantasy, and action-adventure genres have broad appeal. Challenges arise due to language barriers, cultural differences, and technical issues such as contracts and copyrights. Despite these obstacles, co-productions are seen as a cultural fusion experiment that requires determination, courage, and multicultural understanding (Su 2017).

Moreover, Su (2017) underscores that while some co-productions predominantly reflect American culture with a limited representation of Chinese culture, recent developments indicate

a shift towards a more diverse cinematic landscape. Chinese corporations investing in Hollywood and collaborations that tap into Chinese cultural resources demonstrate an evolving co-production framework. Initiatives such as talent incubators, the establishment of English-language film offices, and partnerships between Chinese and American directors signify a new phase of negotiation and the emergence of a new global cultural landscape (Su 2017).

Su (2017) highlights that this ongoing collaboration challenges cultural imperialism and promotes diversity and inclusivity. It reshapes the global power structure and contributes to the creation of a new global culture. Su (2017) concludes that co-productions will continue to evolve, fostering new forms of collaboration and reshaping the global media structure.

Interestingly, Aynne Kokas, writing in 2017, also pointed out the new possibilities deriving from China-Hollywood relations. The scholar observes that stakeholders across various levels, including production, industry executives, workers, and government policymakers, are forging “new, blended Sino-U.S. media content and brands” (Kokas 2017, 14). Kokas emphasizes the range of co-ventures between Hollywood and China, encompassing studio film collaborations and the establishment of shared brandscapes. These brandscapes, or the demarcation of territory by brands, manifest in production studios, entertainment centers, theme parks, and English-language schools. Notably, influential Hollywood entities such as The Walt Disney Company, DreamWorks Animation, and director James Cameron are actively participating in the Chinese media industry through their investments in both films and brandscape (Kokas 2017, 14). The professor suggests that through their increasingly intimate production relationships with Hollywood institutions, Chinese policymakers, and media producers are enhancing the country’s soft power (Kokas 2017). Moreover, the growth of Sino-U.S. collaboration involves not only institutional-level efforts but also contributions from media industry forums, fans, and below-the-line workers. This expanding list of projects offers novel blends of mass media culture, production practices, and brands, transcending the control of any single industrial or regulatory authority (Kokas 2017).

The involvement of Chinese and American policymakers in the China-Hollywood relationship, especially as it pertains to co-productions, holds significant relevance to this dissertation. And these involvements were particularly intense during this period. Kokas (2017) highlights that while government intervention in the media industry aligns with China’s planned economy, it deviates from the norm in the United States. However, a noteworthy event took place in February 2012 when then-China Vice President Xi Jinping and then-U.S. Vice President Joe Biden met in Washington, DC, to discuss increasing the People’s Republic of China’s film import quotas. This meeting underscored the media policy priorities of both

nations' governments at the highest levels. During Xi's visit, a joint venture called Oriental DreamWorks was established, with the aim of creating family-branded entertainment in China (Kokas 2017). This venture was supported by Chinese investors such as China Media Capital, Shanghai Media Group, Shanghai Alliance Investment Limited, and Hollywood's DreamWorks Animation SKG, with Hollywood film executive and producer Jeffrey Katzenberg playing a key role in the agreement. Katzenberg sat next to Xi at a State Department luncheon held in Xi's honor, and they also attended a Los Angeles Lakers basketball game together. The collaboration brokered by Biden, Xi, and Katzenberg marked a significant milestone in the partnership between a major U.S. corporation and the Chinese government and private-sector partners, highlighting the intricate nature of public-private collaboration between the two nations. These media collaborations not only bring together U.S. politicians and industry leaders but also mirror the close relationships among Chinese politicians and executives in other sectors (Kokas 2017). In August 2012, DreamWorks Animation announced its plans to establish Oriental DreamWorks in Shanghai's Xuhui District. The convergence of top-level Chinese and U.S. leadership, along with the involvement of key Hollywood figures, provides insight into the importance of the media industries in the China-U.S. relationship (Kokas 2017). These dynamics also underscore the interplay between cinema, the creative economy, and politics, which serves as a central theme in this dissertation.

Kokas (2017) observed that the relationship between U.S. and Chinese media policy has evolved alongside the growth of the Chinese media market. As the relative sizes of the Chinese and U.S. media markets change, negotiations shape the collaboration between the Sino-US media industries, presenting opportunities for asserting authority. The significance of Sino-U.S. relations in media and cultural products increases with the proliferation of major international productions and brandscapes. Leaders on both sides actively bridge policy gaps to expand China's market influence and Hollywood's market share. The visits of Chinese President Xi Jinping to the United States have been connected to the media industries. For instance, the June 2013 Sunnyland Summit, the first meeting between Xi and U.S. President Barack Obama, took place in Southern California, an area deeply immersed in the industry. This meeting foreshadowed the emphasis on media and communication in future meetings between the two leaders (Kokas 2017).

During Xi's visit to the U.S. in September 2015, which coincided with numerous Sino-U.S. deals, Warner Bros. and China Media Capital announced the opening of Flagship Entertainment, a co-venture aimed at producing English- and Chinese-language content. The intertwining of state-level diplomacy and the global entertainment brands of China and

Hollywood became evident (Kokas 2017). The state dinner hosted by President Obama during Xi's visit further emphasized the media and technology sectors, with a significant number of guests representing entertainment, media, and technology companies. Thus, one of the notable features of Sino-U.S. media joint ventures in the twenty-first century, as seen in Xi Jinping's meetings in the U.S., is that industry leaders and policymakers from both countries have played a significant role. This situation is particularly intriguing due to the mythologies surrounding Hollywood producers and Chinese political leaders. While the U.S. government does not directly control Hollywood, the Chinese government holds substantial authority over its media industries. The contrasting levels of influence that government officials in China and the United States have over their respective media industries contribute to a complex bilateral media policymaking environment (Kokas 2017).

Kokas also illustrates the complex relations in China-Hollywood co-productions analyzing two films, referred to as faux-productions: *Iron Man 3* (2013) and *Transformers: Age of Extinction* (2014). Discussing *Iron Man 3*, which had two versions – one tailored specifically for China – Kokas (2017) suggested that the transfer of control over a Hollywood blockbuster to Chinese regulators marked a turning point in Hollywood's relationship with China. However, despite its success at the box office, Kokas emphasized that *Iron Man 3* did not represent a complete victory for China in terms of soft power or policy. While the co-production approach was initially explored for the film, it was ultimately bypassed. The inclusion of “Chinese elements” in the movie felt forced and inserted into the storyline. As a result, a portion of the Chinese box office revenue that would have typically supported regional Chinese films went to Marvel Studios instead. This demonstrated the emergence of Chinese soft power within Hollywood, alongside the PRC's evolving trade and media policies. Although the film boasted a substantial budget and generated profits for Chinese distributors, the compromises made by both parties in faux-productions like *Iron Man 3* underscored the increasing interdependence of the Chinese and U.S. film industries (Kokas 2017).

On the other hand, Kokas's analysis highlights *Transformers: Age of Extinction* (2014), also referred to as *Transformers 4*, as a distinctive and noteworthy case. In 2014, the release of *Transformers 4* coincided with significant political events in Hong Kong, making the relationship between policy and the production of Chinese and American visual culture even more intricate. A mutual decision was made by Paramount Studios and the SAPPRT to release the movie on June 27, the Friday before the traditional protests in Hong Kong. The film included pronounced scenes of a fictitious PRC defense minister sending ships toward Hong Kong's harbor, visually projecting power that would have been politically infeasible in real-world Hong

Kong. The movie also depicted a dominant police presence, foreshadowing the actual scenes of police presence during the protests that followed. The images first appeared on screens in Hong Kong the weekend before large-scale demonstrations against PRC government authority there, which attracted more than 500,000 protesters (out of Hong Kong's seven million residents) and launched a string of pro-democracy demonstrations that came to be known as the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong (Kokas 2017). Interestingly, *Transformers 4* surpassed previous box office records in China despite the ongoing protests.

According to Kokas (2017), *Transformers 4* exemplifies the blending of the Hollywood dream factory with the Chinese Dream. It not only promoted a major U.S. commercial brand but also provided branding opportunities for both horizontally integrated Hollywood media conglomerates and Chinese media companies. Furthermore, the production of the film involved the recruitment of Chinese actors through a reality show, contributing to China's domestic media industry and talent development. *Transformers 4* also underscored China's significance as a film location, even though certain footage of the Great Wall did not make it into the final cut. These collaborations between China and Hollywood demonstrate the mutual demands of trade, investment, and soft power (Kokas 2017). This is due to the fact that Sino-U.S. blockbusters like *Transformers 4*, far from being one-way cultural imperialism, require a constant back-and-forth of branding efforts between Chinese and Hollywood partners that reflect the demands of both U.S. trade and investment and Chinese soft power (Kokas 2017).

Kokas (2017) emphasizes that media industry collaboration plays a crucial role in the trade relations between China and the U.S. The success of blockbuster efforts such as *Transformers 4* highlights the influence of media brand co-ventures on global entertainment and trade. While collaboration is not a natural process, trade policies and international organizations like the WTO exert pressure to ensure access to China's media market. As China's media industry continues to develop through collaborative projects and domestic policies, Chinese products and companies become more competitive. The complexity of policy, soft power, and cultural sovereignty in the Sino-U.S. relationship is evident, and blockbusters provide insights into the changing dynamics of this relationship, should global audiences know how to look (Kokas 2017).

Erich Schwartzel (2022) also analyzed the case of *Transformers 4*, noting a significant shift in Hollywood's approach to incorporating Chinese elements into their films. After the success of *Avatar* (2009) in China, studios began seeking Chinese revenue. Paramount Pictures, wanting to tap into this market, enlisted Michael Bay, the director of the *Transformers* franchise. While *Red Dawn* exemplified a studio preemptively removing content that might anger Chinese



officials (as I pointed out in Chapter 2), *Transformers* took the opposite approach, strategically including “Chinese elements” in the script to appeal to Chinese bureaucrats and audiences (Schwartzel 2022). For the first time, creative decisions in Hollywood were influenced by Chinese preferences. However, audiences outside China may not have noticed these subtle changes. Schwartzel (2022) detailed the “green light” meeting for *Transformers*, where top executives assess the project’s finances and market potential, including the expected Chinese box-office gross. Paramount needed assurance of the film’s release in China and an optimal release date. In a meeting near the Forbidden City, Rob Moore, vice chairman of Paramount Pictures, engaged with Chinese officials, including Tong Gang, the vice minister of the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television. The officials had reviewed the script, and one scene required modification: instead of the Americans saving the day in Hong Kong, China’s good guys should arrive first. Paramount made the necessary adjustments to showcase China’s role in protecting Hong Kong. Schwartzel (2022) highlighted the backdrop of the meeting, referencing an event involving the film *Pacific Rim* (2013), where a Chinese Communist Party officer criticized it as American propaganda, a big-budget effort to export the U.S.’s rebalancing of its Asia-Pacific strategy and to show U.S. dominance in the South China Sea. The mention of *Pacific Rim* served as a reminder for Hollywood executives to be mindful of political sensitivities (Schwartzel 2022). That Hollywood executives decided to give in and review the script shows that the table had changed.

At this point, it is worth revisiting an example mentioned in Chapter 1 of this dissertation, which concerns the film *Battleship* (2012). Secker and Alford (2017a) describe it as “little more than *Transformers* on water.” The movie portrays aquatic alien robots invading the world from the Pacific Ocean and launching an attack on Hong Kong. Fortunately, the U.S. and other countries’ ships engaged in military exercises in the region come to the rescue. The film showcases the heroism of U.S. sailors, aided unexpectedly by veterans of the Pacific War against Japan, thereby honoring both the past and present of the U.S. Navy (Secker and Alford 2017a).

Secker and Alford (2017a) highlight that *Battleship* received extensive cooperation from the U.S. military, particularly the Navy. A significant portion of the footage featuring U.S. Navy ships was captured during the 2010 biannual RIMPAC exercise, which is repeatedly referenced in the film (Secker and Alford 2017a). The authors obtained documents through the Freedom of Information Act, including an email from Dennis Moynihan, the Chief Information Officer of the U.S. Navy at that time. In the email, Moynihan emphasized that the film would promote the Navy’s brand and serve as a means to familiarize many Americans with their Navy

(Secker and Alford 2017a).

Secker and Alford (2017a) argue that *Battleship* was essentially a branding exercise. The U.S. Army's Entertainment Liaison Offices reports describe it as a "promilitary chest-thumper" that would attract a significant audience in the 18-39 age group. They also note how the film supports the army's objectives of "Broadening Understanding and Advocacy" and promoting a "depiction of a Trained & Ready Force to meet our Nation's needs" (Secker and Alford 2017a).

When comparing *Transformers 4* and *Battleship*, it is noticeable that the interest lies in the fact that a foreign country, China, influenced the script to enhance the image of its Armed Forces in *Transformers 4*. However, is this any less problematic than a propagandistic portrait of a U.S. corporation, supported and promoted (given that *Battleship* would not have been made without the support of the U.S. Navy) by this corporation? If Hollywood is truly independent and non-partisan, as critics of China's state-backed soft power claim, then why is interference from the U.S. government any less concerning than interference from the Chinese government? Are both of them propaganda? Does Joseph Nye's advice to the Chinese that "the best propaganda is no propaganda" (Nye 2012) apply to U.S. Army-backed Hollywood movies such as *Battleship* and *Top Gun*? These debates need to be faced and they once again underscore the significance of addressing these issues within a dissertation in International Relations.

In this section, I explored the period from the 2000s to 2017, characterized by high enthusiasm and expectations surrounding co-productions between China and the United States. I highlighted the divergent interests of both parties, with the United States aiming to access the growing Chinese market and China seeking to strengthen its film industry and enhance its soft power to promote its strategic narratives. Despite these sometimes conflicting interests, there was a significant integration between industries and policymakers in both countries, exemplified by the visit of then-Vice President Xi Jinping to the United States in 2012 and his meetings with then-Vice President Joe Biden. These meetings involved discussions with U.S. executives and businessmen interested in the expanding Chinese media market. These dynamics highlight the interplay between cinema, the creative economy, and politics in China-U.S. relations.

Among notable cases of collaborations during this period were *Iron Man 3* and *Transformers 4*, which represented turning points in the China-U.S. dynamic, as Hollywood executives' creative decisions became influenced by the Chinese government's interests. While these examples illustrate instances of faux-productions, there were also genuine co-productions between China and Hollywood during this period. A significant example is *Kung Fu Panda 3*,

the first animated co-production between China and Hollywood. This collaboration was made possible through Oriental DreamWorks, a China-U.S. joint venture established during Xi Jinping's 2012 visit to the United States. In Section 3.2.3., I will delve into the analysis of animated co-productions, including *Kung Fu Panda 3*. Another noteworthy co-production is *The Great Wall*, which will be further examined in Section 3.3. Both *Kung Fu Panda 3* and *The Great Wall* were initially developed amidst the optimistic and enthusiastic atmosphere in Hollywood regarding the Chinese market and China's interest in Hollywood techniques.

However, this scenario undergoes changes in 2017, as explored in the subsequent section.

### 3.2.2. *The failures and challenges*

In this section, I will examine co-productions between China and the United States from mid-2017 to 2023. I will explore the key reasons behind the shift in the previously positive relationship and demonstrate how they are interconnected with domestic events in both countries. The election of Donald Trump in the United States and the subsequent hardening of policies towards China, along with China's focus on investments in the Belt and Road Initiative and changes in the treatment of Chinese businessmen investing abroad (such as the case of Dalian Wanda), as well as a tax scandal that impacted the Chinese film market, have all contributed to this change. This section aims not only to highlight the impact on film production but also to illustrate how political events can influence the content showcased on movie screens worldwide, including films produced by Hollywood, China, and joint productions. Consequently, these developments affect China's use of cinema as a soft power tool for disseminating its strategic narratives.

The selection of mid-2017 as a turning point aligns with the proposition of Professor Wendy Su (2022). However, evidence of this change can be seen before that, such as the already mentioned 2016 letter sent by sixteen Congressmen, representing both the Republican and Democratic parties, to Gene L. Dodaro, the Comptroller General of the U.S. and head of the Government Accountability Office. As I already pointed out, in the letter, the Congressmen raised concerns about foreign acquisitions of American companies, specifically mentioning China's Dalian Wanda Group's purchases of Legendary Entertainment studio and the AMC movie-theater chain. They called for a review of the acquisition process of American companies

by foreign entities and emphasized the need for greater oversight by the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS), inquiring: “Should the definition of national security be broadened to address concerns about propaganda and control of the media and ‘soft power’ institutions?”

However, with the election of Donald Trump in the United States and the subsequent escalation of rhetoric towards China, this issue took on a new dimension. Media outlets began devoting increased attention to the topic, with prominent stories published in *The New York Times* discussing the relationship between China and Hollywood (A. Qin and Carlsen 2018). Advocacy organizations like PEN America produced extensive reports on how Beijing exercises censorship over Hollywood (PEN America 2020). Senator Ted Cruz introduced a bill to penalize Hollywood studios that alter their scripts to appease the Chinese government (Cruz 2020). Even South Park released an episode satirizing the complex relationship between the U.S. entertainment industry, including Disney and Marvel, and China (Parker and Brzeski 2019). These are just a few examples of the events that I will delve into further below.

Wendy Su (2022a) discusses how the Hollywood-Chinawood relationship experienced a turning point in 2017. The election of President Donald Trump led to a shift in the U.S.’s policy towards China, moving from engagement to confrontation and triggering a trade war. As part of this, motion pictures were included in Trump’s proposed \$200 billion tariff list announced in July 2018. Su (2022a) contends that, at the same time, the Chinese government embarked on a strategic pivot, redirecting its global expansion ambitions from the earlier Hollywood- and American-focused endeavors to the Belt and Road Initiative, a global infrastructure development strategy. The year 2017 witnessed a substantial drop in Chinese investment in Hollywood, plummeting from \$4.78 billion in 2016 to \$489 million (Su 2022a).

In a 2017 *CGTN* article, Ty Lawson elaborated on the plummeting deal flow between China and Hollywood, dropping from around \$5 billion in 2016 to less than \$500 million in 2017, with no significant acquisitions since February. Lawson (2017) pointed out that direct film-related investments were especially hard-hit, dwindling by \$4.6 billion in 2017 from the previous year. Notably, numerous high-profile deals had disintegrated in the preceding year, including Anhui Xinke’s \$345 million purchase of Voltage Pictures, Wanda’s \$1 billion acquisition of Dick Clark Productions, and Recon Holdings’ \$100 million deal for Millennium Films (Lawson 2017).

Lawson (2017) attributes this investment slump to the increasing difficulty buyers encountered in obtaining approval from Chinese authorities for overseas entertainment acquisitions. In August 2016, the State Council had announced intentions to curtail domestic

companies' foreign investments in fields like entertainment, sports, and property. This move followed a series of multibillion-dollar acquisitions and was prompted by concerns over companies accumulating excessive debt. Under the weight of these new restrictions, investments came to an abrupt halt for both the Chinese and U.S. entertainment sectors (Lawson 2017).

Furthermore, as Wendy Su (2022a) notes, 2018 also witnessed the Chinese film industry grappling with a tax evasion scandal (to be discussed later in this chapter) and a decelerating domestic economy that drained its financial resources. Consequently, as the bilateral relationship and global politics entered an uncertain phase, both film industries became ensnared in the political crossfire.

The changing bilateral relationship and geopolitical tensions had a profound impact on the two film industries. Instances like Quentin Tarantino's refusal to comply with China's censorship requirements, criticisms of China in *South Park*, and controversies surrounding the NBA further strained relations (Su 2022a). The *South Park* episode is really telling of how the China-Hollywood relationship started to be seen in the U.S. in this period. In the episode,<sup>33</sup> Disney is targeted numerous times, with Mickey Mouse turning up to ensure that all of his employees – cartoon characters from Marvel and Disney – go along and don't upset the Chinese government. The episode also highlights the challenges faced by a *South Park* character attempting to write a movie, with constant script alterations to meet Chinese requirements. The scriptwriter humorously remarks, "Now I know how Hollywood writers feel," as a Chinese guard monitors and modifies his work in real-time. In a perhaps expected reaction, the Chinese government responded by deleting all clips, episodes, and discussions of the show. *South Park*'s creators Trey Parker and Matt Stone issued a statement with a faux apology about the ban: "Like the NBA, we welcome the Chinese censors into our homes and into our hearts. We too love money more than freedom and democracy. Xi doesn't look like Winnie the Pooh at all. Tune into our 300th episode this Wednesday at 10! Long live the great Communist Party of China. May the autumn's sorghum harvest be bountiful. We good now China?" (Parker and Brzeski 2019).

In yet another representative development of the increasingly more unsettling China-Hollywood relationship, the Asia Society's U.S.-China Film Summit even changed its name to the "U.S.-Asia Entertainment Summit" to reflect the trade war and conflicts between China and the U.S. (Su 2022a). These tensions escalated with the COVID-19 pandemic, pushing bilateral

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<sup>33</sup> The full episode is available at: <https://www.southparkstudios.com.br/episodios/4y1119/south-park-rock-in-china-temporada-23-ep-2>.

relations to their lowest point since 1989 and raising concerns about complete decoupling between the two countries (Su 2022a).

Before 2017, China was Hollywood's largest overseas market and investor. Su (2022a) highlighted significant investments, such as Alibaba partnering with Amblin Partners, Dalian Wanda Group's acquisitions of Legendary Pictures and Carmike Cinemas, Bona Film Group's investments with 20th Century Fox and Studio 8, and Lions Gate Entertainment's joint ventures. However, aggressive Chinese investment drew regulatory attention and raised concerns for the U.S. government. This, combined with the changing relationship and geopolitical concerns, disrupted the Hollywood-Chinawood partnership.

Su (2022a, 343) also underscored that the fear of a "Chinese Communist takeover of Hollywood" has been present in the U.S. for some time. Americans increasingly viewed China's rise as a threat, and the film industry became a target in the new Cold War between the two countries. As mentioned in Chapter 2, political figures like Vice President Mike Pence, Senator Ted Cruz, and Attorney General William Barr joined the crusade, criticizing Hollywood's perceived submission to Chinese influence, and citing content alterations in movies like *World War Z* and *Red Dawn*. Cruz even proposed legislation restricting government funding for film production if the content was altered to please Chinese censors. Also analyzed in Chapter 2, Disney's remake of *Mulan* faced controversy over the lead actress's support for the Hong Kong police and assistance obtained from entities linked to forced reeducation camps. Netflix also faced criticism for its plan to adapt Liu Cixin's trilogy *The Three-Body Problem*, with the author's support of China's actions in Xinjiang being a point of contention.

From the Chinese side, according to Su (2022a), China's government implemented tighter control over capital outflow and imposed restrictions on IPOs, impacting the entertainment industry. The Dalian Wanda Group faced scrutiny and scaled back its global presence. In the face of a regulatory uproar at home, billionaire Wang Jianlin declared he would respect the government's directives and refocus his conglomerate's operations within China (Brzeski 2017). These regulatory changes and slower growth in China's film industry from 2018 contributed to a challenging environment. Despite some successful domestic films, the industry experienced a "cold winter" characterized by a crackdown on tax evasion among celebrities and declining profits for privately-owned studios.

This tax scandal is exemplified by the case of involving Fan Bingbing, one of China's most prominent film celebrities. In July 2018, Bingbing inexplicably vanished, remaining out of the public eye for months. As Chris Berry (2019) aptly compares, "The Hollywood equivalent would be Kim Kardashian's social media accounts being closed down overnight."

Three months later, Fan Bingbing reemerged, issuing an extensive apology on social media and incurring a substantial fine of around 883 million yuan for tax evasion and other transgressions. The actress had become embroiled in a governmental inquiry into how celebrities reported their earnings in contractual agreements. Certain film stars were alleged to have employed “yin-yang contracts” – a practice where one contract discloses an actor’s actual earnings, while another specifies a lower sum, which is submitted to tax authorities (*BBC News* 2018). Berry (2019) underscores that Fan Bingbing’s high-profile discipline represents just the most conspicuous illustration of a broader pattern initiated by the Chinese government. The outcome has been a comprehensive corrective action that led to the eradication of what the government considered disorderly capital and speculative funds from the industry. This complicated the movie business environment in China. Or, in Berry’s words, “if you are a Chinese filmmaker, it is harder to get investment just now.”

In this context, over 1,800 film and TV production companies closed in 2019, with cultural and entertainment funds leaving the industry. The COVID-19 pandemic further devastated China’s film industry, leading to numerous closures and financial losses for theater chains.

Given the declining film market in China, it is worth revisiting previous discussions on how the focus on the market drives collaborations between China and Hollywood. Apart from domestic tensions in the United States, which have discouraged co-productions with China due to the perception of China as an adversary in the new Cold War, the weakening of China’s domestic film market has caused studios to carefully consider their involvement in such partnerships. During an interview I conducted with Dede Nickerson, a U.S. executive who has been residing in China for more than 25 years and has played a prominent role in China’s film industry, this emerged as a key topic of discussion. The interview took place over Zoom on January 5th, 2023.

Nickerson has broad expertise in the Chinese film market. She served as a strategic advisor to Netflix for their partnerships in China, involved in the development of both films and series through international collaborations. Operating at the CEO level, her responsibilities encompass establishing content partnerships, fostering government relations, and spearheading the creation of high-quality films and series in Asia. During her tenure at Sony Pictures, Nickerson devised a strategic plan that revitalized their local language co-production business, resulting in a series of films that collectively surpassed RMB 1 billion in box office revenue. She successfully cultivated a robust Government Relations program, leading to an increased number of film releases by Sony in China. Moreover, she played a pivotal role in expanding

their digital licensing business, which experienced remarkable growth from \$5 million to \$60 million in just three years. This expansion involved forging valuable relationships with industry giants such as Alibaba, Tencent, and China Mobile. Nickerson also facilitated co-financing arrangements for Sony's U.S. film slate, collaborating with partners like China Film and Wanda. Furthermore, as a creative producer, Nickerson leveraged her government connections at Miramax to introduce Miramax titles to the Chinese market and secure sales to the China Movie Channel. Notably, she managed projects like *Hero* (2002) and *Shaolin Soccer* (2001), which emerged as top-grossing foreign language films globally. Under her supervision, the production of *Kill Bill* (released in two parts, in 2003 and 2004) in China achieved remarkable success and stands as one of the highest-grossing U.S. films shot in the country. During her time at Sony, Nickerson produced acclaimed films such as Jiang Wen's *Gone with the Bullets* (2015) and Chen Kaige's *Monk Comes Down the Mountain* (2015), all while identifying promising remakes tailored for the Chinese market. We talked for over one hour, via Zoom, on Jan. 5, 2023.

Speaking in a scenario of the peak of COVID infections after the abrupt end of the Zero Covid policy in China (Kuo 2023), Nickerson mentioned the difficulties in the theatrical market in the country. According to Nickerson, "Things are not great here. The platforms are all having financial difficulties, the economy, COVID, the censorship." Nickerson mentioned that, differently to what happened in countries such as Japan or Korea, where there's been a very good producing system, in China, "you had a top tier of directors, who are getting all the money in the production, and there was never a systematic, a slate approach to producing content in China. And so it never really became systematic." And in that sense, the country is more susceptible to disruption in its film market. In this context, Nickerson ponders that film executives with experience in China have a more important role to play. Before,

the studios just saw you as an avenue to get to the Chinese capital and the Chinese market, and they didn't care. And so it's a real inflection point. And it's an inflection point that ties into where China's going. I think there's a recognition that China's very isolated. But, you know, there's also the problem that China hasn't been in the world for a while now. And you have this new power dynamic. And it's hard to see just yet how you know, which direction things are really going.

I will further debate China's efforts to export its movies and narratives in the next chapter.

Focusing specifically on co-productions, during the same interview I asked Nickerson about the failure of co-productions such as *The Great Wall*, and also about the success of co-productions such as *The Meg* (about which I will write in the next section). Nickerson once



again highlighted the importance of the market and audiences:

I read the project, *The Great Wall* was shopped around with another director attached to it and it was a bad script. We looked at it at Sony and we passed. Because it was a bad script. I don't know who made the decision (...). I think there was a group of very good talkers who got into a room and said Zhang Yimou is going to do something incredible here and that didn't happen. And *The Meg* was a commercially successful movie that audiences want to see.

Nickerson explained that she had a great deal of experience with co-productions in China. "I did *Kill Bill* way back when, which was a service co-production. It wasn't released here. But all my Sony movies were co-productions." But Nickerson also pointed out the difficulties related to the co-production model. "The whole architecture of 'co-production' is really dated." According to her,

You can just as easily structure a movie... a lot of films that have been acquired overseas, you can structure it. So you do it as a domestic production. It's much less cumbersome and then you sell the overseas rights unless it's a big English language co-production. Lots of co-productions are Chinese language, then you can just make it and then sell it. That's much easier. It's much easier administratively.

Nickerson also mentioned that, at times, international partners just prefer to search for alternative places than face the difficulties in China: "If we have a platform partner, and there are issues, if they make it difficult, and make us go through all the nonsense in terms of approvals for making it in China, we'll just make it in Hong Kong or Taiwan." These comments go in the same direction as arguments made by Kokas (2017; 2019a), Su (2017), and Peng (2017), among others, about the difficulties, both political and administrative, foreign filmmakers and studios face in China. As stated by Peng and Keane (2019, 10): "one senses that in a time of tight ideological control international players are losing interest." This point also underscores the significance of comprehending the intricacies of film production and co-production formats in China. It holds relevance for both companies and studios seeking to engage in the Chinese market and for those aiming to assess its potential as a means of exercising soft power. It becomes apparent through insights shared by Nickerson and analysis conducted by experts in the Chinese film industry that technical aspects pertaining to the film market and co-production format exert a direct influence on the ultimate products that will (or not) be shown on screens in China and globally. Consequently, this will shape China's capacity to promote its strategic narratives and strengthen its soft power.

Questioned if the co-production format still has a chance to succeed in China, Nickerson said: "Will co-productions come back? It really depends... on how much demand there is on the platforms for Chinese language or Chinese stories." Nickerson highlighted the increased

importance of platforms in China, something also noted by Wendy Su. According to Su (2022b), the COVID-19 pandemic has brought about significant changes in global media industries and audience media consumption habits. To adapt, the film industry has implemented shorter theatrical windows and expanded streaming services, leading to a digital distribution revolution. Su (2022b) analyzed the transformation of China's film distribution and exhibition sector, particularly the strategies employed by digital giants such as iQIYI, Maoyan (backed by Tencent), and Tao Piao Piao (backed by Alibaba) to promote and exhibit films. Su's research reveals that these digital corporations' strategies have accelerated the platformization of the film industry's distribution infrastructure. However, the current industry practices indicate the potential for coexistence in the foreseeable future (Su 2022b).

In her interview, Nickerson noted the same aspects. According to her, "a lot of the old big theatrical people within the studios, they are gone. They're still making movies. Some of them will still get released in China, but there's no longer the China factor and more content consumption is driven by platforms than it is by traditional windows." Nickerson also remarked that TV formats are different in China, and co-production plays almost no role. "For TV, there is no co-production system. You have to make it domestically and then... like all the Sony domestic productions, you have a local partner, you keep certain rights, they keep certain rights, you revenue-share on it." According to Nickerson, these productions do not have to be a co-production. "It's much simpler if it's not... and companies don't care. Netflix doesn't care if a movie is released in China or not when they buy it, they just want the content for the content's sake and they're not in China, so they don't care. Unless things change and they can be in China, they don't care." Nickerson also mentioned the importance of brands, something Kokas (2017) also debated. According to Nickerson, "A lot of times, like when I was at Sony, we wanted our logo on the movie in China because we were released, we had a business and we are a brand. That's what it really comes down to in the end. And the regulations about foreign brands on Chinese content, ... administratively, all this stuff is so dated and needs to be overhauled." The question, then, was whether brands wanted to be noted in China. "And the question is to be or not to be. And I think it will be driven by whether or not there's any interest in [it]... And Disney is certainly the most powerful of the brands. But I think, in some respects, younger audiences are more brand-agnostic and it's more about the content." I will debate more about Disney and other animated initiatives in the next section.

However, Nickerson also showed optimism with signs of changing in the theatrical market in China: "over the past few weeks, I've screened some great movies, if they can get released... None of them are state-sponsored, but they're really about what's going on socially.

And what people are feeling and what people are thinking, which makes me actually more optimistic than I should feel, given the overall macro environment here.”

A few months following my interview with Nickerson, when I write this chapter, in May 2023, Chinese media reports that box-office revenues in China “jet toward recovery”: “The record-breaking number of 18 new movies has set box-office coffers jingling this May Day holiday, demonstrating the Chinese film industry’s continuing strong momentum toward recovery” (Xu 2023). Of these record-breaking movies, “the three highest-grossing movies this holiday are Chinese stories and all holiday movies cover a range of genres – from action and suspense to romance – indicating that local film companies are regaining confidence in the market and are willing to release more films” (Xu 2023). I will cover Chinese movies in the next chapter. But this article goes in the direction of Nickerson’s analysis regarding the recovery and strengthening of the Chinese film market, especially through local productions, which are gaining more and more audiences. These events also seem to point to difficulties in resuming the model of co-productions between China and Hollywood, something perceived both by film industry executives working in China and by analysts of the Chinese film market.

In this section, I examined the landscape of co-productions between China and Hollywood post-2017. The changing domestic circumstances in both the United States and China have introduced tensions and challenges for such collaborations. In the United States, the election of Donald Trump marked a significant shift in U.S.-China policy, and the emergence of adversarial rhetoric amidst a new Cold War climate made it increasingly difficult to initiate new projects between China and Hollywood. U.S. politicians started criticizing Hollywood for capitulating to Chinese interests, and civil society reports emerged, condemning the industry for yielding to China. Even entertainment productions like *South Park* began scrutinizing Hollywood’s relationship with the Chinese government.

On the Chinese side, there was a shift in investment focus towards the Belt and Road Initiative, accompanied by changes in Chinese business investments abroad, exemplified by the case of Dalian Wanda. Additionally, a tax scandal affecting the Chinese film market further contributed to a challenging period referred to as the “cold winter,” characterized by losses and crises. The Chinese film market had already been grappling with limited resources and underperforming box office results prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, dissuading Hollywood studios from actively pursuing opportunities in that market. Other factors, such as the growing influence of digital platforms, also exerted an impact. Consequently, the possibility of utilizing co-productions between China and Hollywood as a means to promote Chinese strategic narratives appears to be increasingly restricted. However, there are alternative avenues for co-

productions, which I will explore in the following section.

### 3.2.3. Other possibilities for co-productions

In light of the crisis, instability, and uncertainties outlined in the preceding section, it might appear that the opportunities for co-productions between China and Hollywood are diminishing. Nonetheless, this section will explore alternative avenues for co-productions. Specifically, I will delve into the realm of action co-productions by examining the case of the film *The Meg* (2018). Furthermore, I will explore animation co-productions, with a focus on notable examples such as *Kung Fu Panda 3* (2016), *Abominable* (2019), and *Over the Moon* (2020).

The failure of *The Great Wall*, both in terms of public reception and critical acclaim – a topic that will be addressed in the upcoming sections –, raised significant questions about the co-production model. The film's production incurred significant expenses, amounting to US\$150 million, and unfortunately, it ended up experiencing substantial financial losses, totaling US\$75 million (McClintock and Galloway 2017). The challenges stemming from the collaboration itself, involving actors, directors, and producers from different nationalities, along with the intricate requirements for filming, and the search for a theme that would resonate with both U.S. and Chinese audiences, made the project exceedingly complex and ultimately unsuccessful. This failure has cast doubt on the viability of the co-production model (McClintock and Galloway 2017).

However, the subsequent year witnessed the release of a film that achieved remarkable success: *The Meg* (2018). This movie, a collaborative effort between Warner Bros. and China Media Capital's Gravity Pictures, surpassed all previous U.S.-China co-productions, earning a staggering \$527.8 million worldwide (including \$143 million in the U.S. and \$153 million in China). Directed by Jon Turteltaub, *The Meg* is a science fiction action film loosely adapted from Steve Alten's 1997 novel, *Meg: A Novel of Deep Terror*. The screenplay, written by Dean Georgaris, Jon Hoeber, and Erich Hoeber, stars Jason Statham, Li Bingbing, Rainn Wilson, Ruby Rose, Winston Chao, and Cliff Curtis. The plot revolves around a group of scientists who encounter a colossal 75-foot-long (23 meters) megalodon shark during a rescue mission in the depths of the Pacific Ocean. In essence, it is an action-packed movie that centers on a massive shark devouring smaller sharks and humans, irrespective of their nationality. The film's

resounding success during this post-honeymoon phase of U.S.-China film collaborations garnered significant attention. In fact, it became the focus of an entire panel at the Asia Society's 2018 annual U.S.-China Entertainment Summit in Los Angeles, dedicated to discussing this phenomenon (Sun 2018).

According to those involved with the film, one of the reasons for the film's success is that it is culturally sound. Producer Belle Avery mentioned that "Getting the characters and cultural elements right before going to a company was crucial. It was ridiculous to see companies just throwing [Chinese] actors in [other co-productions]. It had to be culturally sound. The key was to be synergistic and respectful" (Sun 2018). Additionally, Chantal Nong, VP production for Warner's DC film group, boasted that audiences never found the film's inclusion of Chinese characters to be forced, unlike with some past co-productions. "We weren't compromising [story decisions] because it was for the Chinese market. It continued in development the way we would with any Warner Bros. movie. From the start, the fact that it had Chinese elements was very organic" (Sun 2018).

Moreover, Reach Glory Entertainment managing director Ben Erwei Ji, a co-producer on *The Meg* also noted that *The Meg* shied away from historical representations, a popular but not always smart choice in co-productions, especially given the present mood in China-U.S. relationship:

People think sad historical pieces are natural subjects for co-productions. But consider the current situation of China-U.S. relations. The forward-looking projects turn to a young audience; that's the key to start with. Could be a comedy about current life in China or the U.S., or science fiction, but do something happy, family entertainment. Historical [stories] could be good, but this is not the right time (Sun 2018).

The production of *The Meg* acknowledged the challenging period in China-U.S. co-productions. At that time, there was a significant stigma surrounding past co-productions, which Chinese audiences had grown tired of due to perceived attempts at appeasement. Consequently, the local distributor in China, Gravity, consciously downplayed their involvement during the initial marketing phase. Catherine Xujun Ying, the CEO of Gravity, stated, "U.S.-China co-productions had such a bad reputation in the past, in the first stage we downplayed it. We emphasized it is a really high-profile, big-budget blockbuster from Hollywood, a blue-blood Warner Bros. Production" (Sun 2018). For instance, although Turteltaub and star Jason Statham were invited to walk the red carpet at the Shanghai International Film Festival, all prerelease marketing for *The Meg* in China pointed it to be nothing but a pure Hollywood tentpole. According to Catherine Xujun Ying, "People had the fear that it would be the same as bad co-

productions before. After the first weekend and after they saw the movie and saw that all of the Chinese elements were not so embarrassing, people realized and embraced the fact that it's a great movie" (Sun 2018).

With these considerations in mind, we can circle back to the main theme of this dissertation: the use of movies to advance Chinese strategic narratives. In that sense, how could a film about a huge shark that eats smaller sharks and people from different nationalities contribute to the goal? Wouldn't the audiences just think of the movie as another Hollywood blockbuster, especially if even the production is downplaying the co-production aspect of the project?

The Executive Producer Jiang Wei, who was president of Gravity Pictures when it co-produced *The Meg*, also debated the reasons for the success of the movie. The main one: to go easy on cultural references. According to Jiang, "I knew the subject was very suitable for co-productions: adventure, sci-fi, sharks. It doesn't involve many cultural, educational or national issues" (*Bloomberg* 2018). Jiang, who left Gravity to head Wanda Pictures and the China subsidiary of billionaire Wang Jianlin's Legendary Entertainment, mentioned that the film "reasonably" melds Chinese cast and elements with Hollywood production and distribution flair, a combination that accounts for its achievements (*Bloomberg* 2018).

Ying Zhu (2019) commented on the success of *The Meg* and the peculiarity of the film purposely avoiding being seen as a co-production. According to the professor, the producers openly talking about downplaying Chinese elements in the movie is "a rare acknowledgment of the aversion of global audiences to heavy-handed Chinese cultural propagation" (Zhu 2019). However, Zhu (2019) highlights that it is evident that the film maintains its distinctly Chinese identity, showcasing Chinese characters and cultural symbols. *The Meg* has achieved a remarkable feat by becoming the top-earning live-action co-production, marking a significant breakthrough. Its box-office earnings were evenly distributed across the United States, China, and other parts of the world, exemplifying a rare and successful crossover of cultures (Zhu 2019).

This leads us to three important considerations. First, as emphasized by Wang Xiaohui, the former director of the National Film Bureau, China's goal of becoming a "strong film power" like the United States by 2035 encompasses both political and commercial objectives (R. Davis 2019). The commercial aspect is evident in Wang's call for the production of 100 movies per year, each earning over RMB 100 million (R. Davis 2019). Films such as *The Meg*, which performed tremendously well at the box office, contribute to this objective and provide valuable insights into achieving international success through co-productions. As emphasized by Jian,

co-producer of *The Meg*, “Co-productions are meant to be international. China’s film market is already thriving on its own. There’s no need to make a movie dedicated to the Chinese audience, likewise in the U.S.” (*Bloomberg* 2018).

Second, as highlighted by Zhu (2019), the presence of Chinese narratives on the global screen does not always have to be politically driven or overtly noticed. I will debate this further next when discussing the animated co-production *Over the Moon*. However, it is worth noticing that the mere inclusion of Chinese characters and representations in increasingly common cinematic experiences can contribute to broadening the acknowledgment and awareness of China, thus helping to better tell Chinese stories.

Finally, co-productions continue to play a crucial role in enhancing the Chinese film industry by facilitating the transfer of technical knowledge and skills. As observed by Peng and Keane (2019), co-productions serve as a means to transfer expertise and attract individuals with much-needed skills to work in China. The exchange of know-how not only enhances the capabilities of future filmmakers but also allows them to break free from the confines of the domestic market (Peng and Keane 2019). In this regard, co-productions like *The Meg* can strengthen China’s film industry, enabling the production of technically superior films and expanding the international audience for Chinese cinema. Ultimately, this indirectly contributes to the objective of leveraging cinema as a form of soft power to promote Chinese strategic narratives.

The second topic to be discussed in this section pertains to animated co-productions, starting with the prominent example of *Kung Fu Panda 3* (2016). This animation stands out as an interesting case due to its co-production between DreamWorks, a U.S. company, and Oriental DreamWorks, as I already pointed out, a China-U.S. joint venture established in 2012 during Vice President Xi Jinping’s visit to the United States to meet with then Vice President Joe Biden. The film, part of a successful franchise, garnered significant popularity. Notably, it is the third installment in the series, which means the storylines were initially created by American executives. Schwartzel (2022) highlighted that the original *Kung Fu Panda* (2008) was a massive hit in China, but it also presented a problem for Chinese politicians, who questioned why they had NOT produced a film that showed their national treasure and cultural features. Therefore, it is interesting to observe that, with its involvement in *Kung Fu Panda 3* (2016), China effectively became (co-)producer of these stories.

*Kung Fu Panda 3* achieved remarkable success, having the potential to effectively convey Chinese narratives. However, it is relevant returning to Professor Greene’s observation I presented in Chapter 2, regarding Hollywood productions that approach China, often

presenting a Westernized portrayal of the country. Referring to the original *Kung Fu Panda* from 2008 and the animated film *Mulan* from 1998, Greene (2014) argues that both movies immerse us in a post-modernist realm of pastiche and parody commonly found in children's cartoons. They reflect the triumph of individualism and the pervasive influence of American popular culture, which assimilates everything into its own sphere. In *Mulan*, a legendary Chinese heroine is transformed into an American teenager, while in *Kung Fu Panda*, the profound significance of ancient Chinese martial arts is diminished. In both films, China itself is reduced to a collection of superficial motifs, where landmarks like the Forbidden Palace and the Great Wall hold no more meaning – and perhaps even less – than mere culinary symbols such as egg rolls and chopsticks (Greene 2014). Consequently, Greene (2014) suggests that, by projecting American values onto the Chinese landscape, these films not only appropriate the other but also, as if by magic, make authentic China vanish right before our eyes. In any case, the presence of China among the film's producers in *Kung Fu Panda 3* means that China can have a little more control over the stories that are present in the movie. And that, in turn, can strengthen China's ability to disseminate its strategic narratives in the future.

It is worth noting that the producers of *Kung Fu Panda 3* demonstrated a keen awareness of the growing significance of the Chinese audience. Recognizing this, the film was “tailored specifically to appeal to the growing Chinese market” (Morris 2016). In fact, the production process involved creating two versions of the movie – one in English and one in Mandarin – instead of the usual practice of dubbing into a foreign language. This extensive effort ensured that the animated characters, including the lovable panda and his companions, seamlessly matched the dialogue in both languages. Notably, *Kung Fu Panda 3* holds the distinction of being the first film to debut in both Mandarin and English simultaneously in both the United States and China (Morris 2016). And that, once again, highlights the importance of this Sino-Hollywood collaboration.

Another notable example of an animated co-production is the film *Abominable* (2019). This animation was co-produced by DreamWorks and Pearl Studio, which is an offshoot of Oriental DreamWorks. In 2018, CMC Capital Partners, led by Chinese tycoon Li Ruigang, acquired complete ownership of NBCUniversal's joint-venture animation studio Oriental DreamWorks and subsequently rebranded it as Pearl Studio (Brzeski 2018). *Abominable* follows the journey of a young Chinese girl from Shanghai who befriends a yeti and embarks on an adventure to bring him back to Mount Everest, traversing breathtaking Chinese landscapes along the way. This animation achieved significant success and effectively conveyed Chinese strategic narratives, including one that sparked controversy: China's



disputed “nine-dash-line” maritime claim in the South China Sea.

In the film, the main character Yi has a rooftop shed where she keeps a large map of East Asia adorned with pictures and notes. Notably, the map includes the South China Sea with China’s controversial nine-dash line, which generated significant attention and controversy. For context: the South China Sea is an area of great strategic importance, situated between multiple influential nations and known for its abundant natural resources and fishing grounds. China claims historical control over a significant portion of this region. The nine-dash line, which carves out the largest area, leaves only a narrow coastal strip for other claimants. China first published a map in 1947 that delineated its claims and continues to assert that historical evidence supports its position (*BBC News* 2019).

Indeed, Zhiguo Gao and Bing Bing Jia’s comprehensive study, published in *The American Journal of International Law* in 2013, delves into the emergence of conflicting territorial claims in the South China Sea over the past few decades. Despite China’s extensive historical presence in the region through fishing, navigation, and other activities, other nations have also staked their claims to sovereignty over islands and jurisdiction over maritime space (Gao and Jia 2013).

The study sheds light on the profound significance of the nine-dash line in the South China Sea, emphasizing that it should not be merely dismissed as a historical relic (Gao and Jia 2013). Instead, it has undergone a transformative evolution since its establishment in the early twentieth century. Following the Second World War, the Chinese government proclaimed the nine-dash line as a comprehensive statement encompassing territorial title and rights. Over the subsequent six decades, this consolidation gained recognition or acquiescence from both regional and international entities until 2009. Throughout this extended period, no state, whether within the region or beyond, protested against the nine-dash line, cementing its status based on international law (Gao and Jia 2013).

The authors argue that the nine-dash line serves multiple crucial purposes (Gao and Jia 2013). Firstly, it demarcates China’s territorial claims and historical rights concerning the islands and insular features in the region. Secondly, it safeguards China’s long-established rights in fishing, navigation, and other marine activities, including oil and gas development within the waters and continental shelf enclosed by the line. Lastly, it potentially serves as a basis for future maritime delimitation lines. Consequently, Gao and Jia’s study underscores the intricate and dynamic nature of territorial disputes in the South China Sea and highlights the historical significance of the nine-dash line in shaping the region’s geopolitical landscape.

As Bates Gill (2022) emphasizes, a fundamental element guiding the foreign policy of

the People's Republic of China (PRC) is the assertive pursuit and protection of expansive Chinese sovereignty. This pursuit is particularly pronounced in "contested spaces," encompassing the South China Sea, the Himalayas, Taiwan, Xinjiang, Tibet, and Hong Kong. According to Gate (2022), this unwavering pursuit of territorial claims in these regions significantly impacts China's foreign relations, shapes global perceptions of China, and carries the potential to ignite conflicts in the foreseeable future. Consequently, it is evident that this issue is closely connected to China's strategic narratives.

In any case, back to *Abominable*, the map is briefly displayed but has no real significance to the plot of the movie. As the nine-dash line is frequently used to depict the sea in China, some people speculated that the Chinese part of the co-production simply uses an accurate and common map (*BBC News* 2019). However, its inclusion sparked immediate reactions from neighboring countries. Vietnam, for instance, blocked the film's release due to the depiction of Beijing's nine-dash line (Vu and Nguyen 2019). In Malaysia, the film was approved for screening on the condition that the controversial map was removed (*BBC News* 2019). In the Philippines, the Foreign Minister called for a boycott and even suggested removing the map from the movie (*BBC News* 2019). Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian wrote for *Foreign Policy* magazine that "Hollywood is paying an 'Abominable' price for China access," commenting on how "a kid's movie has turned into a geopolitical nightmare for DreamWorks" (Allen-Ebrahimian 2019). According to Kokas (2019a), through collaborations such as the one in *Abominable*, blockbuster movies are able to use the variety of their countries' interests as a justification for the proclamation of a dominant national vision. The power structures in China are strengthened by this particular sort of visibility, which also solidifies financially-driven power structures that already exist in Hollywood (Kokas 2019a).

Once again, I would like to draw attention to a discussion presented in Chapter 1 of this dissertation, which debated the utilization of Disney animated films to promote strategic narratives of the United States during the Good Neighbor Policy in the first half of the twentieth century. As previously emphasized, it is worth acknowledging that this approach, now being employed by China to advance its interests, has also been adopted by other nations. In the case of China, it is significant the use of Hollywood expertise and techniques to propagate Chinese narratives. However, it is important to recognize that employing animated films as a means to disseminate a country's strategic narratives is not inherently innovative.

Following the success of *Abominable*, another remarkable case is that of *Over the Moon* (2020), the first animation co-production between China and the U.S. to receive an Oscar nomination in the Best Animated Feature category (*Global Times* 2021). This recognition from

the Academy shows the progress made in terms of technology and reception of Sino-Hollywood animation co-productions. The film was jointly produced by Pearl Studio and Netflix Animation, animated by Sony Pictures Imageworks, and directed by Academy Award-winner Glen Keane. *Over the Moon* portrays the journey of a young girl named Fei Fei, who is grieving the loss of her mother and seeks solace from the mythical moon goddess, Chang'e. As a brilliant young scientist, Fei Fei constructs her own spaceship and embarks on a voyage to the moon.

According to Debruge (2020b), the release of *Over the Moon* was timed to coincide with China's Mid-Autumn Festival, marking a significant milestone in the Chinese pursuit of global influence. This film goes beyond being just another animated feature on Netflix's lineup; it represents a grand-scale production on par with Disney's renowned creations. The visionary talent behind *Over the Moon* is none other than Glen Keane, an esteemed artist known for his exceptional work in bringing beloved characters like Ariel, Aladdin, and the Beast to life during his tenure at Disney (Debruge 2020b).

*Over the Moon*, even more than *Kung Fu Panda 3* and *Abominable*, immerses viewers in a rich tapestry of Chinese narratives. The animation skillfully weaves together "a modern-day interpretation of tales familiar to children in Chinese societies," bringing a "traditional Chinese story to audiences both at home and abroad" (Eagan 2020). The film showcases various aspects of Chinese culture, including customs, cuisine, and worldviews, in a lighthearted and enjoyable manner – although some critics argued that the movie's message about loss and the power of letting go may feel "oversweetened," reminiscent of Disney's style, being "more Disney than Disney" (Clarke 2020).

The movie was released in 2020, a year after a China probe – named Chang'e 4 – made a historic landing on the far side of the moon (Devlin and Lyons 2019). The connection between the film and the real-world achievement was explicitly acknowledged by Pearl Studio in a tweet<sup>34</sup> that celebrated China's groundbreaking feat and teased the upcoming release of *Over the Moon*, stating, "China makes history as the first country to land a spacecraft on the far side of the Moon! In other news, Pearl Studio is currently producing OVER THE MOON, an animated film about a girl who builds a rocket ship and blasts off to the moon. Stay tuned for the moon trip in 2020!"

At this point, I would like to revisit the debate I introduced in the initial chapter of this dissertation. Qin Yaqing (2020a) emphasizes the significance of culture as the shared background knowledge of a society, the information that individuals in a given community

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<sup>34</sup> Available at: <https://twitter.com/pearlanimation/status/1081122630382510081>.

presume to be universally known and taken for granted. In the Western world, for instance, it is widely recognized that Apollo is a Greek deity, one of the prominent figures in the pantheon of Olympus, and the god of the sun. Hence, when Abe Silverstein, former director of NASA's Glenn Research Center, came across a book of mythology one evening in 1960 and selected the name "Apollo" for the moon mission, it resonated perfectly. Silverstein believed that the image of "Apollo riding his chariot across the sun was appropriate to the grand scale of the proposed program."<sup>35</sup> Could it be that a similar sentiment was evoked in the Western audience upon encountering the name of the Chinese lunar probe, Chang'e? How many people possessed the background knowledge that Chang'e is regarded in China as the goddess of the moon? By disseminating this knowledge (which is already intrinsic to many Eastern populations), the film more widely helps to make knowledge more plural and diverse, in the sense proposed by Qin Yaqing (2020a).

This example further highlights the capacity of films to effectively disseminate Chinese strategic narratives. While at times this can be perceived as heavy-handed, such as the inclusion of the contested nine-dash line map in *Abominable*, there are also instances where it occurs in a constructive manner. These films serve to promote and share traditional as well as contemporary knowledge about China. By expanding the symbolic repertoire and enhancing the collective understanding of the audience, they also contribute to the fulfillment of Xi Jinping's reiterated objective of "extending the reach and appeal of Chinese civilization" and of "better tell China's stories" (Xi 2022).

In this section, I have presented various examples of successful co-production possibilities. I highlighted the case of action films such as *The Meg*, which effectively minimized sensitive and potentially problematic cultural elements to create a compelling blend of cultures and achieve international success. Additionally, I discussed the animated co-productions *Kung Fu Panda 3*, *Abominable*, and *Over the Moon*, showcasing the increasing success of collaborations between China and Hollywood. Whether China joins established projects like *Kung Fu Panda 3* or engages in joint creation endeavors like *Abominable* and *Over the Moon*, these co-production processes contribute to the advancement of Chinese narratives.

It is important to note that while these collaborations foster the propagation of Chinese narratives, they can also spark controversy. For instance, the depiction of the nine-dash line map in *Abominable* drew criticism. However, it is worth highlighting that the promotion of Chinese narratives often aligns with the objective of diversifying and expanding the collective

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<sup>35</sup> Available at: [https://www.nasa.gov/centers/glenn/about/history/silverstein\\_feature.html](https://www.nasa.gov/centers/glenn/about/history/silverstein_feature.html).

background knowledge of society. An excellent illustration of this is *Over the Moon*, which provides insights into the Chinese moon goddess Chang'e, thereby enriching the audience's symbolic repertoire.

Throughout this subchapter, I have provided an overview of co-productions between China and Hollywood. It started with a honeymoon phase, from the early 2000s to 2017. During this time, marked by China's entry into the WTO in 2001, there was a significant surge in the co-production sector, along with substantial Chinese investments in Hollywood. It appeared that China's aspiration to leverage co-productions to enhance its soft power aligned with Hollywood's growing pursuit of increased profits.

However, in 2017, a notable shift occurred. In the U.S., the election of Donald Trump in the United States represented a change in rhetoric towards China as a potential adversary in a new Cold War, which had a profound impact on the landscape and perception of productions involving China in Hollywood. On the Chinese side, there were also notable changes, including a heightened focus on investments in the Belt and Road Initiative, a shift in the government's relationship with prominent business figures such as Dalian Wanda, which had previously made substantial investments in Hollywood, and the occurrence of a tax scandal that affected the Chinese film industry.

In this challenging landscape, both China and the United States faced disincentives to pursue co-productions. China encountered difficulties in its domestic market, while the United States experienced a waning commercial interest in seeking initiatives, especially given the internal criticism of Hollywood's relationship with China. These circumstances created a less favorable environment for co-productions, dampening the motivation to collaborate between the two countries. The prevailing challenges, including market dynamics and scrutiny of the Hollywood-China relationship, contributed to a sense of hesitancy and caution in seeking joint ventures.

Lastly, I demonstrated that even in the midst of this discouraging co-production landscape, there are still other viable opportunities for collaboration. One such example is the realm of action films, exemplified by the successful co-production of *The Meg*. By purposefully reducing potentially sensitive cultural elements, the film managed to navigate possible problems and criticism, resulting in a fruitful collaboration. Additionally, I highlighted the significance of animated co-productions such as *Kung Fu Panda 3*, *Abominable*, and *Over the Moon*. Each of these productions, in their own unique ways, effectively advanced Chinese narratives, showcasing the potential for effective collaborations between China and Hollywood within the animation genre.

However, the epitome of Sino-Hollywood co-productions remains *The Great Wall*. This monumental undertaking, being the largest investment ever made in a joint production between the two countries, carried immense expectations due to its potential impact on the film industry and the perception of China on the global stage. Consequently, the upcoming sections will be dedicated to analyzing this notable co-production in further detail.

### **3.3. An analysis of *The Great Wall* (2016)**

In this subchapter, I will analyze the case of *The Great Wall*, which stands as the most ambitious and costly Sino-Hollywood co-production to date. To provide a comprehensive analysis, I will commence by presenting a concise history and contextual backdrop of the film, shedding light on its anticipated outcomes and objectives. Subsequently, I will scrutinize the film itself, exploring its predominant themes and narratives and examining their alignment with China's strategic narratives. Finally, I will reflect upon the film's impact and extract key lessons that *The Great Wall* can offer towards China's aspiration of leveraging cinema as a tool for soft power.

#### *3.3.1. History and Contextualization of The Great Wall*

In this section, I will provide a concise history of *The Great Wall*'s production, emphasizing the significance of this co-production within the broader context. It is crucial to recognize the immense importance of *The Great Wall*, directed by Zhang Yimou, in the Chinese endeavor to utilize films as tools of soft power for disseminating strategic narratives. As Su aptly points out, "This single movie and Zhang Yimou have been entrusted with the mission of integrating the domestic film industry with Hollywood's industrial system, carrying on the Chinese cultural legacy and exporting soft power" (Su 2017, 9). Therefore, it is "no wonder that such co-productions fit well with China's agenda and goals, acquire the full support of the Chinese state, and become a battleground of power negotiation between Hollywood and China" (Su 2017, 9).

Director Zhang Yimou also expressed his perspective on the matter. According to Zhou Xuelin (2017, 115), during a press conference held on November 15, 2016, to promote *The Great Wall*, he encapsulated the objective of his work as follows: “We use this global blockbuster movie as a means to disseminate Chinese culture and to transmit the image and values of Chinese people.” Zhou (2017) emphasizes that in numerous interviews with Zhang, both prior to and following the film’s release, he candidly described *The Great Wall* as a typical Hollywood movie adhering to the traditional formula of “monster appears and threatens human beings; hero appears and wins the battle against the monster” (X. Zhou 2017, 117). Zhang made it evident that the film’s success would be measured solely by its performance at the box office (X. Zhou 2017).

However, amidst its market-oriented, Hollywood-influenced nature, this global blockbuster had an additional objective – to promote Chinese culture to a worldwide audience. As Zhou (2017) suggests, the film served as Zhang’s deliberate endeavor to present China as a nation with a rich historical, cultural, and technological heritage. In this sense, *The Great Wall* demonstrated a narrative and stylistic coherence with some of Zhang Yimou’s previous work, particularly the 2008 Beijing Olympics Opening Ceremony, which he also directed (X. Zhou 2017).

This duality of commercial and political goals – which, as I insistently pointed out, was also present in Wang Xiaohui’s calls for China to be a “strong film power” like the U.S. by 2035 (R. Davis 2019) – can be seen in many interviews by Zhang Yimou. For the *CCTV*, for instance, Zhang clarified that:

*The Great Wall* is a commercial production. But the core of the film is a Chinese story. And you can see the Chinese cultures, traditions and values in this film. So I think it’s a great opportunity for Chinese film makers to introduce China to Hollywood and the world. If it turns out to be a success, then more and more Hollywood filmmakers would like to come to China and cooperate with Chinese filmmakers (*CCTV* 2016).

The film garnered significant anticipation and drew considerable attention from Western media outlets. John Sudworth, writing for the *BBC*, described the film as “China takes on the world with a new Matt Damon film,” emphasizing its global significance (Sudworth 2016). Brooks Barnes and Amy Qin, in their article for *The New York Times*, titled “The East Lobs a Blockbuster-Hopeful to the West With ‘The Great Wall,’” noted that the movie, filmed entirely in China, aimed not only to provide escapism but also to demonstrate the Chinese film industry’s capacity to produce global blockbusters, “that event films can rise in the East and play in the West” (Barnes and Qin 2016). Antonina Luszczkiewicz and Krzysztof Iwanek,

writing for *The Diplomat*, referred to *The Great Wall* as China's endeavor to "Conquering the World With Cinema," highlighting its deep-rooted connection to Chinese culture and its ability to engage Western viewers with a clear message (Luszczkiewicz and Iwanek 2017).

Expectations surrounding *The Great Wall* were also significant in the Chinese media. In an article published by Xu Fan in the *China Daily*, the film was highlighted as having the potential to pique the curiosity of global movie fans about China's history (Xu 2016). The article emphasized that the film was viewed as a fresh approach to presenting a Chinese narrative to the world, pointing out that Zhang Yimou, one of China's esteemed filmmakers, expressed his agreement to direct the film due to the opportunity to utilize Hollywood storytelling skills in popularizing Chinese history and culture, making it the largest-budget movie he had undertaken (Xu 2016). Classical Chinese mythology was incorporated into the film through the portrayal of the Tao Tie monsters, drawing from *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*<sup>36</sup> and other elements of Chinese mythology. Xu Fan also underscored that the movie showcased ancient China's pioneering inventions, as well as traditional musical instruments and costumes while benefiting from the expertise of two leading visual effects companies: Industrial Light and Magic, founded by George Lucas, and Weta Digital, backed by Peter Jackson (Xu 2016). However, the article noted that, in an intriguing twist, despite the filmmaker's efforts to promote a new China-Hollywood model with the story, domestic moviegoers expressed skepticism about the plot, particularly since it revolved around two Western mercenaries, portrayed by Damon and Pascal (Xu 2016). I will touch upon the film's reception later on.

According to Zhang Rui's article on *China.org.cn*, prestigious director Zhang Yimou captivated a boisterous audience at Madison Square Garden in New York, where he unveiled the new trailer for his highly-anticipated blockbuster, *The Great Wall*. Zhang Yimou emphasized that the film is intended for a global audience, stating, "I just want worldwide audiences to learn more about Chinese culture and invention while being entertained by the monster movie" (R. Zhang 2016). Zhang Rui also highlighted a comment made by Chinese actress Jing Tian, who noted that her character portrays a strong leader within the Chinese army.

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<sup>36</sup> *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*, or *Shan Hai Jing*, is a compilation of mythic geography and beasts, which is thought to have been written during the late Warring States Period (475-221 BC). The book is an "encyclopedic account of people's views of the world at that time, the 30,000-word book documents some 40 states, 550 mountains, 300 waterways, more than 100 historical figures and 400 mythical monsters." Interestingly, Chang'e, the namesake of China's lunar probe, as I highlighted in the last sections, is named after a legendary goddess in ancient fairy tales, and she first appeared in *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*. Source: Ancient work inspires modern world, *China Daily*, Sep. 7, 2022. Available at: <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202209/07/WS6317d7aea310fd2b29e7651f.html>.



Jing Tian expressed her admiration for the story's emphasis on gender equality in leadership roles, stating, "One of the things that I love most about the story is the equality between men and women in leadership roles. The respect that all these warriors have for each other, regardless of gender, is something I wish we saw more of, both in films and in real life" (R. Zhang 2016).

It is crucial to underscore that the enthusiasm and expectations surrounding the film were well-founded. The production commenced during the peak of the honeymoon phase for Sino-Hollywood co-productions (from 2001 to mid-2017), characterized by significant Hollywood investment in China and the Chinese government's explicit commitment to using cinema as a medium to effectively convey China's stories. The selection of Zhang Yimou as the director itself demonstrates the immense importance attributed to the film. Zhang Yimou stands as one of the most revered directors from the Fifth Generation of Chinese cinema, having achieved remarkable success both within China and on the international stage.

Zhang Yimou holds the distinction of being the first Chinese filmmaker to be acknowledged by the Motion Picture Academy, garnering Best Foreign Film Academy Award nominations for *Ju Dou* in 1990, *Raise the Red Lantern* in 1992, and *Hero* in 2003. He has received accolades from renowned international film festivals including the Venice International Film Festival, Cannes International Film Festival, and Berlin International Film Festival. Additionally, Zhang Yimou's box office hit *House of Flying Daggers* received numerous international awards and earned nominations for Best Foreign Film at both the BAFTA and Golden Globe Awards. In recent years, Zhang Yimou has further expanded his creative horizons. He directed Placido Domingo in the world premiere of composer Tan Dun's original opera *The First Emperor* at New York's Metropolitan Opera House in December 2006. Moreover, he served as the chief director for the awe-inspiring opening and closing ceremonies of the 29th Olympic Games in Beijing in 2008.<sup>37</sup> Thus, it is evident the high profile of *The Great Wall* production.

In any case, the expectation for the film was surpassed by the disappointment with it. Critics expressed their dissatisfaction with the movie in various ways. Manohla Dargis of *The New York Times* described it as a creation that seemed to be conceived by someone watching *Game of Thrones* while under the influence, stating, "The whole thing plays out as if it had been thought up by someone who, while watching *Game of Thrones* and smoking a bowl, started riffing on walls, China and production money" (Dargis 2017). Maggie Lee of *Variety* referred

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<sup>37</sup> For more information on Zhang Yimou: <https://www.festival-cannes.com/en/p/yimou-zhang/>. For more information on Zhang Yimou's awards: <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0955443/awards/>.

to the film as a “generic fantasy spectacle” (M. Lee 2016). Helen Roxburgh of *The Guardian* commented that the epic starring Matt Damon delivered spectacle but lacked soul, describing it as “a monster movie with a muddled message – but plenty of sweeping swordplay” (Roxburgh 2016). Matt Goldberg of *Collider* criticized it as “a dull and lifeless blockbuster”, saying that the movie “largely lacks the flair and intimacy of Yimou’s previous action films, and instead plays as a fairly rote blockbuster designed to appeal to everyone and thus appealing to no one” (Goldberg 2017). Matt Glasby of the *South China Morning Post* characterized the film as “a culture clash of the worst kind – rather than an exciting blend of East meets West, it looks more like two different films shoved violently together” (Glasby 2021). Eric Kohn of *IndieWire* bluntly referred to it as an “awful movie,” describing it as “Zhang Yimou’s misbegotten medieval epic” (Kohn 2017).

*The Great Wall* made its premiere in the U.S. during the four-day Presidents’ Day weekend in 2017, but its performance at the box office was disappointing, considering its massive budget of 150 million dollars (X. Zhou 2017). The film received predominantly negative feedback both in the U.S. and China. On Rotten Tomatoes, the movie garnered over 10,000 ratings with a 42% approval rating, and the critics’ consensus stated, “*The Great Wall* is neither as exciting nor as entertainingly bonkers as one might hope.”<sup>38</sup> On Douban, a Chinese audience-generated movie review platform similar to Rotten Tomatoes, it received a rating of 4.9 out of 10 (X. Zhou 2017). More than 40% of the 70,000 reviews gave the film only one or two stars out of five (X. Zhou 2017).

Chinese reviewers described the movie as “messy, mindless and illogical” (J. Huang and Horwitz 2016). Many netizens expressed disappointment with the film’s emphasis on style rather than substance. Specifically, they criticized the clumsy integration of mid-rate Hollywood blockbuster storytelling with superficial nods to “Chinese culture.” One online critic pointed out, “The biggest problem is there are too many boring parts, flat characters, a retarded story, and a lack of imagination” (J. Huang and Horwitz 2016). Others commented that “The Chinese element has basically been reduced to sky lanterns, Chinese military armor, the Great Wall, and other symbols of Eastern culture. It doesn’t use the story to promote traditional Eastern values, it’s all tokens” (J. Huang and Horwitz 2016).

Song Hwee Lim (2020) also highlighted the negative reaction to the film in China. According to the scholar, the Golden Broom Awards for the worst Chinese films (China’s answer to the U.S. Golden Raspberry Awards, or Razzies) not only handed *The Great Wall*’s

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<sup>38</sup> Available at: [https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/the\\_great\\_wall\\_2017](https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/the_great_wall_2017).

lead actress Jing Tian the Most Disappointing Actress award, it even had to invent a new category of the Most Heart-breaking Film of the Year for the film itself (Lim 2020).

Despite these negative reviews from Chinese audiences and critics, *The Great Wall* received strong support from the Chinese state, largely due to the esteemed reputation of director Zhang Yimou as a visual ambassador of Chinese culture (X. Zhou 2017)(Zhou 2017). Following its release in China, an article in the *China Daily* highlighted the film's success at the global box office, proclaiming "*The Great Wall* shines at global box office, to open in US, Australia" (*China Daily* 2017a). The piece underscored the remarkable achievement of the film, securing a top-three position in 27 markets during its opening weekend, setting an impressive precedent for Chinese productions (*China Daily* 2017a). Furthermore, the China Film Association's film critic praised *The Great Wall* as "a unique and meaningful exploration and the first ever U.S.-China in-depth collaborative experiment" (Su 2017, 8). According to the critic, the film's significance lies in "its take on Hollywood's industrial system, production model and technological caliber as reference for Chinese movie production, and the facilitating of the continuous exchange and collaboration with Hollywood, in order to bring the entire Chinese film industry to a new high and rebuild Chinese high concept blockbusters" (Su 2017, 8).

However, the defense of the film went even further. Brzeski (2016) reports that an editorial published on the mobile site of the *People's Daily* described the negative reviews as "vicious and irresponsible," accusing them of causing significant harm to the Chinese film industry's ecosystem. The article specifically singled out Douban and Maoyan, influential review aggregators and mobile ticketing services, for their surprisingly low ratings of recent Chinese films, including *The Great Wall*. It even suggested the possibility of review manipulation or hacking on Douban's platform. According to Brzeski (2016), this sentiment aligns with the response of Chinese film studio Le Vision Pictures to a negative review of the film. The company, a co-producer of *The Great Wall*, issued a legal letter in the form of a statement on its official social media account, following a scathing one-line review from a prominent online critic known as "Xiedu Film." The critic, who boasts nearly 750,000 followers on Weibo, shockingly claimed that the film's esteemed director, Zhang Yimou, had died. The situation escalated further when Maoyan removed professional film critics' reviews from its main page in response to the criticism. According to the *Global Times*, officials from the State Administration of Press Publication, Radio, Film, and Television visited the offices of Douban and Maoyan in response to the situation (Brzeski 2016).

In any case, it is possible to find critiques of *The Great Wall* in the main Chinese media

outlets. Juli Min (2017), a writer based in Shanghai and the Editor in Chief and Fiction Editor of *The Shanghai Literary Review*, published an article in the *Global Times* on January 17, 2017, accusing *The Great Wall* of perpetuating a “tired ‘white savior’ narrative.” According to Min (2017), *The Great Wall* fits the mold of a typical “white savior” movie, a standard Hollywood narrative where a Caucasian male comes to the rescue of non-white natives from external threats or their own shortcomings. Drawing comparisons to films like *The Last Samurai* (2003), *Avatar* (2009), and *The Blind Side* (2009), Min (2017) argues that these movies depict white men as the moral and romantic center of the action, simultaneously saving primitive-minded natives and seducing women from diverse ethnic backgrounds. This narrative reinforces the association of whiteness with power and righteousness, while non-whiteness is portrayed as weak and inferior.

Juli Min (2017) writes that as Hollywood movies focus primarily on white audiences, and racist and/or idealistic narratives sell, it makes sense that movie producers keep reusing these formulas. But Min (2017) ponders why a Chinese production team would agree to produce a white savior narrative where Chinese male characters face gruesome deaths or sacrifice themselves for Damon’s character, implying that he is more valuable. Min (2017) highlights the problematic message conveyed by *The Great Wall*, where not only does Matt Damon’s character save the country but he also wins the hearts of Chinese women, perpetuating a particular image of Caucasian males. And concludes: “Think about what kind of message that sends to everyone about Caucasian males” (Min 2017).

Juli Min’s remarks brought attention to one of the primary criticisms against the film, namely the casting of a Caucasian protagonist as the hero in a movie centered around a Chinese story. These concerns are intricately linked to the themes and narratives explored in the movie, which will be discussed in the following section.

In this section, I provided an overview of the history and context of *The Great Wall*. I underlined the high expectations surrounding the film in both China and the West, supported by the favorable climate of co-productions between China and the United States at the time. The selection of esteemed director Zhang Yimou to lead the co-production further underscored the film’s significance.

Moreover, I discussed the subsequent disappointment and criticism that emerged upon the film’s release. I examined the initial defense of the film by major Chinese media outlets in response to negative reviews, including the removal of critical content and allegations of detrimental effects on the film’s performance. Additionally, I acknowledged the presence of certain criticisms within the Chinese media, particularly regarding the film’s content itself.

Building on these insights, the next section will explore *The Great Wall*'s main themes and narratives, analyzing their connection to China's objective of utilizing cinema as a platform to disseminate its strategic narratives.

### 3.3.2. The Great Wall: *the film*

Commander Lin Mae (played by the Chinese actress Jing Tian): How many flags do you fight for?

William Garin (played by the American actor Matt Damon): I don't know... Many flags.

Commander Lin Mae: We are not the same.

(...)

Commander Lin Mae: Here, in this army, you fight for more than food or money. We give our lives for something more. *Xin ren* is our flag. Trust in each other. In all ways, at all times.

William Garin: Well, that's all well and good, but I am not jumping. I am alive today because I trust no one.

Commander Lin Mae: A man must learn to trust before he can be trusted.

William Garin: Then you were right. We are not the same.

(...)

Commander Lin Mae: Why did you go over the wall?

William Garin: Xin Ren.

Commander Lin Mae: Thank you.

(...)

General Lin Mae: Perhaps we were both wrong. We are more similar than I thought

William Garin: Thank you, General.

These are some of the interactions between two of the main characters of *The Great Wall*. Set in the Song Dynasty (960-1279), the film follows the journey of two European mercenaries as they venture through China in search of "black powder." Eventually captured, they find themselves taken to the imposing Great Wall, where they soon realize that its purpose is not merely to safeguard China from barbarian invasions but to defend the country and the world from an alien attack. Yes: Song Dynasty, European mercenaries, gunpowder, and aliens. And Matt Damon.

In this section, I will analyze the film *The Great Wall*, the most expensive Sino-Hollywood co-production to date. I will identify its main themes and narratives, problematize some choices of the production and discuss how the film relates to China's goal of using cinema

as a soft power instrument to disseminate its strategic narratives.



**Figure 4:** Chinese poster of The Great Wall. **Source:** promotional material.

The dialogue at the beginning of this section already gives some indications of one of the main themes of the film: the contrast between an honorable China, characterized by moral values and mutual trust, and the Western mercenaries, who speak English (and also Spanish, in the case of the character played by the Chilean-born American actor Pedro Pascal) and are greedy, suspicious, untrustworthy, and selfish. The film presents these distinctions with clarity and leaves little room for interpretation, conveying its messages in a straightforward manner.

The character William Garin (played by the American actor Matt Damon), explicitly expresses his affiliation with multiple allegiances, stating that he fights for “many flags,” while also emphasizing his survival instinct by declaring, “I am alive today because I trust no one.” While the character Commander Lin Mae (played by the Chinese actress Jing Tian) articulates a nobler system of values, literally saying, “Here, in this army, you fight for more than food or

money. We give our lives for something more. *Xin ren* is our flag. Trust in each other.”

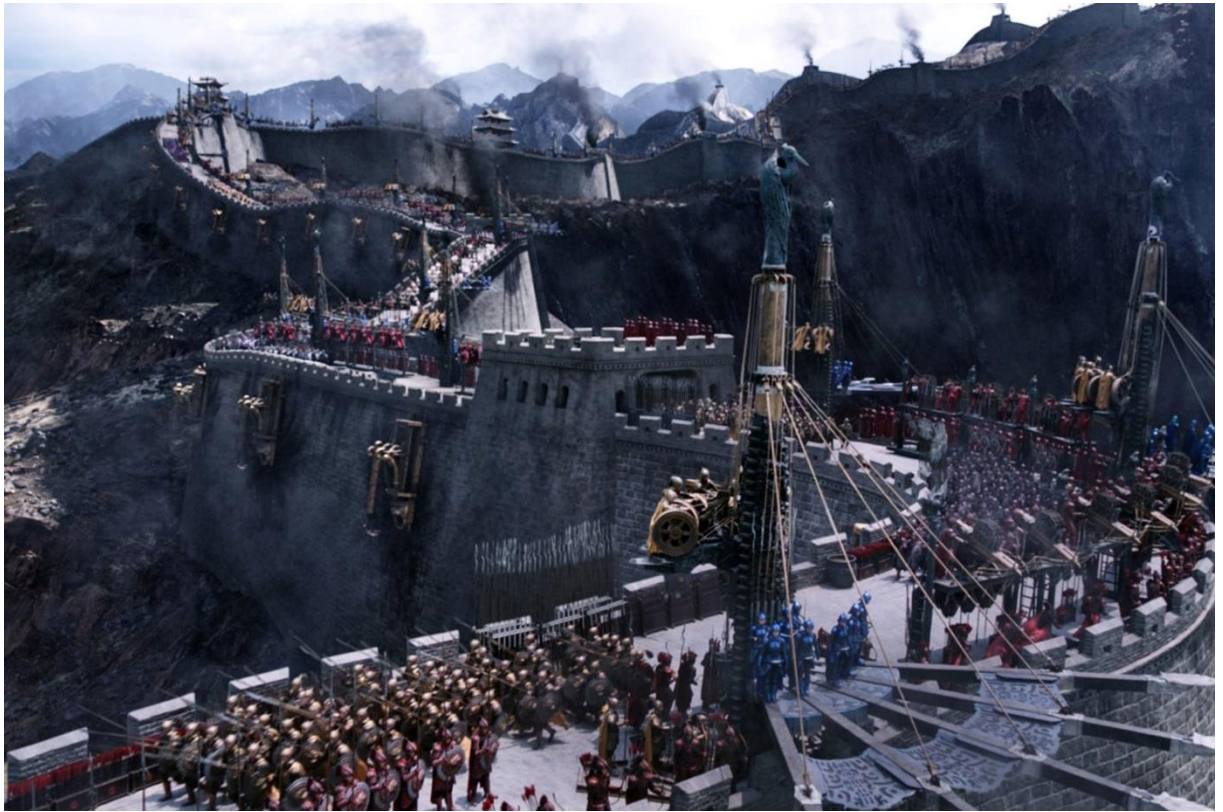
The film follows a familiar narrative pattern commonly seen in this genre, featuring a gradual transformation of the characters. Matt Damon’s character undergoes significant moral growth throughout the story, displaying a shift in his willingness to trust others and actively contribute to the battle, even if it means endangering his own life. This transformation is particularly evident when contrasted with the actions of the other Western characters. The European mercenary Pero Tovar, played by Pedro Pascal, and the European adventure-turned-captive teacher Sir Ballard, portrayed by Willem Dafoe, demonstrate their self-serving nature by planning to steal the black powder and betray everyone involved in this crucial moment. On the other hand, Damon’s character evolves by observing the Chinese characters and aligning himself with their values of trust and selflessness.

The casting of Matt Damon in the role of a protagonist sparked accusations of whitewashing, connecting the film to other instances that perpetuate “white savior” narratives. Director Zhang Yimou addressed these allegations in a statement to *Entertainment Weekly*. Zhang clarified that “Matt Damon is not playing a role that was originally conceived for a Chinese actor” and that “There are five major heroes in our story and he is one of them – the other four are all Chinese. The collective struggle and sacrifice of these heroes are the emotional heart of our film” (McGovern 2016). Zhang also highlighted that “As the director of over 20 Chinese language films and the Beijing Olympics, I have not and will not cast a film in a way that was untrue to my artistic vision. I hope when everyone sees the film and is armed with the facts they will agree” (McGovern 2016).

In any case, the fact is that Matt Damon’s character was present at all the crucial moments in solving the film’s problem. He is the one who kills the first alien at the beginning of the film, it is an artifact that was with him that helps to devise a strategy against the aliens, and he remains by the side of the Chinese actress throughout the resolution of the crisis at the end of the movie. However, it is crucial to note that the final attack is executed by the Chinese character General Lin Mae, portrayed by Jing Tian, following two unsuccessful attempts by Damon’s character. General Lin Mae emphasizes her lifelong training and readiness for this decisive moment. She leads a successful attack that vanquishes the aliens, ultimately saving China (and the world).

In addition to the contrast between a worthy China and selfish and greedy Western mercenaries, the film also quite evidently brings high praise to China’s military power. This theme is clear in an early scene, where the dialogue explicitly acknowledges the awe-inspiring nature of China’s army:

William Garin (played by Matt Damon): Look at this army. Have you ever seen anything like this?  
 Pero Tovar (played by Pedro Pascal): Incredible.



**Figure 5:** *The Great Wall* and China’s military might. **Source:** promotion material.

The film’s depiction of China’s military might is presented in a straightforward manner, without any subtlety. This particular dialogue between Garin and Tovar reminded me of a scene from the Hollywood movie *2012* (2009). In *2012*, a solar phenomenon is discovered that will potentially end life on Earth. To preserve part of the population, massive arks are constructed in caves located in Tibet, as its high altitude would protect them from the tsunamis caused by the impending disaster. The Chinese government and army assist in this endeavor. In one scene, as the characters enter the caves and witness the impressive architecture and vessels, a senior White House official remarks: “Leave it to the Chinese. I didn’t think it was possible. Not in the time we had.” This praise of China’s power and capacity in a U.S. film led to concerns regarding Chinese influence in Hollywood. Robert Daly (2016) addressed the issue, stating that “there have been no films in recent years that depict the Chinese Communist Party or mainland Chinese characters in a critical light. [...] Instead, China has saved the world in ‘2012’ and ‘The Martian’”.

This similarity between *The Great Wall* and *2012* was also noted by Jing Yang, Min



Jiao, and Jin Zhang (2020). According to the scholars, the surprise at China's collective strength in the two movies subverts the Westerner's usual assumption of assertiveness. The display of technological advancement on the screen contradicts the association of China with backwardness. The authors comment that, in *The Great Wall*, William Garin encounters another setback for his bow is deemed primitive by the soldiers, and the presence of giant crossbows and catapults is reportedly based on the historical accuracy of the medieval Chinese armory. The waning power of Garin, compared with the privileged dominance of his Hollywood predecessors, disrupts the Western modernity/coloniality matrix of power-knowledge (J. Yang, Jiao, and Zhang 2020). Set in the previous millennium that makes China equal if not superior to Europe, the film recognizes China as one of the key contributors to world civilization and attempts to rescue the Oriental Other from an evolutionary Eurocentric historiography (J. Yang, Jiao, and Zhang 2020).

Aynne Kokas (2019a) examines *The Great Wall's* financing, casting, and genre to analyze China's pursuit of global recognition and influence. While China's growing market size and massive investments in Hollywood allow for increased visibility, Kokas argues that Chinese films often present simplified and politically sanitized representations, limiting the range of Chinese identities showcased. The casting of Matt Damon in *The Great Wall* exemplifies this phenomenon. Traditionally, Hollywood incorporated Chinese actors to appeal to Chinese audiences, often relegating them to ornamental roles with limited significance. However, Damon's casting represents a shift in power dynamics, as major Hollywood actors are now being featured alongside Chinese actors in an attempt to attract foreign audiences to Chinese films. Nevertheless, Caucasian male actors continue to dominate lead roles in Chinese-funded or supported films, perpetuating hegemonic representation. Kokas also highlights the issue of colorism, as pale-skinned actors are prioritized over dark-skinned actors in films distributed in China. This reinforces colorism and marginalizes Chinese ethnic minorities. The controversies surrounding *The Great Wall* shed light on racial exclusion prevalent in Hollywood and prompted discussions about casting practices (Kokas 2019a).

Kokas (2019a) argues that genre plays a significant role in Chinese films' global marketability, with martial arts and historical genres being particularly popular. These genres transcend cultural barriers and require minimal cultural awareness, thus expanding the film's reach and exportability. Kokas debates the concept of "cultural discount," where films cater to audiences with limited cultural knowledge by incorporating elements that can be easily understood. Sino-U.S. collaboration films often possess a high cultural discount, limiting nuanced discourse and reinforcing political structures aligned with Chinese government

priorities (Kokas 2019a).

*The Great Wall* aligns with this pattern by presenting a simplified narrative that appeals to viewers with limited knowledge of China. Similar to *Hero* (2002), another movie directed by Zhang Yimou, which advocated for sacrificing personal ambitions for the collective good, *The Great Wall* makes a persuasive case for strong borders, a formidable military, and foreign recognition of China's power (Kokas 2019a). According to Kokas, the film underscores the significance of the wall's strength and the wisdom of the Chinese people, strongly advises outsiders to follow China's example and share their knowledge with the Chinese military and political authorities who are implementing their beneficial vision of a powerful Chinese border. Kokas argues that although the film's use of historical period drama further blunts the political message by providing historical distance, this plausible deniability works only for viewers with limited knowledge of Chinese history. Despite underperforming financially, *The Great Wall* broke new political ground by exploiting the ignorance of Chinese culture in Hollywood for Chinese propaganda efforts (Kokas 2019a).

Additionally, Kokas contends that by leveraging the visibility of the martial arts genre in the global market, *The Great Wall* renders invisible China's pluralism. Like *Hero*, Zhang's first crossover hit, the film uses the conventions of the martial arts genre to assert the importance of Chinese military cohesion in the fight against interlopers from the outside (in this case, monsters). Unlike *Hero*, which was distributed by a U.S. firm but produced by Chinese partners, *The Great Wall* promotes its vision of a strong, centralized Chinese state in a production context that frames China's nation-building efforts as part of a wider financial expansion into Hollywood: a U.S.-run studio led *The Great Wall*'s initial phases of production, and later a Chinese-owned U.S. studio subsidiary took over (Kokas 2019a).

Finally, *The Great Wall* also incorporates the monster genre. Kokas argues that whereas the use of the martial arts genre in *The Great Wall* focuses on arguing for the power and skill of China's central government, the monster movie warns of the dangers of the periphery (Kokas 2019a). In the case of *The Great Wall*, monster genre tropes are used to suggest the dangers posed by external influences on the hegemonic vision of China presented within the film (Kokas 2019a). Thus, according to Kokas, the entire premise of the film relies on efforts by Chinese military and political leaders (aided by Western interlocutors) to prevent alien beings from crossing the Great Wall of China (Kokas 2019a).

In conclusion, Kokas asserts that pairing popular genres with big blockbuster studio funding allows Chinese films to increase their visibility in the global market. However, this approach results in a two-dimensional and highly politicized image of China. *The Great Wall*

exemplifies a new model of multigenre storytelling that goes beyond previous strategies for reaching the global market (Kokas 2019a).

Jing Yang, Min Jiao, and Jin Zhang (2020) provide an alternative interpretation of the film *The Great Wall*, viewing it as a discourse on modernity. They discuss various themes explored in the film, such as otherness, Chineseness, the white savior narrative, symbolic representation of monsters, genre dynamics, and the manipulation of Western templates by Chinese filmmakers. The authors argue that the film blends Western and Eastern elements, aiming to create an “authentic” Hollywood movie for the global market. However, despite its technical prowess and international ambitions, the film fails to impress audiences due to its shallow plot, awkward dialogue, and lack of character depth (J. Yang, Jiao, and Zhang 2020).

The scholars also explore the transnational aspects of circulation, appropriation, and indigenization in the film, particularly in relation to monster films (J. Yang, Jiao, and Zhang 2020). While monster films are not commonly associated with Chinese cinema, the authors trace the fascination and criticism of technological impact back to Western literary works, suggesting that monsters in cinema often represent public fears related to atomic warfare, extraterrestrial invasions, and ecological catastrophes. In contrast, the Tao Tie monster in *The Great Wall* derives from ancient Chinese mythology, representing a literal “gluttonous ogre.” The authors also discuss how the film incorporates the white savior narrative to reinvent Western paradigms within a Chinese context. This blending of elements challenges the notion of monolithic Euro-American modernity, contributing to de-Westernization and pluralization within the global cinematic landscape (J. Yang, Jiao, and Zhang 2020).



**Figure 6:** The monster Tao Tie climbs the Great Wall. **Source:** promotional material.

The authors comment on the history of China-Hollywood relations, emphasizing the recent emergence of monster films in China. They highlight the evolution of these films from low-budget projects to blockbuster hits that cater to the evolving tastes of a consumer-oriented society. *The Great Wall* serves as an example of the convergence between local and global elements, where different ideological positions and cultural legacies coexist and compete (J. Yang, Jiao, and Zhang 2020).

The scholars criticize the use of Western imagination tropes in the film and discuss how extravagant costumes, elaborate helmets, and ornate weapons blend ancient and futuristic elements. They argue that the inclusion of exotic signifiers caters to the Western fantasy of the Other, reinforcing colonial romanticization and the consumption of difference. To add flavor to the medieval Chinese setting, the film introduces caricatures of sycophantic officials in the royal court. These officials compete to flatter the boy Emperor in their pursuit of transporting the

captive Tao Tie to the capital, leading to a massive monster invasion. The clownish portrayal of feudal rulers aligns with the conventional perception of China as a land of despotism, detached from modern civilization. By presenting a heterogeneous mix of exotic signifiers reminiscent of the director's arthouse films, *The Great Wall* constructs a unique version of "Chineseness" that caters to Western fantasies (J. Yang, Jiao, and Zhang 2020).

The film attempts to balance the self-conscious strategy of orientalization with a reinvention of the Hollywood white savior narrative (J. Yang, Jiao, and Zhang 2020). It portrays Mei, a Chinese woman, as a capable commander, empowering her while still restoring the dominance of the white male protagonist. Mei and William, the white male protagonist, join forces to save the world, challenging Western assumptions and showcasing China's collective strength and technological advancements (J. Yang, Jiao, and Zhang 2020).

The authors discuss the unique features of the Tao Tie monsters in the film, highlighting their allegorical significance. They explain how the film weaves science fiction with ancient legends to critique excessive desire and greed, using the monster as a metaphor. The film's treatment of gunpowder and its association with Chinese moderation and reverence for life is contrasted with the Western desire for military conquest and world domination. The film raises questions about the assumption of Euro-American modernity and the need for a balance between scientific discovery and veneration for the universe (J. Yang, Jiao, and Zhang 2020).

The authors conclude by stating that the film offers imaginative resolutions to global geopolitics and promotes non-hegemonic ways of thinking. It recognizes the contributions of different cultures to world history and embraces the positive influences of globalization. As a Chinese monster film, *The Great Wall* provides multi-layered perspectives for viewers of diverse national and social backgrounds, transcending genre-specific expectations and conveying a unique commentary on scientific progress, human desire, and common legacies (J. Yang, Jiao, and Zhang 2020).

Drawing from the aforementioned points, numerous connections can be established between the themes of the films and China's strategic narratives. One such connection relates to the critique of unchecked greed and consumption, symbolized by the Tao Tie, and the concept of ecological civilization. Scholars Sam Geall and Adrian Ely (2018) delve into the influence of dominant policy narratives in China on sustainable innovation, highlighting the emergence of ecological civilization (*shengtai wenming*) as an official narrative that is likely to shape sustainability pathways in the future (Geall and Ely 2018).

The idea of moderate use of technology (symbolized by the black powder in the movie) can be associated with peaceful development. In the words of Xi Jinping,

In pursuing modernization, China will not tread the old path of war, colonization, and plunder taken by some countries. That brutal and blood-stained path of enrichment at the expense of others caused great suffering for the people of developing countries. We will stand firmly on the right side of history and on the side of human progress. Dedicated to peace, development, cooperation, and mutual benefit, we will strive to safeguard world peace and development as we pursue our own development, and we will make greater contributions to world peace and development through our own development (Xi 2022).

Furthermore, the idea of collaborative action between China and foreign entities to save humanity can be linked to the concept of a “Community of Common Destiny.” According to Zhang Denghua (2018), this concept, increasingly employed by the Chinese government and President Xi Jinping on international occasions, was initially introduced as a means to improve relations with neighboring countries amidst territorial disputes. However, the scholar argues that it forms part of China’s long-term strategy to maintain a peaceful “period of strategic opportunity” for its own development (D. Zhang 2018).

Additionally, the collaboration between China and foreigners to address shared challenges also aligns with the principle of Win-Win Cooperation. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, in a speech at the China Development Forum in 2015, discussed the concept of a “New Type of International Relations of Win-Win Cooperation.” Wang emphasized that this concept, proposed by President Xi Jinping, builds upon the purposes and principles of the UN Charter while transcending traditional theories of international relations. Its profound impact on future international relations is evident as it seeks to replace confrontation with cooperation and exclusivity with mutually beneficial collaboration. The concept rejects zero-sum games and winner-takes-all approaches (Wang 2015).

In this context, rather than solely contrasting Chinese leaders’ discourse with their actions (for example, “wolf warrior” diplomacy, which I will explore in the upcoming chapter, displays limited collaboration with foreigners with whom China holds differing views), what is more crucial is to recognize that these narratives held dear by Chinese leaders find expression in the film. Thus, when observing the Chinese characters in the movie *The Great Wall* collaborating with foreigners (who were present to steal from them) for the betterment of humanity, fostering a scenario where everyone benefits and can thrive in an improved world (within the film’s context, free from the clutches of ravenous monsters), it is possible to notice that this echoes discourses and ideas of Chinese leaders. That, in turn, reinforces the argument that the movie is promoting strategic narratives, which aim to create of shared interpretations of the past, present, and future in the world politics.

The concept of cooperation instead of conflict and the idea of coming together to address

problems can also be associated with Qin Yaqing's relational theory. According to this theory, Chinese *zhongyong* (yin-yang) dialectical conceptions play a significant role, emphasizing the harmonious coexistence of opposing forces. These opposing forces are integral parts of a larger whole, with one encompassing the other, creating a sense of complementarity and balance. This Chinese *zhongyong* dialectics differs from the Hegelian dialectic, which is prevalent in Western thought. While the yin-yang concept suggests the coexistence of two opposing poles in a state of fundamental harmony, the Hegelian dialectic acknowledges the existence of two opposing poles but views their fundamental relationship as one of conflict. This distinction arises from the fact that yin and yang, unlike Hegelian thesis and antithesis, represent co-theses that are inclusive and complementary to each other. Their inherently dynamic interaction enables what Qin Yaqing terms "coevolutionary harmony" (Y. Qin 2018).

The connection between foreign collaboration in a monster film and a Chinese theory of international relations does not imply that the theory was deliberately integrated into the film or that one must exclusively employ this theory to interpret the movie or potential international relations depicted in it. The key point here is that the existence of a co-production between China and Hollywood enables this kind of association, spotlighting traditional cultural elements also emphasized by Chinese International Relations scholars – a significant observation. Just as analysts have identified, for instance, traces of Reagan's policies in *Rambo* (Harper 2017) and liberal IR theories in *Independence Day* (Weber 2021), a similar analysis can now be applied to Chinese IR theories. It is important to note that this is not a purely Chinese production (unlike the American films *Rambo* and *Independence Day*); instead, it is a collaborative effort between China and the United States.

The debates proposed by Jing Yang, Min Jiao, and Jin Zhang (2020) on *The Great Wall* can also be seen as an alternative discourse on modernity in China, addressing questions about Orientalism, Other, and Chineseness that goes back to Professor Green's debate on the images of China in Hollywood films. According to the professor, the films produced in Hollywood, from the first representations of China in Hollywood to more recent films, portrayed on screen a mirror of the Americans themselves, serving China only to highlight these differences between the American self and the other, foreign, exotic, different (Greene 2014). Ultimately, those Hollywood movies that talked about China were really about the United States. Thus, that *The Great Wall* somehow addresses these themes in a collaboration between China and Hollywood is a noticeable development of these perspectives.

Many of these ideas discussed above are part of the Chinese political discourse, and that is why I made a point of analyzing the speeches of Chinese leaders. In this sense, perhaps the

propagation of these narratives in a film is equivalent to what Professor Aynne Kokas (2019a) called Chinese propaganda efforts. I emphasize, however, as I have done elsewhere in this dissertation, that this is neither new nor exclusive to China. Perhaps the peculiarity in this case, as also pointed out by Professor Kokas (2019a), is China's capture of a Hollywood film to advance Chinese narratives, and in that sense *The Great Wall* broke new political ground in the use of co-productions for promote Chinese narratives.

Nevertheless, as observed, the film experienced box office failure and garnered significant disapproval from critics and audiences in both the U.S. and China. Furthermore, shifts in domestic landscapes within the U.S. and China, along with changes in the bilateral relationship, have posed challenges for initiating new co-productions. Nonetheless, *The Great Wall* stands as a notable example of leveraging Hollywood to propagate Chinese discourses, marking a significant milestone in the application of co-productions to advance China's strategic narratives.

In the next section, I will discuss the main lessons that the film *The Great Wall* can teach to realize using film as an instrument of China's soft power.

### 3.3.3. Possible Lessons from The Great Wall for the Future of China-Hollywood Relations

The film *The Great Wall* (2016) provides valuable lessons on utilizing cinema as a tool for China's soft power. Similar to *Mulan*, it demonstrates how shifts in the political landscape can impact film production and its soft power effects. The movie production commenced during the honeymoon phase (from 2001 to mid-2017) between China and Hollywood, characterized by significant Chinese investments in Hollywood while Hollywood aimed to tap into the growing Chinese film market for increased profits. However, the film's release coincided with a more aggressive tone from the United States towards China (especially after Trump's inauguration in 2017) and faced criticism for pandering to the Chinese government.

Apart from the changing political environment, the film itself highlights the challenges of leveraging films as instruments of soft power. Analysts critique the movie for attempting to please too many audiences without targeting a specific group. Although acclaimed Chinese director Zhang Yimou incorporates elements of Chinese culture and history into the cinematography of *The Great Wall*, blending them with perceptions and stereotypes about China alongside alien monsters derived from Chinese mythology may have made the film



unappealing to both domestic and foreign audiences.

However, the film encapsulates a myriad of Chinese strategic narratives, encompassing the portrayal of China's military might (which receives explicit acclaim from Western characters in the film) and technological advancement (coveted by these same Western characters, but used only for good by the Chinese), the emphasis on international collaboration (even with foreign mercenaries), and the endorsement of resource preservation (in stark contrast to both the foreign mercenaries and the greedy monsters). These motifs resonate with the rhetoric of Chinese statesmen, particularly encapsulating notions like the community of common destiny, ecological civilization, peaceful development, and win-win Cooperation.

While the use of films to disseminate strategic narratives is not exclusive to China and has been employed by other nations, what truly sets China apart is its prowess in leveraging co-productions with Hollywood to disseminate its strategic narratives. This accomplishment reinforces the argument that as China's influence grows stronger, it assumes greater control over the narratives projected and enhances its soft power capabilities.

*The Great Wall* did not achieve success with the public or critics. Director Zhang Yimou acknowledged that "Probably the story is a bit weak, or the timing of it wasn't right, or we didn't do a very good job in making the film. There could be many reasons". Nonetheless, Zhang emphasized the importance of co-productions like *The Great Wall* as significant milestones in Chinese-Hollywood collaboration. He highlighted that "As the Chinese saying goes, 'all beginnings are hard.' I feel that this beginning is valuable. I hope that there will be more co-operation like this, that people won't stop just because the result wasn't so good" (China Daily 2017b). And, in fact, new co-productions are already emerging, being successful, and generating some controversy.

Throughout this chapter, I initially explored various co-production models, both international and specific to China, to examine how the chosen format shapes China's capacity to exert influence over film narratives, thereby enhancing their ability to communicate strategic messages. I also analyzed the underlying motivations for countries to engage in co-productions, emphasizing how China's endeavors align with those of other nations utilizing this model to fortify their domestic markets and expand their global footprint. Additionally, I delved into the historical evolution of co-productions in China, highlighting the earlier collaborations primarily with Hong Kong and Taiwan, while emphasizing that Hollywood has emerged as China's predominant co-production partner in recent years.

I also have debated the fluctuating dynamics of China-Hollywood co-productions, ranging from periods of cooperation and enthusiasm to moments of antagonism and frustration.

Initially, these collaborations primarily involved faux-productions or fake co-productions, where Hollywood utilized Chinese labor, actors, and locations to cater to Chinese audiences. This landscape began to change with China's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, China's growing strength and film market, and increased investment in Hollywood. China's involvement in the creative process of filmmaking has expanded, enabling it to effectively tell its own stories in co-productions.

*The Great Wall* represents a significant milestone in this progression, regarded by many as the first genuine China-Hollywood co-production where both sides contribute resources, human capital, and creative expertise to shape the narrative. However, the film debuted amid a shifting landscape, as China-U.S. collaborations experienced a slowdown and encountered frustration. Factors contributing to this shift include Donald Trump's presidency in the United States, the implementation of aggressive rhetoric towards China, and internal changes within China such as increased investment in the Belt and Road Initiative, leading to reduced investment in Hollywood. Furthermore, the Chinese government's shift in approach towards entrepreneurs investing in Hollywood and a tax scandal within the Chinese film industry in 2018 have added to the challenges.

While *The Great Wall* faced public and critical disappointment, partly due to the changing political climate, as well as the difficulties in creating an engaging story appealing to both Chinese and international audiences, other possibilities for co-productions have emerged. For instance, less politically sensitive action films and animation co-productions, such as *The Meg*, *Kung Fu Panda 3*, *Abominable*, and *Over the Moon*, have garnered success and generated discussion.

During my analysis of *The Great Wall*, I extensively debated the utilization of different genres in the film, including historical, monster, martial arts, and science fiction. This incorporation of diverse genres and their respective success is prominently observed by China both in certain China-Hollywood co-productions (for instance, *The Meg* is also a science fiction film), and particularly in Chinese films with a global appeal. China has begun exploring different genres that have achieved international success, thereby engaging in a cultural dialogue and addressing issues of cultural discount and representation.

In the next chapter, I will delve into Chinese blockbusters and China's endeavor to develop its own global films that feature the Chinese language and heroes. I will analyze how they are trying to achieve international acclaim and disseminate Chinese strategic narratives.

## CHAPTER 4 – CHINESE BLOCKBUSTERS: PROJECTING CHINA’S STORIES WELL

“Citizens of the People’s Republic of China: Don’t give up if you run into danger abroad. Please remember, a strong motherland will always have your back!” With these powerful words superimposed on the Chinese passport just before the credits, the movie *Wolf Warrior 2* (2017) concludes. The film’s tagline, “Whoever attacks China will be killed no matter how far the target is,” delivers an even more direct message. These elements demonstrate how Chinese blockbusters have become a means for projecting China’s stories on the global stage.

In an article titled “China Finally Has Its Own Rambo,” published in *Foreign Policy Magazine*, Kevin Fan Hsu suggests that *Wolf Warrior 2* “provides a glimpse of how the Chinese government wants to present its place in the world to its own people” (Hsu 2017). Similarly, Tom Harper argues in *The Conversation* that the film reflects changes in China’s foreign policy: “Like many Hollywood movies, the film is indicative of the changes in Chinese foreign policy and attitudes today – just as Rambo had been for the Reaganite policies of the Cold War” (Harper 2017). This deliberate shift in China’s cinematic portrayal is confirmed by Wu Jing, the actor and director of *Wolf Warrior 2*, who stated in an interview with Evan Osnos from *The New Yorker* that “In the past, all of our movies were about, say, the Opium Wars – how other countries waged war against China. But Chinese people have always wanted to see that our country could, one day, have the power to protect its own people and contribute to peace in the world” (Osnos 2018).

The impact of *Wolf Warrior 2* extends beyond the silver screen and can be noticed by the use of the term “wolf warrior diplomacy” to describe China’s “new brand of foreign policy” (Westcott and Jiang 2020). Peter Martin (2021), the author of *China’s Civilian Army: The Making of Wolf Warrior Diplomacy*, highlights that Chinese diplomacy has, in recent years, begun to display aggressive attitudes not usually associated with its traditional stance. In this context, “The foreign media began to brand this new confrontational approach “wolf warrior diplomacy” after a series of Chinese action movies that depicted Rambo-like heroes battling China’s enemies at home and abroad” (Martin 2021, 3). According to the author, “The moniker captured the intimidating and sometimes bewildering nature of Chinese diplomacy as seen by the outside world, and it stuck” (Martin 2021, 4).

In this chapter, I will analyze Chinese blockbusters and explore their potential as a soft power tool for disseminating Chinese strategic narratives. To do so, I will investigate aspects

of Chinese film history, particularly focusing on the internationalization of Chinese films, starting with the influential Fifth Generation of Chinese cinema, its global success, and its relations with the Chinese government. I will also examine recent developments in the industry, including the emergence of independent and authorial cinema spaces within China's Sixth Generation, and discuss their impact on China's international perception.

Next, I will explore how the Chinese government actively seeks to use cinema as a political tool through main melody films. I will analyze the concept of main melody films and their development in China from the 1980s to the present. I will specifically concentrate on the distinctive characteristics of military-themed main melody films, examining how they convey narratives of a new China and a new Chinese foreign policy to the world. Additionally, I will explore the potential for genre diversification within the main melody film subfield, considering alternative genres such as science fiction films that offer glimpses into a future with Chinese characteristics.

One of the movies that most effectively exemplify China's efforts to use cinema as a soft power tool is *Wolf Warrior 2* (2017). Analyzing this film will provide valuable insights into the interaction between cinema and International Relations. I will closely examine its context, production, and the main themes it presents, aiming to establish connections with Chinese strategic narratives. By doing so, I will draw attention to the key lessons that *Wolf Warrior 2* can offer regarding the effective use of films as a soft power instrument for China.

I will argue that despite Chinese films not having achieved widespread global success yet, they have enjoyed increasing recognition, particularly in the region surrounding China. These films have also gained traction in other areas, with the notable exception of the United States and Europe. The improved quality of Chinese films and the involvement of renowned actors and directors with them have garnered attention. While these films have resonated with the domestic Chinese audience, they have also caught the interest of international analysts, highlighting the importance of refining these narratives. In this sense, the argument that also prevails here is: the stronger China gets, the more it will manage to disseminate its strategic narratives through films, strengthening Chinese soft power.

Next, I will start by investigating the history of Chinese cinema and its international potential.

#### 4.1. A brief history of Chinese Cinema

In this subchapter, I will provide a concise history of Chinese cinema from the early twentieth century to recent developments. My focus will be on the cinema-State relationship and the internationalization efforts of Chinese cinema.

I will begin by summarizing the initial period until the late 1970s. Then, I will discuss the Fifth Generation of Chinese cinema, which gained recognition abroad and marked the first interaction between foreign audiences and Chinese films after years of isolation. Next, I will explore the Sixth Generation of Chinese cinema and more recent events, aiming to understand the Chinese film landscape, particularly its engagement with the global stage.

Before delving into Chinese cinema's history, it is crucial to address a significant debate in its historiography regarding the term "Chinese cinema." Zhang (2004) argues that the concept of a national cinema is subject to friction, particularly in the era of globalization, where multinational corporations operate beyond national boundaries and challenge the notion of the nation-state, especially within the film industry. Moreover, Zhang (2004) contends that the national cinema paradigm is insufficient when examining China due to its complex territorial composition. China's film industry is characterized by separate film industries in different territories, namely the People's Republic of China (PRC) in the mainland, the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR), and the Republic of China (ROC) in Taiwan. These distinct territories have fostered the development of separate national cinemas within each region.

Zhang (2004) emphasizes the ongoing interrogation of the term "Chinese" itself, which can denote various markers such as ethnicity, culture, language, politics, or territory. This poses challenges to the designation of "Chinese cinema." From a cultural perspective, regional differences exist within China, such as those between northerners and southerners in the mainland or mainlanders (*waisheng ren*) and islanders in Taiwan. Linguistically, Mandarin cinema differs from Cantonese cinema in Hong Kong and Taiwanese-dialect film in Taiwan. Politically, divergent ideologies and institutions in mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan since 1949 have influenced film productions, leading to the concept of "three Chinas."

Therefore, Zhang (2004) suggests approaching the term "Chinese cinema" predominantly from cultural and historical perspectives rather than solely in terms of the State. Zhang advocates for using the term "Chinese national cinema" to encompass films from mainland China (including pre-1949), Hong Kong, and Taiwan, acknowledging the theoretical

and geopolitical complexities surrounding “China” and “Chineseness.” This broad framework enables exploration of the interactions between Beijing, Shanghai, and Hong Kong, considering their distinct dialects, throughout the twentieth century. It also highlights the similarities in nationalist State policies, such as film censorship and subsidies, between the CCP regime in mainland China and the KMT regime in Taiwan after 1949. Zhang argues that instead of fixating on the unsettled notion of “Chineseness” in Chinese national cinema, understanding the historical construction, circulation, and contestation of the “national” is of utmost importance.

Although this essential debate lies somewhat beyond the scope of the present study, I will reference these discussions whenever they contribute to the analysis of the cinema-State relationship, the film industry’s engagement with the global context, and the utilization of cinema to internationalize China’s strategic narratives.

In the next section, I will start investigating cinema’s initial years in China.

#### *4.1.1. The first years of Cinema in China*

In this section, I will provide an overview of the early period of Chinese cinema, spanning from the beginning of the twentieth century in imperial China to the emergence of the Fifth Generation, which will be discussed in the next section. While acknowledging the vastness of this period and the multitude of historical events, it is important to note that this dissertation, developed at an Institute of International Relations, does not aim to exhaustively cover the entire history of cinema during this time. Instead, I will take a high-level approach, briefly touching upon key historical moments. Throughout this analysis, the primary focus will be on understanding the relationship between cinema, the State, and the international context.

In the book *Projecting A Nation: Chinese National Cinema Before 1949*, Jubin Hu (2003) addresses the lack of English-language scholarship on pre-1949 Chinese cinema and focuses on the mobilizations of “the national” in Chinese cinema during that period, an aspect often overlooked by researchers. Hu (2003) argues that the issue of the nation was the central theme shaping Chinese cinema before 1949, as films not only reflected nationalist ideologies and movements but actively participated in debates surrounding the “Chinese nation.”

To approach the concept of national cinema, Hu (2003) raises methodological questions and aims to explore the construction of Chinese national cinema, its multi-faceted nature, and

its relationship with film content and form. By addressing these issues, Hu (2003) seeks to answer the question of how the history of Chinese cinema before 1949 can be written by tracing discourses involving the issue of national cinema.

Hu (2003) highlights the differences between the Chinese and European concepts of national cinema. While the European concept emerged in the 1920s and focused on national culture and countering Hollywood's influence, the Chinese concept placed greater emphasis on the nation as a community and the threats faced in political, military, economic, and cultural terms. The concept of "the nation" served as the guiding principle throughout Chinese cinema before 1949.

Hu (2003) then explores the characteristics of different historical periods in Chinese cinema: pre-1920s cultural awareness, the 1920s industrial nationalism, the 1931-1936 period of class nationalism versus traditionalist nationalism, the 1937-1945 period of colonial and anti-colonial nationalisms, and the 1946-1949 period of nationalism and modernization. Hu analyzes how these periods shaped Chinese national cinema and discusses the influences of political parties and external factors on the cinematic discourse of nationalism.

Hu examines the main characteristics of each period in pre-1949 Chinese cinema history, which I adapted into the table below:

Period	Main Characteristics
Cultural Awareness (Pre-1920s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Film associated with traditional Chinese art forms</li> <li>- Filmmakers aimed to promote and preserve Chinese culture</li> <li>- Focus on advocating Chinese culture rather than nation-building</li> </ul>
Industrial Nationalism (1920s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Rapid development of the Chinese film industry</li> <li>- Emphasis on Westernization and Sinicization               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Westernization: adoption of techniques to compete with imports</li> <li>- Sinicization: production of costume and martial arts films</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Class Nationalism vs. Traditionalist Nationalism (1931-1936)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- CCP and KMT's competing discourses of nationalism               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- CCP: class-based nationalism with a focus on class struggle</li> <li>- KMT: emphasis on Confucian values and cultural tradition</li> </ul> </li> <li>- Film used as self-justification for the struggle for State power</li> </ul>

Colonial and Anti-colonial Nationalisms (1937-1945)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Chinese filmmakers address themes of patriotism and national survival</li> <li>- Japanese establish film production base in Northeast China</li> <li>- Japanese promote ideas of racial conflict for colonization</li> </ul>
Nationalism and Modernization (1946-1949)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Shift from nationalism to focus on modernization</li> <li>- Expression of discontent with political corruption</li> <li>- Rethinking of tradition and modernity in film content and form</li> <li>- Incorporation of techniques and themes from Western and Chinese sources</li> </ul>

**Table 4:** Main Characteristics of Pre-1949 Chinese Cinema according to Hu (2003). **Source:** the author, based on Hu (2003).

Analyzing the periodization proposed by Hu (2003) and the key characteristics of each phase, it becomes evident that Chinese cinema was greatly influenced by external factors and the international context. The introduction of cinema itself, a foreign technique and art form originating from the Western powers, occurred during a tumultuous period in China's history – the decline of the Qing Dynasty Empire. This coincided with a crisis of Chinese national identity and traditional customs. The process of modernization in Republican China during the 1920s was heavily affected by foreign ideas and influences. The political conflicts of the 1930s between the Kuomintang (KMT) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) were also significantly shaped by external elements. The Japanese invasion period, marked by a foreign attack, further exemplified the impact of external forces on Chinese cinema. In the post-invasion period, as the nation sought to consolidate itself into a new reality, cinema became a reflection of these changes. Thus, this concise analysis of the extensive period highlights the intrinsic relationship between these cultural dynamics, particularly within the realm of cinema, and society as a whole. It underscores how these dynamics were intertwined with the historical context, the influence of the outside world, and, most significantly, the relationship with the State and political leadership during those turbulent times.

Various approaches to periodization exist in film historiography, with each scheme serving different objectives. Zhang (2004) acknowledges this and offers a broader periodization framework that also focuses on the national aspects of Chinese cinema. Zhang's scheme aims to accommodate the parallel, divergent, and diverse developments in mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, employing more thematic labels.



Zhang's periodization begins with the early cinema and national traditions from 1896 to 1929. It then progresses to the era of cinema and the nation-people spanning 1930 to 1949. Zhang further examines the cinematic reinvention of the national in Taiwan from 1896 to 1978 and the cinematic revival of the regional in Hong Kong from 1945 to 1978. The scheme also explores socialist cinema and the nation-state in the People's Republic of China (PRC) from 1949 to 1978, and delves into cinema's relationship with national and regional cultures in all three Chinas from 1979 to 1989. Additionally, Zhang (2004) concludes by discussing cinema and the transnational imaginary, along with developments in the new millennium from 1990 to 2002. Zhang (2004) argues that this flexible periodization framework aims to facilitate comparative studies of cinema and its national aspects in mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan throughout the twentieth century.

Zhang (2004) further details each period, and in the table below, I summarized the pre-1949 period:

Period	Phases and key issues
Cinema and national traditions, 1896–1929	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 1896–1921: Cinema as attractions</li> <li>- 1922–1926: Cinema as narration</li> <li>- 1927–1929: Cinema and speculations</li> <li>- characteristics: early cinema and a growing sense of nationalism</li> </ul>
Cinema and the nation-people, 1930–1949	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 1930–1937: Prewar cinema</li> <li>- 1937–1945: Wartime cinema</li> <li>- 1946–1949: Postwar cinema</li> <li>- characteristics: a 'golden age' period, cinema, modernity, and nation-people</li> </ul>

**Table 5:** Phases and key issues of Pre-1949 Chinese Cinema according to Zhang (2004).

**Source:** the author, based on Zhang (2004).

It is worth noting that while Hu and Zhang offer different periodizations for the pre-1949 phase of Chinese cinema, both authors underscore the prominent role of “national” elements within a time of significant social and political transformations in China. This further highlights the inherent relationship between cinema and politics.

In an effort to enhance accessibility to early Chinese films and cinema history, Christopher Rea, a Professor at the Department of Asian Studies of the University of British Columbia, has initiated the Chinese Film Classics Project.<sup>39</sup> This project includes a free online

<sup>39</sup> Links to all materials related to the Chinese Film Classics Project can be found at <https://chinesefilmclassics.org/>.

course, a YouTube playlist featuring over 30 subtitled early Chinese films, and a book titled *Chinese Film Classics, 1922-1949*, published in 2021. Rea aims to encourage archives to restore and make high-quality copies of Republican-era films available to the public. The lack of availability and poor quality of many existing films in the public domain pose significant barriers to appreciating the early contributions of Chinese cinema (Rea 2021).

Rea's book serves as a companion for multiple readerships, particularly those new to Chinese cinema history or film studies. It provides historical, cultural, cinematic, and social contexts and explains technical terms. It can be seen as a guide for analyzing cinematic form using Chinese examples. Each chapter also offers a brief history of an individual film, while researchers can find original interpretations of well-known films and discover new connections and allusions between cinema and popular culture. Additionally, the book explores the influences of foreign films on early Chinese cinema, with abundant intertextual resonances between Chinese, American, European, and Russian films of that era. Chinese films possess unique symbols, motifs, character types, and narrative conventions (Rea 2021). They offer perspectives on the global history of cinema, incorporating elements such as moral melodramas, Art Deco graphics, Expressionist sets, montage techniques, slapstick comedy, and classical Hollywood aesthetics. Chinese films also feature linguistic jokes, indigenous aesthetics, political messaging, and references to external events, creating a distinct cinematic experience (Rea 2021).

Moreover, Rea (2021) argues that the films and filmmakers of the Republican era had a profound impact on later Chinese filmmaking. Understanding the history of Maoist cinema, midcentury colonial Hong Kong, Nationalist Taiwan, and Southeast Asian cinema, it is important to have familiarity with the names, styles, and contributions of Republican cinema. Many directors, screenwriters and actors continued their careers in the People's Republic of China, while others ventured to Singapore and Hong Kong, where films inspired by Shanghai classics gained popularity in the 1960s. Therefore, the midcentury period in Chinese cinema history holds significant importance and warrants rediscovery (Rea 2021).

Rea's project and book reinforce two key points of interest for this dissertation: the impact of politics and the international sphere on the development of Chinese cinema. This is evident not only in the early Chinese cinema discussed above but also in more recent developments, as further analyzed in this chapter.

Advancing beyond the arrival of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to power in China, Zhang (2004) investigates what the author refers to as the period of socialist cinema in the People's Republic of China (PRC). This period began on October 1, 1949, when the CCP

established the PRC after defeating the Nationalist troops and forcing the Republic of China government to retreat to Taiwan. It extended until 1978, when filmmakers gradually recovered from the Cultural Revolution, and a new CCP policy facilitated the rapid growth in the cinema industry in the following decades (Y. Zhang 2004).

Zhang (2004) emphasizes that during this period, cinema was under complete control of the Party more than in any other period of film history. The Party exercised autocratic rule in the name of the nation-state, and the fate of filmmakers, and to a lesser extent, film administrators, was subject to the unpredictable whims of the CCP leadership. Nationwide campaigns against artists and filmmakers were launched every few years, and internal conflicts within the CCP translated into periods of relaxation followed by tightened control, creating a pattern of zigzag development that alternately elevated cinema to new heights and plunged it into deep crises (Y. Zhang 2004).

In the international context, the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950 severed China's ties with the United States and its allies, while the persistence of the Cold War firmly aligned China with the Communist camp. However, growing tensions with the Soviet Union from the early 1960s further isolated China from both the First and Second World and led China down the path of self-reliance, self-sufficiency, and self-importance (Y. Zhang 2004).

From a historical perspective, Zhang highlights that this period can be divided into three phases. Firstly, during the nationalization phase (1949-1952), the CCP confiscated the remaining film facilities of the Kuomintang (KMT) and transformed them into three State-run studios: Northeast, Beijing, and Shanghai. Although initially, private studios outperformed state studios by maintaining their humanistic approach, Mao Zedong's leadership led the CCP to be suspicious of the filmmakers' ideological stance. As a result, the CCP implemented relentless political interference, hastily nationalizing all private studios by January 1952 (Y. Zhang 2004).

Secondly, in the phase of socialist realism (1953-1965), the CCP employed film as an effective propaganda tool and expanded its operations by establishing new studios in strategic locations, dispatching projection teams to remote areas, and providing training to new personnel through workshops and film schools. Working within the confines of ideological State apparatuses, filmmakers endeavored to cultivate national styles and explore acceptable genres, particularly war, ethnic minority, and opera movies, while trying – and not always succeeding – to avoid offending the CCP leadership. However, they occasionally failed in these endeavors (Y. Zhang 2004).

Thirdly, during the Cultural Revolution and beyond (1966-1978), the ultra-leftist faction led by Mao's wife, Jiang Qing, suspended feature film production and condemned the

achievements of socialist cinema during the previous seventeen years. As the nation was embroiled in factional conflicts and political persecution, film production resumed with the filming of “revolutionary model plays” and films that aligned with ultra-leftist ideology (Y. Zhang 2004). In the immediate aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, from 1977 to 1978, cinema became a popular outlet for venting frustrations, and filmmakers were preoccupied with condemning political persecution, resulting in rigid ideological boundaries and formulaic representations (Y. Zhang 2004).

In conclusion, Zhang (2004) argues that socialist cinema represents an unusual period in Chinese film history. It was a time when film art became intimately intertwined with revolutionary politics, and cinema effectively propagated the socialist spirit while consolidating the power of the nation-state at the expense of the people (Y. Zhang 2004).

When examining this period, Ding (2021) highlights the significant impact of nationalization on the production, distribution, and screening of movies in China after 1949. This had profound implications for the industry and how films were perceived. The dominant ideology of workers, peasants, and soldiers served as the driving force behind the promotion of the country’s film industry, which was primarily produced by State-owned film studios (Ding 2021). During the initial four years of the Cultural Revolution’s ten-year span, film production came to a complete halt as the medium was viewed by many as bourgeois, leading to a perceived need for deprivation of its influence. In 1970, only revolutionary model play films were produced (Ding 2021).

Ding (2021) also discusses the period following the end of the Cultural Revolution, echoing Zhang’s observations that cinema became a popular outlet for expressing frustrations, and filmmakers were preoccupied with condemning political persecution. Ding (2021) further highlights the emergence of a significant number of “scar films” that offered criticism and introspection on the Cultural Revolution. These films demonstrated a different creative power, meaningful expressions, and the ability to attract audiences compared to the pre-Cultural Revolution era (Ding 2021).

Additionally, Ding (2021) notes that the Film Bureau of the Ministry of Culture reviewed a large number of films produced before the Cultural Revolution, as well as foreign films that were translated, and lifted the ban on their screening. This decision greatly contributed to the revival of films and ushered in a new stage of development in the industry (Ding 2021). As discussed in earlier chapters, the reforms in the Chinese film industry, echoing the period of Reform and Opening Up in China, gained momentum in the 1980s and 1990s, significantly impacting both the domestic film market and China’s film production and export.

A notable manifestation of this transformation can be observed in the international recognition garnered by the directors of the Fifth Generation of Chinese cinema, a subject I will explore further in the subsequent section.

In this section, I examined the early years of cinema in China, covering the period from the final crisis of imperial China to the end of the Cultural Revolution. By exploring this extensive period of Chinese cinema's development, it was possible to observe the intrinsic relationship between cinema, the state, and China's interactions with the outside world.

Initially, cinema was introduced to China by foreign powers and used as a tool to promote traditional Chinese culture, coinciding with a period of identity crisis during the collapse of the Qing dynasty. I discussed how cinema both reflected and shaped debates surrounding the concept of the Chinese nation in the 1920s and 1930s. Cinema became intertwined with discussions between the Chinese Communist Party and the Chinese Nationalist Party, and it served as a means of resistance during Japan's invasion of China, as well as a medium for national development in the post-war era.

With the Chinese Communist Party coming to power, cinema fell increasingly under State control, becoming a powerful tool for disseminating the ideology of the CCP. As ideological conflicts intensified during the Cultural Revolution, cinema was viewed as a bourgeois art and faced opposition, leading to a decline in China's cinematic development. Studios were nationalized during this period, and it was not until Mao Zedong died in 1976, marking the end of the Cultural Revolution, that this trend began to reverse.

From 1978 onward, as China underwent the process of Reform and Opening-up, cinema experienced a resurgence, gaining new vitality and forging a new relationship with the international community. This shift becomes particularly evident through the journeys of the directors belonging to the Fifth Generation of Chinese cinema, a topic I will delve into in the next section.

#### *4.1.2. The Fifth Generation and the Chinese Cinema on the Global Stage*

This section explores the transformative changes that occurred in Chinese cinema during the 1980s, with a specific focus on the emergence of the Fifth Generation of Chinese filmmakers, their interactions with global cinema, and their relationship with the Chinese government. While previous chapters have discussed reforms within the Chinese film industry,

the primary objective here is to examine how Chinese films began to reach international audiences, the specific narratives chosen for international distribution, and how the Chinese government navigated these narratives and the growing cohort of directors.

Ni Zhen, who began teaching at the Beijing Film Academy in the early 1980s and “became both mentor and friend to the Fifth Generation” (Ni 2003, xiii), discusses the term “Fifth Generation” in his book. Ni Zhen observes that although it is difficult to prove who first coined the term, “with the passing of time and increased use in critical and scholarly articles, it seems Fifth Generation cinema has almost become a synonym for Chinese cinema of the 1980s” (Ni 2003, 1).

According to Jean-Michel Frodon (2014), mainland Chinese cinema experienced a remarkable renaissance in the 1980s, emerging from the shadow of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), which had devastated various aspects of society, including cinema. During this time, film scholars, initially from the West but soon joined by Chinese experts, began categorizing Chinese film history into “Generations.” This approach had the advantage of providing a straightforward periodization: the “First Generation” referred to the silent film era (1905-1930), the “Second Generation” encompassed the period of civil war, anti-Japanese resistance, and World War II until the Communists came to power (1930-1949), and the “Third Generation” represented the State studios of the People’s Republic of China (1950-1965). Following the Cultural Revolution’s destructive impact, a new group emerged, known as the “Fourth Generation” or the “sacrificed generation.” These filmmakers, who were meant to begin their careers in the 1960s, embraced a modest and realistic style of cinema closely connected to the everyday lives of urban and rural dwellers. Frodon asserts that their main influences were Italian neorealism in terms of aesthetics and André Bazin’s writings in terms of theory.

Interestingly, it was the Fourth-Generation filmmakers who played a pivotal role in nurturing and supporting the emergence of the subsequent and more widely recognized “Fifth Generation.” Many members of the Fourth Generation, after the revival of the Beijing Film Academy, became mentors, teachers, and patrons for aspiring filmmakers. Filmmaker Wu Tianming, for instance, transformed a provincial studio in Xian into a welcoming space for experimentation, providing opportunities for budding talents such as Chen Kaige, Zhang Yimou, and Tian Zhuangzhuang, who later gained significant acclaim (Frodon 2014). Despite their differences, these filmmakers shared a penchant for exploring aesthetics, drawing inspiration from traditional Chinese painting. Thematically, their works served as sensual fables that captured the spirit of breaking away from the Maoist era, coinciding with China’s entry into the

“age of reforms” initiated by Deng Xiaoping. Set predominantly in the countryside and vast sparsely populated landscapes reminiscent of blank pages in classical painting, their films were deeply influenced by the filmmakers’ transformative and inspiring experiences during their adolescence, spent alongside peasants during “re-education campaigns,” despite the trauma it entailed. Combining a carnal form of realism with a connection to the cosmos, their films challenged the value system of socialist China and embraced the rebellious energy of youth, particularly the pursuit of love (Frodon 2014).

Frodon (2014) highlights that initially, the early films of these Fifth-Generation filmmakers faced censorship and were banned. However, they managed to establish their legitimacy through international recognition, particularly at prestigious film festivals. Hong Kong played a pioneering role in promoting their work, which later gained attention at festivals in Berlin, Venice, and Cannes. Throughout the 1990s, Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige, the two prominent figures of the Fifth Generation, progressively moved towards more visually ornate and spectacular cinema, catering to foreign audiences’ fascination with exoticism. Frodon (2014) argues that, unfortunately, their films displayed less critical observation of Chinese society, ultimately aligning with the official narratives of the regime (Frodon 2014). I will debate these developments regarding Fifth-Generation directors further in the following paragraphs.

According to Paul Clark (2021), the emergence of the Fifth Generation in the mid-1980s brought unprecedented international attention to Chinese cinema. The term referred specifically to the graduates of the 1982 class of the Beijing Film Academy, who entered the university in 1978 and had unique backgrounds and experiences as part of the educated youth during the Cultural Revolution (Clark 2021).

The class of 78, who grew up during the 17 years of New China (1949-1966), shared common attitudes and experiences that shaped their views on cinema. They recognized film as a powerful propaganda tool employed by the new regime, and even forbidden films during the early years of the Cultural Revolution reinforced their belief in the medium’s influence. The ubiquity of film images and songs solidified cinema as the primary source of popular culture (Clark 2021).

Notably, the early films produced by the class of 78 stood out for their courageous exploration of significant national issues and their critical perspective. For instance, Zhang Junzhao’s *One and Eight* (1984) employed close, confrontational images of partially naked male bodies to convey a tough sensibility, while Chen Kaige’s *The Yellow Earth* (1984), set in the Shaanxi countryside, served as an allegory for China’s opening up in the 1980s and the

impact of new ideas on traditional norms. These films exhibited confrontational shots, employed allegorical narratives, and reflected the filmmakers' own experiences (Clark 2021).

The Fifth Generation, a diverse group, existed for a relatively short period and dissolved due to both their inherent diversity and changes in the Chinese film and entertainment industries. According to Clark (2021), Zhang Yimou's *Red Sorghum* (1987) marked both the peak and the end of the Fifth-Generation era, which lasted approximately five years. Economic reforms, the rise of television ownership, and the emergence of private film production influenced filmmakers and audience preferences. The influence of Hollywood filmmaker Steven Spielberg, who filmed in Shanghai, also had an impact, since many Shanghai-based members of the class of 78 had contributed to the set or had watched the director at work. The Fifth Generation explored a wider range of subjects and media, but commercial pressures and a shifting entertainment landscape led to their gradual loss of coherence (Clark 2021).

In retrospect, the Fifth Generation can be seen as a temporary phenomenon shaped by China's unique circumstances during the Cultural Revolution era. They were internationally recognized as a New Wave in Chinese cinema but marked the end of an era rather than a new beginning. Their shared experiences as educated youth influenced their attitudes and innovations, and they were the last generation to view filmmaking as a sacred duty (Clark 2021).

Clark's analysis underscores the profound impact of the Cultural Revolution on Fifth-Generation directors, serving as a central point of cohesion among these diverse filmmakers. According to Clark, one of the defining aspects of living through the Cultural Revolution was the recognition of the significance and power of cinema. Many of the themes and aesthetics explored by these directors were also deeply rooted in this socio-political experience. As Chen Kaige said once (quoted by X. Zhou 2017, 50): "I always believe that my life experience mostly comes from that era. The most important thing is that [the Cultural Revolution] helps me to know myself."

Clark also highlights the importance of the reform and opening era, during which these directors were studying cinema at the Beijing Film Academy and beginning their filmmaking careers. The participation of several Fifth-Generation directors in the production of a Spielberg film exemplifies the significance of their integration with the global film industry. This integration not only allowed them to incorporate new techniques into their own films but also opened up new possibilities and directions in the realm of cinema and entertainment.

Clark acknowledges the diversity among the Fifth-Generation directors but also emphasizes that there was a brief period of cohesion and shared characteristics within this group, largely stemming from their shared experiences of youth during the Cultural Revolution. In this



sense, the Fifth Generation can be regarded as a transient phenomenon, internationally recognized but with an influence that is perceived as a culmination rather than a fresh beginning.

Wendy Larson (2011) also highlights the transitional nature of China's Fifth-Generation film directors. According to the scholar, the Fifth-Generation films marked a transition from socialism to a more commercial and capitalist cultural landscape. Larson (2011) points out three key defining aspects of the Fifth Generation's work: the inheritance of socialist themes and rural focus, the use of aesthetics to challenge the past, and the global impact of their films on the Chinese film industry (Larson 2011).

Larson (2011) emphasizes that the influence of Chinese socialism was significant in shaping the Fifth Generation's worldview. Many of the filmmakers were "educated youth" who were sent to the countryside during Mao Zedong's era to learn from peasants and contribute to socialism. Despite their attempt to distance themselves from socialist themes, the influence of socialist aesthetics and traditions is evident in their work (Larson 2011).

Larson (2011) discusses Chen Kaige's film *Yellow Earth* as an example of an early Fifth Generation film that embraced aspects of socialism while also challenging its interpretation. The film's rural setting and depiction of impoverished peasants reflect the Fifth Generation's engagement with the socialist emphasis on the countryside. However, *Yellow Earth* also breaks away from socialist realism by portraying the contradictions and limitations of the party's ideology (Larson 2011).

According to Larson (2011), the Fifth Generation's emphasis on artistic experimentation and visual aesthetics played a crucial role in establishing Chinese cinema on the global stage. Their films introduced innovative themes, plots, and characters, but their most significant contribution was the development of a radically different aesthetic style that resonated with global audiences (Larson 2011).

However, Larson (2011) notes that after the Tiananmen Incident in 1989, the Fifth Generation faced challenges, and some directors shifted their focus to television or emigrated. The changing social, cultural, and economic landscape in China posed new obstacles, leading to a decline in the Fifth Generation's earlier influence.

Larson (2011) highlights Zhang Yimou's role in shaping the development of a Chinese and pan-Asian star system, with Gong Li becoming the first Chinese film star to achieve global recognition since the Maoist period. The Fifth Generation's entry into the global market and their collaboration with international partners further propelled Chinese cinema onto the world stage.

As China's film industry faced changes with its entry into the World Trade Organization

and increasing global connections, Chinese directors sought funding and production opportunities abroad (Larson 2011). This globalization trend led to the emergence of historical martial arts epics that explored themes of national unity and struggle. Films like Zhang Yimou's *Hero* (2002) sparked both praise and criticism for their complex narratives and spectacular fighting scenes while also raising questions about authoritarianism (Larson 2011).

Larson (2011) concludes that the Fifth-Generation filmmakers moved beyond their earlier framework and entered the realm of big-budget, globally recognized cinema, contributing to the transformation and recognition of Chinese film on a global scale.

In addition to highlighting the experience of educated youth sent down to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution, also debated by Clark, Larson further discusses the international acclaim received by Fifth-Generation directors, with Zhang Yimou's success serving as a prime example, and the profound impact that the 1989 Tiananmen Square incident had on the Fifth Generation of filmmakers. I will explore both topics next.

Zhou Xuelin (2017, 1) devotes an entire book to analyzing the work of Zhang Yimou, "the most acclaimed but still under-researched contemporary director in Chinese cinema." Notably, Zhang Yimou holds the distinction of being the first Chinese actor to receive the Best Male Actor award at a major international film festival, specifically the Tokyo Film Festival, in 1987. In the subsequent year, his directorial debut earned him the prestigious Golden Bear Prize at the West Berlin International Film Festival. Zhang Yimou's artistic pursuits encompass not only feature films but also opera and live-action extravaganzas. With an exceptional track record of winning numerous awards at international film festivals, it is no wonder that he has become a focal point of both academic and public attention. Scholars and audiences alike have meticulously analyzed, discussed, and interpreted his works from various angles, exploring themes such as aesthetics, Chinese traditions, gender politics, modernism, post-modernism, post-colonialism, post-socialism, Orientalism, and globalization (X. Zhou 2017).

Zhou (2017) asserts that Zhang Yimou has embodied numerous contradictions throughout his career, displaying characteristics such as being talkative and reserved, friendly and withdrawn, solemn and humorous, locally and globally oriented, and blending both traditional and modern elements with influences from Chinese and Western cultures. Consequently, regardless of the critical reception of his films, most reviewers agree that Zhang Yimou has significantly impacted Chinese national cinema, revolutionizing the funding, production, marketing, distribution, and consumption of Chinese films. Furthermore, his works have transformed the global perception of China and played a crucial role in shaping the trajectory of Chinese cinema as a whole (X. Zhou 2017).

Zhou (2017) argues that a comprehensive examination of Zhang's work can shed light on the significant changes that the Chinese film industry has undergone since opening up to the outside world. It has evolved from a strictly ideological censorship system to a dynamic landscape where politics interacts with artistic values and box office ambitions. With Zhang Yimou's help, Chinese cinema has transitioned from an inward-looking to a more outward-looking culture and from a national to a transnational industry (X. Zhou 2017).

One of the topics analyzed by Zhou is Zhang Yimou's "martial arts trilogy" comprised of *Hero* (2002), *House of Flying Daggers* (2004), and *Curse of the Golden Flower* (2006). Zhou (2017) investigates how Zhang created commercially successful movies in response to growing pressures within the Chinese context, such as the expanding youth audience and the influence of Hollywood. Zhou (2017) also explores the director's family background and his experience during the Cultural Revolution to understand how they influenced the themes of these films.

Zhou (2017) emphasizes that the release of Hollywood films in the Chinese market brought about significant changes. After years of exclusion due to ideological reasons, Hollywood was allowed to import movies to China starting in 1994. These imports captivated Chinese audiences, leading Chinese filmmakers to initially respond with resignation rather than direct conflict. About this topic, Zhang Yimou said:

Honestly speaking, even if you put all the greatest filmmakers from the world cinema together, they are still no match for Hollywood. This situation will remain unchanged within the next half century.... what we can do is to avoid the powerful American films and make films we are familiar with. If we pour out our genuine passion on the films we are making, we can probably withhold the "native land." Local films must combine human nature (人性) with entertainment [values]; they must also contain sustained philosophical meanings. This is an alternative road for Chinese cinema (quoted by X. Zhou 2017, 36).

According to Zhou (2017), Zhang Yimou adopted a strategy of "using small to confront big" to produce small-budget festival winners such as *Keep Cool* (1997), *Not One Less* (1998), and *The Road Home* (1999). However, this strategy had limited success as the Chinese film industry faced shrinking attendance and production figures, with a small number of imported blockbuster movies occupying a significant portion of the market. In response, Zhang shifted to a strategy of "using big to confront big," inspired by the success of Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) in the global market. Zhang directed *Hero* (2002), an epic martial arts costume drama, which achieved extraordinary box office revenues both domestically and internationally. This led to a wave of Chinese 'big pictures' directed by other filmmakers, revitalizing the Chinese industry in terms of production and reception. The sale of cinema tickets and overall box-office revenues experienced a significant increase during this period (X.

Zhou 2017).

Zhou (2017) highlights that *Hero*'s remarkable success at the box office was accompanied by widespread controversies. While the film encouraged local audiences to support Chinese cinema and instilled confidence in film companies, both national and international, to invest in Chinese projects, Zhang Yimou faced severe criticism for his innovative yet subversive treatment of the chivalric spirit and code of honor within the genre. Critics argued that *Hero* buried the chivalric spirit of traditional Chinese martial arts in a manner that aligned with the contemporary mainstream ideology of the Chinese government and society in the new millennium, expressing a fascist ideology by supporting a brutal historical dictator (X. Zhou 2017).

According to Zhou (2017), at first glance, *Hero* incorporates many generic elements of the martial arts genre. It tells a revenge story and features heroic protagonists who embody the chivalric spirit of altruism, loyalty, truthfulness, and mutual faith. The film's characters Long Sky, Broken Sword, Flying Snow, and Nameless are described by the King of Qin as honorable, gracious, and open-minded. The director himself states that these male and female knights-errant live and die for justice, righteousness, and loyalty. However, *Hero* subverts a central aspect of the chivalric spirit by merging individual chivalric concerns with nationalism. The martial arts genre has traditionally depicted a distinct world called *jianghu*, an imagined realm separated from mainstream society, characterized by individuals and relationships outside the realm of law and authority. This world follows a special code of honor. *Hero* disrupts this tradition by introducing a national twist to the martial arts genre, connecting it to collective, institutional, and governmental interests (X. Zhou 2017).

Zhou (2017) discusses a highly criticized moment in the film when Nameless is swayed by the King's ambition to unite the seven warring states. Nameless' abandonment of his mission is seen as a betrayal of his fellow warriors who sacrificed their lives to provide him the opportunity to approach the King. While some viewers interpret this act as surrender and submission to authority, others relate it to Zhang's own life experiences.

As I already debated in Chapter 1, Gary D. Rawnsley is among those who disagree with the notion that *Hero* serves as a tribute to authoritarianism, adding to his analysis elements of the film director's own biography. Rawnsley (2007) ponders that Zhang Yimou had several censored films at the beginning of his career and could have moderated the tone of his criticisms in order to release *Hero*. Rawnsley considers that the film subtly critiques the government, evident in its portrayal of a somber court surrounding the King, contrasting with the vibrant life outside. The faceless bureaucrats, echoing in unison to remind the King of his duty to execute

Nameless, further symbolize this criticism. In this sense, similar to Nameless, who presents different versions of events to approach the Emperor, Zhang Yimou might have crafted a film that seemingly praises the government to gain proximity and convey a layered critique within his narrative (Rawnsley 2007).

According to Zhou (2017), this kind of adaptation would reflect Zhang's 'survival strategy' in an ideologically hostile environment. This strategy of acceptance and submission was developed by Zhang during the Cultural Revolution and was influenced by his family background and personal journey. Zhang learned to make himself useful to others, endure insults, avoid agitation, and adapt to adversity, seeking space for survival. This survival strategy informs Zhang's approach to filmmaking, focusing on gaining approval from authorities rather than solely pursuing personal vision (X. Zhou 2017). Zhou notes that Zhang is frank about this "survival strategy": "Acceptance is my biggest philosophy. All my innovative efforts are made on the grounds of this premise...", said Zhang (quoted by X. Zhou 2017, 42). And: "When I receive a film script, the first thing I think about is not whether there will be an investor for the film, but how I can make the kind of film that I want [to make] with the approval of the authorities" (quoted by X. Zhou 2017, 42).

Nevertheless, Zhou (2017) acknowledges that Zhang's success is not solely attributed to his ability to understand and obey obscure orders. Despite his humility, Zhang possesses a desire for success by being different from established norms. His experiences during the Cultural Revolution did not extinguish his restless and rebellious spirit. After graduating from the Beijing Film Academy, Zhang was assigned to the Guangxi Film Studio, where he had the freedom to create his own films. His early works as a cinematographer, such as *One and Eight* and *Yellow Earth*, were regarded as rebellious and inspired a new wave of Chinese cinema. Zhang's directorial debut, *Red Sorghum*, created an imagined world of youth that resonated with Chinese audiences. Throughout his career, Zhang has oscillated between art and commerce, combining auteur individualism with genre requirements. While incorporating elements of rebellious youth culture to appeal to a younger audience, Zhang often depicts this rebellion ending in tragedy, reflecting an awareness of the limits of independence within a cultural context burdened by tradition and the trauma of the Cultural Revolution (X. Zhou 2017).

In conclusion, Zhou (2017) argues that Zhang Yimou's "martial arts trilogy" represents his efforts to navigate the challenges faced by the Chinese film industry during a period dominated by Hollywood imports. Zhang's films deviate from traditional martial arts genre conventions through his transformation or avoidance of the chivalric rules. Balancing artistry with commercial appeal, Zhang seeks to appeal to a younger audience while acknowledging

the constraints and historical baggage within Chinese society. The filmmakers of Zhang's generation, drawn to individualism, have grown up in a cultural context influenced by centuries of tradition and scarred by the traumatic events of the Cultural Revolution (X. Zhou 2017).

Zhou's analysis of Zhang Yimou brings attention to several key points. One of these points revolves around the director's relationship with global cinema. Zhou underscores the impact of Hollywood films entering China, a topic I have previously discussed in other chapters. Starting from the 1990s and further expanding with China's entry into the WTO, the influx of Hollywood movies led Chinese directors, including Zhang Yimou, to seek alternatives to make their films more appealing to domestic audiences. Consequently, Zhang Yimou's martial arts trilogy can be seen as an embodiment of this endeavor.

Another notable aspect highlighted by Zhou is the emphasis on past experiences, particularly during the Cultural Revolution. These experiences not only influenced the thematic elements in many of Zhang Yimou's films but also shaped his approach to navigating the landscape of censorship in China. Having developed a survival strategy during the tumultuous times of the Cultural Revolution, the director often found himself operating in an environment with ambiguous rules and regulations.

It is intriguing to consider that despite Zhang Yimou's tremendous success – both critically, as evidenced by international awards, and commercially, with blockbuster hits – as well as his collaboration with the government, such as directing the opening and closing ceremonies of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, he still remains subject to the obscure and uncertain rules of the system. This is exemplified by the recent case involving his film *One Second* (2022). The movie, set during China's Cultural Revolution, was initially slated to premiere in competition at the 2019 Berlin Film Festival. However, just before the festival, an announcement on the film's official Weibo social media page stated that it had been withdrawn due to “technical reasons” (Frater and Vivarelli 2019). The festival confirmed this, explaining that the film had not been completed. Speculation immediately arose that the withdrawal was politically motivated, despite Zhang positioning *One Second* as a personal homage to cinema. This incident, as noted by Rebecca Davis, stands out as one of the most prominent instances of Chinese cinema being censored abroad in recent years, with “technical reasons” serving as a common euphemism for State censorship<sup>40</sup> (R. Davis 2020d).

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<sup>40</sup> Patrick Frater and Nick Vivarelli brought attention to the fact that Zhang's film was the second Chinese film to be withdrawn from the Berlin Film Festival in 2019. The first film was *Better Days*, a story about disillusioned youth that was scheduled to premiere in the Generation section. While sources informed *Variety* that the withdrawal of *Better Days* was due to censorship reasons, the official statement claimed that the film was not completed in time (Frater and Vivarelli 2019). Interestingly, *Better Days* would go on to become Hong Kong's

In a display of his survival strategy, Zhang Yimou made adjustments to his film to navigate the censorship process. The newly approved version of *One Second* now has a runtime of 104 minutes, one minute shorter than its originally listed duration for its planned debut at the Berlin Film Festival. Chinese reports, as mentioned by Davis (2020d), suggest that the film crew likely returned to the shooting location on the edge of the Gobi Desert in Dunhuang, Gansu province, last October to film additional footage. It is presumed that these new scenes were intended to replace any censored sections (R. Davis 2020d). Eventually, the film was released in 2022. According to Cath Clarke (2022), “No one knows what censors removed from *One Second*; but what’s left is a simple, humane story told in metaphors, a film that might work for kids old enough to read the subtitles, appealing to their sense of injustice.”

It is worth noting that the Fifth-Generation directors faced censorship challenges from the beginning of their careers, as highlighted by Ni Zhen (2003), a former professor and mentor of many Fifth-Generation directors. Ni Zhen recounted instances of censorship involving his former students, starting with their early films. One such example was Tian Zhuangzhuang’s film *Our Corner*, which was completed in January 1981 and submitted to China Central Television for potential airing. However, it was unexpectedly rejected by the censors, who found the tone too depressing and questioned the portrayal of societal indifference toward three disabled individuals. A high-ranking official at China Television Drama Production Center suggested abandoning *Our Corner* and instead filming a bright and uplifting TV drama called *One Summer*. However, Tian Zhuangzhuang and his fellow students were not ready to give up on *Our Corner* yet, as they had invested significant effort into its creation. They believed that the audience should have the opportunity to judge the film regardless of its tone (Ni 2003).

According to Ni Zhen (2003), the fate of *Our Corner* foreshadowed the difficulties that the Fifth-Generation directors would face in the following years. “Over the next decade, from *One and Eight* and *Yellow Earth* through *Farewell, My Concubine* and on to *Blue Kite*, tempests followed the Fifth Generation. The fate of that little television drama back in 1981 almost seemed to foretell their future, that trials and tribulations were destined from the moment of their inception” (Ni 2003, 119–20).

Moreover, Ni Zhen (2003) divides this period into two phases, with the 1989 Tiananmen incident serving as the turning point. The first phase was characterized by the initial creative stage, where films such as *One and Eight* and *Yellow Earth* reexamined and reinterpreted Chinese history, shedding light on suppressed aspects of the past. These films presented a

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first Oscar-nominated submission for Best International Feature Film since 1993. However, some members of the Hong Kong public do not believe that *Better Days* accurately represents their experiences (R. Davis 2021).

distinct cinematic representation of war and history, diverging from mainstream political discourse and offering a popular form of art rather than aligned with party politics. Works like Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth*, *Big Military Parade*, and *King of the Children* explored the deep social chaos of the Cultural Revolution, showcasing conflicts between people and nature, as well as culture and the collective. Zhang Yimou's film *Red Sorghum* expressed a strong affirmation of human consciousness, vitality, and freedom, challenging the repression of human nature in Chinese society and the constraints of feudal society's Confucian traditions. This emphasis on human value and subjectivity was a reflection of the context of the 1980s, with its reforms, societal openness, and promotion of individual autonomy. It also demonstrated the filmmakers' psychological exploration as they emerged from the tumultuous decade and returned from rural areas, seeking to express their suppressed emotions and oppression (Ni 2003).

The second phase of Fifth Generation cinema, as described by Ni Zhen (2003), was a period of development and transformation, characterized by the commercialization and international recognition of Fifth Generation films. Notable works during this phase included *Ju Dou*, *Raise the Red Lantern*, and *Farewell, My Concubine*. However, Ni Zhen noted that the political incident of 1989, referring to the Tiananmen Square protests, had a profound impact on political life and the arts in China during the 1990s. Chinese cinema faced strict control and censorship, particularly between 1990 and 1993. Films like *Ju Dou* and *Raise the Red Lantern* were initially banned and only released after the critical success of *The Story of Qiu Ju*. *Blue Kite* has never been released, and although *Farewell, My Concubine* passed the censors, its distribution was limited to a short theatrical run (Ni 2003).

Ni Zhen's remarks reinforce the recurring themes that have been emphasized in the previous pages. Firstly, the significant influence of politics on Chinese cinema is evident, manifested through the ongoing censorship endured by Fifth-Generation directors since the inception of their careers, as well as the repercussions of the Tiananmen Square incident on the development of this cinematic cohort. Secondly, the international dimension holds sway, as Ni Zhen highlights that many films initially subjected to censorship in China only gained domestic approval after achieving success and recognition abroad.

In this section, I examined the evolution of the so-called Fifth Generation of Chinese cinema, with a particular focus on the directors' intricate interactions with politics, the Chinese government, and the global cinematic landscape. The Fifth Generation of Chinese filmmakers grew up during the 17-year period known as the "new China" (1949-1966), and they were sent down to rural areas for work amid the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). This experience of



toiling in the countryside during that tumultuous period exerted a profound influence on their intellectual and artistic development, which, in turn, resonated in their approach to cinema, aesthetics, and the thematic underpinnings of their films.

Furthermore, I elucidated the pivotal juncture in 1978 when these directors gained admission to the Beijing Film Academy, coinciding with a period of reform and openness that facilitated the internationalization of Chinese cinema. Despite facing censorship within China, the films crafted by directors from the Fifth Generation garnered prestigious awards overseas, playing a significant role in elevating the international recognition of Chinese cinema. This exposure to the global stage also impacted the trajectory of Fifth-Generation filmmakers, prompting many to venture into more commercially-oriented and entertainment-driven realms. The inherent diversity among the Fifth-Generation directors ultimately led to the dissolution of their cohesive identity, thus signifying a transitional phase rather than the dawning of a new era. Nevertheless, the lasting effects of their contributions continue to reverberate, and the international acclaim bestowed upon Chinese cinema reached new heights during this period.

The transformative factors that shaped the destiny of the Fifth Generation of Chinese cinema were also instrumental in engendering the emergence of the subsequent Sixth Generation. This new generation of filmmakers exhibits distinctive dynamics in terms of their relationship with the past, the Chinese government, and the international arena, as I will explore in the subsequent section.

#### *4.1.3. Recent changes in Chinese cinema: The Sixth Generation and Beyond*

In this section, I will discuss the latest developments in Chinese cinema, focusing on its relationship with the outside world and the government. I will emphasize that in the 1990s, the emergence of the so-called Sixth Generation of Chinese cinema marked a significant shift in themes, aesthetics, and the relationship with the government. These films reflected a transforming China, distinct from the Fifth-Generation directors who were more inclined to depict an ancient, idyllic, rural, albeit at times troubled, China. Instead, the Sixth-Generation filmmakers were concerned with portraying the ongoing urbanization, reform, and opening of China. The profound impact of the Tiananmen Square incident on these directors cannot be overlooked. Once again, it is possible to observe that the influence of global cinema on Chinese filmmakers comes through their travels, exposure to international films entering China, and

international recognition through awards. Global cinema plays a pivotal role in shaping the future direction of Chinese cinema. Furthermore, I will highlight the challenges faced by the Sixth Generation in navigating government censorship, which is intricately tied to the political system and technological advancements of the period. Lastly, I will explore potential pathways for Chinese cinema that extend beyond the Sixth Generation.

Clark (2021) emphasizes that the arrival of the filmmakers belonging to the Sixth Generation marked a truly transformative moment in Chinese cinema. Among them, Jia Zhangke emerges as a prominent figure, providing valuable insights into the intricate relationship between cinema, global perspectives, and politics. Mello (2019) further emphasizes Jia's significance within the Sixth Generation, as he embraces realism by addressing contemporary issues and capturing urban landscapes. Born in 1970 in Fenyang, Shanxi province, Jia embarked on his filmmaking journey in the 1990s while studying in Beijing. Initially associated with the Sixth Generation, Jia's work has transcended labels, solidifying his status as one of the most original and influential directors in world cinema (Mello 2019).

With an extensive filmography comprising twenty-seven films, including features, shorts, documentaries, and fiction, Jia Zhangke has earned national and international acclaim, receiving prestigious awards at renowned film festivals like Venice and Cannes (Mello 2019). Beyond his role as a filmmaker, Jia presents a multifaceted nature. He is a film producer, occasional actor, initiator of a film festival, lecturer in film and art at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, and founding partner of four film companies. His endeavors extend further as he owns a restaurant and a cultural center, publishes books and screenplays (some translated into French and English), and boasts a significant following of over 16 million on Weibo. Despite occasional tensions with Chinese censorship officials, Jia's influence and role have expanded, as exemplified by his position as one of the new deputies to the National People's Congress in 2018 (Mello 2019). His stature is also reflected in various endorsement campaigns for brands like Johnnie Walker and Moleskine, as well as features in popular magazines, including those found on flights and trains. Several documentaries have been made about him, including one for Chinese television and three by international filmmakers, notably the Brazilian director Walter Salles, who created an affectionate portrait of Jia Zhangke, considering him the most important contemporary film director (Mello 2019).

According to Mello, Jia Zhangke's centrality and significance in today's cinematic landscape align with the polycentric concept of world cinema proposed by Lúcia Nagib (2006) in her essay "Towards a Positive Definition of World Cinema." Nagib (2006) challenges the binary division between the dominant Hollywood center and the periphery of the rest of the

world, advocating for a polycentric, democratic, and inclusive approach to studying world cinema. This perspective recognizes peaks of creative output in different countries during periods of crisis and transition. In the current global context characterized by emerging powers across various regions, Nagib's view finds resonance. Considering these insights, Mello (2019) contends that Jia Zhangke's work can be seen as a pinnacle of creativity within this polycentric atlas of world cinema, originating from China and responding to a new reality through his unique aesthetics. It is possible to argue that the originality of his artistic contributions validates the notion that cinema's greatest innovators often thrive during cultural and historical transitions when new circumstances necessitate the articulation of new languages capable of addressing and responding to emerging realities. Such innovations frequently arise from a combination of technological advancements, artistic originality, and a political vision (Mello 2019).

I will delve deeper into these ideas to expand in more detail. One aspect revolves around Jia Zhangke's classification as a Sixth-Generation filmmaker. As Mello highlights, Jia Zhangke quickly surpassed the confines of the Sixth Generation. In this regard, Clark (2021) argues that this group of filmmakers actively rejected the label of the Sixth Generation. They came from diverse backgrounds, had extensive exposure to various forms of media, and viewed film as just one avenue for expressing their innovative ideas and personal experiences. They placed more emphasis on introspection rather than the nation, thereby challenging the relevance of generational categorizations (Clark 2021).

According to Frodon (2014), attempting to determine Jia's position in relation to these generations becomes challenging due to the limitations of the descriptive framework. Frodon argues that at the same time that Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige, the prominent figures of the Fifth Generation, shifted towards increasingly decorative and visually spectacular cinema in the 1990s, catering to foreign audiences' taste for exoticism and offering less critical observations of Chinese society, a new generation was coming up – the Sixth Generation (the last to be numbered in this manner). This generation directly emerged from the attempt to capture the political and societal changes of the 1980s' economic reforms, which were immediately thwarted by the events in Tiananmen Square in June 1989. Wu Wenguang, with his documentary *Bumming in Beijing* (1990), and Zhang Yuan, with the films *Mama* (1990), *Beijing Bastards* (1993), and the documentary *The Square* (1994), became its main representatives. This new generation focused on depicting cities, particularly impoverished neighborhoods, and marginalized youth, employing handheld cameras and embracing a "raw" aesthetic that diverged from the meticulously composed frames and sophisticated color research

of their predecessors. The pace of their films, often agitated or even frantic, accompanied by contemporary music, contrasted with the long, uninterrupted shots and traditional music favored by the earlier generation (Frodon 2014).

Frodon (2014) highlights that it is within this aesthetic context, deeply connected to political and social issues, that Jia Zhangke surfaces during the latter half of the 1990s. His first feature film, *Xiao Wu* (1997), immediately gained international recognition within film circles. The film merges a focus on the everyday lives of ordinary people, an exploration of urban transformation devoid of grandiose achievements, an examination of individual psychology in a world driven by greed for money and the erosion of traditional bonds, and an exploration of sexual repression (Frodon 2014). Filmed in his hometown of Fenyang, located in the central province of Shanxi, Jia avoids a binary representation of China that contrasts visually majestic, archaic countryside with bustling metropolises like Beijing and Shanghai. Instead, he portrays an invisible China, a vital social component comprised of hundreds of third-tier cities experiencing the repercussions of transitioning from a planned economy to unregulated urbanization, rampant corruption, and the emergence of modern leisure and new media. *Xiao Wu* manages to navigate the immense complexity of these issues by following a character who has been marginalized within his own city, returning only to discover that he no longer belongs. This initiatory journey, a descent into disgrace, is portrayed through stylistic choices influenced by Western modernity, particularly Italian neorealism and the works of Robert Bresson. Simultaneously, Jia incorporates aesthetic choices typical of the Sixth Generation, such as the raw and documentary-like qualities of the visuals (Frodon 2014).

Jia Zhangke's many talks and interviews provide valuable insights into the Sixth Generation, the influence of the outside world, the inter-generational connections, and the relationship with the Chinese government. I will explore these issues next.

During a gathering with students at the Beijing Film Academy's library in 2013, Jia spoke about the access he had to international productions and the profound impact they had on his career, sharing his experiences. He notes that he entered the academy in 1993, a time when it was challenging to view classic films outside of the institution, especially foreign works, as the masterpieces of renowned directors were not widely screened in China (Jia 2014b). However, Jia took full advantage of the atmosphere in the late 1980s when the first graduates who had studied abroad returned to China and began teaching. The curriculum at the Film Academy underwent a transformation during the 1990s. Discussions expanded to encompass European, Japanese, and, later, Korean cinema. Moreover, every Tuesday, students had the opportunity to watch two foreign films on loan from the Film Archives. Many of the professors

had studied abroad and maintained connections with embassies, which facilitated access to a wide array of films. The French embassy, in particular, played a pivotal role in loaning feature films from Godard (Jia 2014b). Jia's exposure to an increasing number of films allowed him to discover captivating filmmakers, such as Michelangelo Antonioni, Robert Bresson, Vittorio De Sica, Krzysztof Kieslowski, Abbas Kiarostami, Yasujiro Ozu, Nagisa Oshima, and Akira Kurosawa (Jia 2014b).

Hence, it is once again noticeable the significance of engaging with global cinema, as it influences the films produced and the narratives propagated by Jia Zhangke. On the one hand, there is the allure of new stories and fresh perspectives, while on the other hand, there is the encounter with novel techniques. It is crucial to remember that cinema emerged as a technique and a language in the Western context, possessing distinct characteristics from the traditional Chinese narrative. This alone presents its own set of challenges that Chinese filmmakers continue to face.

An illustrative instance of this can be observed in a *CGTN* interview during the 2023 Shanghai Film Festival, where Vivian Qu, a director, scriptwriter, and producer, engages in a discussion about how she perceives being labeled as a Chinese filmmaker and the significance of "Chineseness." Qu raises the point that such perceptions often stem from a lack of familiarity with a different culture. She recalls an incident during the screening of her film in Estonia when an audience member remarked, "I thought Chinese films were only martial arts films." But Qu also emphasizes the challenges encountered when working within a distinct medium like cinema:

But also the film language, it's mostly a Western language, and we're borrowing that Western language trying to tell a Chinese story. There's the so-called Three Act structure, which comes from Greek theater, comes from drama. But in the Chinese tradition, Chinese literature, we don't have this. We have Tang poetry, we have Qing novels. So how do we tell Chinese stories with a Western language? And I think the Taiwanese master Hou Hsiao-Hsien does a great job doing this. A lot of it doesn't follow the typical ways of telling a story, but it worked. It reminds you of a lot of the rhythm of poetry, of prose, of something much looser than the dramatic structure, but it really worked. I think it's an inspiration for all of us. But then, for our generation, our challenges, how can we tell stories of our time but still have the Chinese sensibility in there? It's something we need to discover for the rest of our lives (Qu 2023).

The mention of Hou Hsiao-Hsien adds an interesting dimension since he is also among Jia Zhangke's declared influences. Exploring this connection is crucial to comprehending the Sixth Generation and its relationship with preexisting Chinese cinema. According to Jia, the impact of Chinese cinema had a dual nature: admiration, which motivated him to pursue film education and broaden his artistic horizons, and rejection, inspiring him to create films that

challenged the supposed realism and educational character of the cinema prevalent in the country. This dual response shaped Jia's artistic path within the Sixth Generation.

Regarding inspiration, Jia often recalled the episode when, in the early 1990s, as an art college student in Taiyuan, he watched the film *Yellow Earth* (1984) and aspired to become a film director:

One day during that year at Shanxi University, I went to a movie theatre next to our art studio where we did our painting. It was called The Highway Movie Theatre because it was run by the Department of Roads and Highways – it was actually their social club. They used to screen a lot of films, and the tickets were dirt cheap, just a few cents to get in. They were all domestic films. On that afternoon in question, I went in, and they happened to be showing *Yellow Earth*. *Yellow Earth* was actually made in the mid-eighties, but I had never seen it. So I bought a ticket and went in – I didn't have the slightest notion who Chen Kaige was or what *Yellow Earth* was about. But that film changed my life. It was at that moment, after watching *Yellow Earth*, that I decided I wanted to become a director, and my passion for film was born (Jia quoted in M. Berry 2005, 185).

Jia also commented, in a conversation with students from the Beijing Film Academy, about the influence that Hou Hsiao-Hsien's work had on his cinematography:

During my studies, I naturally learned more about Chinese cinema. I read an interview with Hou Hsiao-Hsien in a publication from the Film Academy, accompanied by an article about his work. In the 1980s, Hou Hsiao-Hsien taught there and donated copies of all his early films, including *A City of Sadness* [1989]. It was through this material that I discovered his work. I remember one day when I was heading to a classical theory class. As I was leaving the dormitory, I passed by the building of Interpretation and Performing Arts. There was a small theater where many students, especially those from the acting department, were gathered. I asked them why they weren't going to class. One of them told me that they were screening *The Boys from Fengkuei* [1983] by Hou Hsiao-Hsien... This film made me discover the importance of personal experience. It stayed in my mind long after I saw it. It tells the story of a group of young people from a fishing village in Taiwan who leave their village to live in the provincial capital, the city of Kaohsiung. This experience is similar to that of many of my friends and mine. I left a small city in Shanxi to study in Taiyuan and later in Beijing. It took me a long time to understand how a Taiwanese film could depict my life and that of my friends. Everything in this film feels familiar to me: that innocence, that pent-up energy. I remember the scene where the young people dance on the beach, with turbulent waves in the background. The waves evoke their desires and passions, which are difficult to calm. It's exactly like when, in Fenyang, I enjoyed singing with my friends, and at the end of the songs, we would shout to the sky. Those shouts were like the dance of the young people in front of the waves in the film. The sensations of youth are similar everywhere. I realized how important personal experience was because Hou Hsiao-Hsien had filmed his own experience, but it had universal value (Jia 2014b, 176–77).

Jia highlights the importance of the universal in Hou Hsiao-Hsien's film and points out how it relates to something broader within the post-1949 Chinese cinema, which valued the revolutionary and the collective at the expense of the self:

To understand what *The Boys from Fengkuei* inspired in me, we must remember what Chinese cinema was like at that time, what we had seen until then. Starting in 1949, according to the definition of revolutionary art, Chinese cinema no longer portrayed individuals; it lost its “self.” Personal experience or life no longer held value. What mattered was the portrayal of heroes; it was necessary to tell a legendary story in service of the revolution. Gradually, everyday life and the “self” of human beings disappeared. And suddenly, a Taiwanese film allowed me to access the experience of someone very different from myself but whom I recognized. It inspired my conception of cinema (Jia 2014b, 177).

In these comments, it is already visible in some ways how the influence of post-1949 Chinese cinema on Jia Zhangke occurred also through rejection. But the director expands his ideas further:

When I was a film student, in addition to the foreign films we regularly saw at the Film Academy, two recent Chinese films were shown every week... The problem is that these films did not reflect our lives. There were mainly two types of movies. One was the entertainment films, mostly action, the kind we called “gun-fu,” a hybrid of thriller and martial arts in a legendary world. I had no problem with these films, everyone saw that they were made-up stories, and some of them could be funny. And there were also films that were, so to speak, realistic, but which showed a filtered or deformed reality. For example, every year, we saw films of this type: a student who was almost finishing his studies receives a job offer in an isolated village, poor and backward, but whose inhabitants are very friendly. The student, moved by the simplicity, decides to stay there as a teacher at the rural school. Only the place changed from one film to another, now it was in Guizhou, then in Shanxi, then in Henan. But the story was always the same. It was precisely in these films, which seemed to describe real life, that there was no reality. They didn’t show poverty, they didn’t describe the difficulties people were likely to face. Apparently, they were movies that spoke of reality, but it was a hoax. It was watching this type of film that I thought of making my own (Jia 2014a, 99–100).

Although Jia Zhangke does not mention the term, these films that inspired him through rejection seem to be the main melody movies. These are films that relate to the socialist idea of educating through movies that highlight socialist values. These films gained traction in the late 1980s and during the 1990s, and are increasingly popular today, as I will discuss in the upcoming sections.

However, in seeking to make different films that depict the changes China was going through and present the country in a not-always-flattering light, Jia Zhangke, like the filmmakers of the Fifth Generation before him, would face censorship from the Chinese government. But Jia also knew that he could rely on the international community to showcase his films:

When I made *Xiao Wu*, I knew very well that the film would not be shown in China. International film festivals represented the only chance for the film to have a life. Thanks to the Fifth Generation and the attention it brought to Chinese cinema, I knew that this opportunity existed. In this aspect, the Fifth-Generation filmmakers paved the way. However, I had never imagined that there would be echoes from that first film and that I would be led to take so many trips. When the film was

invited to Berlin, we flew there, but first, we went to Hamburg, where we took a bus to Rotterdam, where we could have the subtitles made. Then we took a train to Brussels and then a car to Paris and another plane to Berlin. For someone who had never traveled and had dreamed so much about it, I was well served (Jia 2014a, 109).

In his comments, Jia contemplated the profound impact of his journey abroad on his career. He recalls being filled with a mix of excitement, happiness, and a tinge of anxiety, primarily due to his limited English proficiency (Jia 2014a). His curiosity was ignited by the prospect of immersing himself in a capitalist country and, more significantly, delving into the realm of cinema. During his university years, certain professors utilized their trips abroad to bring back films and share them with their students, thereby introducing Jia to renowned filmmakers, and this adventure brought him into “their country” (Jia 2014a).

Moreover, apart from the cinematic domain, Jia encountered subjects that deeply resonated with him. Topics that he did not explore before, possibly due to the prevailing political environment in China:

In Berlin, there was another incident that deeply impacted me, although I don't often talk about it. Friends invited me to attend a screening of Taiwanese cinema, and as I am a great admirer of Hou Hsiao-Hsien and Edward Yang's films, I was delighted to join. However, upon arrival, I noticed that each table had a Taiwan flag. Suddenly, I felt a wave of panic. Everything I had been taught told me not to go, that it was dangerous. Yet, at the same time, I felt a strong urge to enter, so I decided to sit with my friends. While this may seem insignificant to you, for me, it was a significant turning point. This experience made me deeply reflect on the meaning of belonging to a country, to a system of representation, and the influence of political parties and ideologies. It made me contemplate the ability to construct one's own perspectives. From that moment, the desire to create a film where political borders could dissolve emerged within me. It was this desire that I eventually fulfilled much later in *Memories of Shanghai* (Jia 2014a, 111).

Similar to the Fifth-Generation filmmakers, Jia Zhangke's international recognition had consequences in China: recognition on one side and censorship on the other. After winning a prize at the Berlin Forum, Chinese journalists in Germany wrote reviews, sparking curiosity among people in China about Jia Zhangke and his unknown film. Upon his return, he met Lin Xudong through the French Institute, who requested a DVD and eventually organized private screenings. These sessions attracted intellectuals like Zhang Yimou, Cui Jian, and Liu Xiaodong, leading to favorable articles in journals. The screenings took place from February to November 1998, including a hidden screening in Shanghai during the International Film Festival, thanks to the efforts of Film Academy comrades who sent messages to guests. Jia also took the film to Yunnan and Shanxi whenever an opportunity arose, introducing *Xiao Wu* (Jia 2014a).

However, all this attention received by Jia had consequences, such as increased



government scrutiny and censorship:

In November, I received a phone call from an official summoning me for a conversation. I went to that meeting at the Censorship Department. I remember that encounter very well... He told me that I had violated the law by shooting *Xiao Wu* without filming authorization or approval for the finished film and also by showing it. I explained that it wasn't a commercial film, but a study film, a student work. Moreover, it was shot on 16mm, which excluded its distribution in theaters. However, he listed the regulations I had transgressed, and that's how I became aware of them: they hadn't been published anywhere, only people working in the studios knew and respected them. Following this incident, the authorities compelled the Film Academy to add a course where students had to learn the current rules (Jia 2014a, 113–14).

Jia Zhangke commented that this was just the first of many problems with the Chinese government:

In the following January, I received an official document containing three points: I had made a film illegally, I had shown it at festivals illegally, and I had sold it abroad illegally. Consequently, I was prohibited from making films without specifying the duration of the ban. I felt sentenced to lifelong imprisonment. Additionally, they imposed a fine on me without specifying the amount. I was not the only one facing problems at that time; seven Chinese directors had issues after presenting their films at the Rotterdam Festival: Tian Zhuangzhuang, Wang Xiaoshuai, Zhang Yuan... The authorities intended to break independent filmmakers with fines. Later, I was told that I had to pay 50,000 yuan, a huge sum for me. I contacted the official from the Censorship Department and explained that I had just graduated from film school and didn't have a penny. He acknowledged that it was indeed a lot of money and said he would try to reduce the amount. A few days later, he called me: "Can you pay 30,000?" – "Of course not." He renegotiated, and in the end, I paid 20,000 yuan, which was still a substantial amount for me. I suppose I could have chosen not to pay; the Censorship Department is not the police, their financial coercive power exists but is limited. However, I believed that by paying, I created the possibility of being able to resume filming soon (Jia 2014a, 114–15).

Although they are extensive, I think it is crucial to incorporate these quotations into the dissertation. Amidst the numerous references to censorship in Chinese cinema, they provide invaluable insights from Chinese filmmakers themselves, shedding light on how censorship occurs and the potential ramifications it holds for the careers of directors as well as the narratives crafted and disseminated about the country.

At the same time, it is essential to acknowledge the nuanced nature of this process. Jia highlights that this episode was instructive, as it revealed that there exists a difference between the inherently harmful system and the people who work within it, who may vary in their openness and willingness to question and seek solutions. Since then, Jia has consistently engaged in conversations with these individuals, striving to make incremental progress. Over the years, many of these cinema officials have even become Jia's friends (Jia 2014a).

Nevertheless, the severity of the system's impact will decisively shape Jia's career,

prompting him to no longer rely on government approval, thereby limiting the potential audience for his films:

When it came to preparing *Platform* [2000], I reached out to Beijing Studio, thinking that if I could strike a deal with them, it might put an end to the filming ban. Beijing Studio was very interested in the project and even proposed Tian Zhuangzhuang as the executive producer. It was during the economic boom, and there was an atmosphere of optimism where anything seemed possible. What had been forbidden a few months earlier could now be allowed. So, I sent the script of *Platform* to the Censorship Department, accompanied by a recommendation letter written by the vice-president of Beijing Studio, guaranteeing that the film would not cause any political problems and would have exceptional artistic quality. With this, I felt confident and went searching for locations in Shanxi. However, I received a call from the Studio asking me to return immediately. The project had been rejected for two reasons: first, the ban imposed on me could not be lifted, and second, the script covered a period of ten years, from 1980 to 1990. The Censorship Department deemed me too young to speak about that period and suggested that I wait another ten years to depict that era. I thought long and hard and concluded that I wanted to make this film despite everything. I took a bus that traveled through the mountains overnight, meditating on my anger and frustration, and decided that I would never seek permission again. I would make my films anyway, even if it meant staying on the sidelines (Jia 2014a, 115–16).

Jia also comments on the impact that technological changes had on the censorship power of the Chinese government: his films, even when censored in China, circulated freely in the country through pirated DVDs.

First, I was surprised. Pirated DVDs were for foreign films. The first time I saw a pirated DVD of one of my films was in a store where I went to see what new films they had. The owner told me, “This afternoon I’m going to receive a great film! From a director named Jia Zhangke. The title of the film is *Platform*. Are you interested? Come back around two or three this afternoon, they will have delivered it to me.” When I returned, there was a whole stack of brand-new DVDs of *Platform*. It’s a bit like losing a child, searching everywhere for them, and ending up finding them in someone else’s house. A very complex feeling. But it was thanks to pirated DVDs that so many people could see the films, and critics started expressing themselves on the internet. Digital technologies were undermining the entire official control system. I remember one time when the Censorship Department gathered the banned directors. I told them, “You should no longer prevent a director from expressing themselves because technology no longer allows it. With digital, we can easily film, the films circulate with pirated DVDs, and viewers discuss them on the internet.” Of course, the limit is that it is still impossible to see these films in cinemas. There are no art film theaters in China, only a distribution system controlled by the state. The only alternative is, and this is only a few years old, to screen films in museums and art galleries. For example, there are regular film screenings in the 798 Art Zone in Beijing (Jia 2014a, 123–24).

However, over time, Jia gradually approached the government apparatus. *The World* (2004) was his first official film, shot with government approval and made through an agreement with Shanghai Studio. Jia commented further on this process:

Since the Studio is a state-owned company, it had bargaining power with the Censorship Department that I had no chance of achieving on my own. At that time, I was still an underground

filmmaker but wanted my films to be released in theaters. The approach to the Studio was strategic and only made possible by the person who was directing it at that time, Ren Zhongrong. He was a film critic before being appointed as the director and had been the chief editor of a film magazine in Shanghai. He had a good understanding of cinema, being a cinephile, which is rare among those in positions of power in the film industry. When I completed the script for *The World*, I submitted it to him, and he liked it a lot. We met, and in a sense, we spoke the same language – the language of people involved in cinema. He quickly became confident about the possibility of reaching an agreement with the Censorship Department, and we went there together. And indeed, the project was accepted. The film administration was also evolving, moving away from an ideological stance to focusing more on an economic approach, with the emergence of a film industry as its horizon. I was fortunate to benefit from a favorable situation on both sides, both from the Studio and the Censorship Department (Jia 2014a, 135–36).

This reminds me of a passage in my conversation with Dede Nickerson – an executive with more than 25 years of experience managing studios, developing production plans, and making acquisitions in China – where she emphasizes that despite the still quite unstable environment of the film industry in China, she is optimistic precisely because of the change in the leadership of the Film Bureau. She said, “I’m actually optimistic because it’s been the worst group for the past five years, the new head of the Film Bureau is actually a film guy who’s a really good guy.” And when talking about the former Film Bureau director, Wang Xiahui, Dede Nickerson mentioned, “he’s not really a film guy, but yes, thank God he’s gone.”

This somehow illustrates the constant impacts of politics and bureaucracy on the Chinese film industry, affecting both Chinese filmmakers and foreigners working in the country’s cinema. And this ultimately influences the narratives produced and exported by China.

Nevertheless, Jia Zhangke comments on his decision to approach the government apparatus after spending so much time on the margins, emphasizing its pragmatic nature:

From the beginning, I sought to create a space for my films. My approach is pragmatic. Some directors don’t see the value in this approach and prefer complete freedom. But I could never abandon access to the audience, a “normal” access. Even though DVDs and the internet can reach the audience, it’s not enough. The full potential of cinema can only be realized in the movie theater. It’s also a way of belonging to the world of Chinese cinema. Otherwise, we remain on the sidelines, which is less interesting. Films have less power, lose touch with reality, and won’t know the reactions of the audience and critics. If a film has a vision, a reflection, and an idea of cinema, it only makes sense when shared. But to belong to the real world and the world of Chinese cinema simultaneously, we need the movie theater as a link (Jia 2014a, 163–64).

These movements by Jia Zhangke highlight the difficulties of navigating the inherent political landscape of the Chinese film market. Initially, Jia Zhangke sought to make his films despite government prohibition, remaining on the fringes. These films gained significant success abroad and began to circulate in the country through technological changes that made governmental control more difficult, such as the proliferation of pirated DVDs and online

discussions about the films.

However, Jia still felt the lack of his films being screened in Chinese cinemas and the desire to film with the support of major Chinese studios. In a pragmatic move, as he described it, he approached the government apparatus. This pragmatism is also evident in his position as one of the new deputies to the National People's Congress in 2018, as highlighted by Mello (2019). On the other hand, this approach somewhat diminishes his ability to act as an independent director. An example of this is the impact of the director's presence at the independent film festival he created, which he abandoned in 2020, aiming for the event to gain independent vitality and move away from his own shadow (Grater 2020). This raised concerns about a potential government takeover of independent Chinese film festivals, fueling fears of a loss of autonomy (Yau and Guo 2020). According to Frater (2021a), the abrupt nature of Jia's exit further fueled concerns that Chinese film festivals are being brought closer under government control, and Jia's larger-than-life indie style may have become a liability rather than an asset. Jia returned for the fifth edition of the festival in 2021, but all of this sparked a considerable discussion about the true space for independent cinema in China. Therefore, we once again see the difficulties that the domestic political landscape, in conjunction with international factors, brings to the production of cinematic images.

In this regard, it is interesting to revisit the discussions by Seio Nakajima (2016) on the subfields of cinema in China, which I already mentioned in Chapter 1. In his analysis of the subfields of the cinematic field in China, Nakajima provides a detailed account of what he refers to as the independent film subfield, encompassing the directors of the Sixth Generation. According to Nakajima (2016), the key characteristics of this subfield can be summarized as follows: firstly, it operates under an "independent artistic logic," pursuing artistic autonomy separate from the State-sanctioned production system. Secondly, the cultural capital specific to filmmaking, exemplified by the directors' formal education at the Beijing Film Academy (BFA), plays a crucial role. Thirdly, there exists a highly complex mechanism of capital conversion. Many, if not all, of the films in this category are considered "banned" in China, but the notion of being "banned" is somewhat ambiguous upon closer examination. While the Film Bureau may publicly announce the banning of certain films, such as Wang Xiaoshuai's *The Days* (1993), in other cases, films simply do not apply for permits due to their small-scale production. However, being labeled as "banned in China" can be recognized as a form of cultural capital, indicating high artistic prestige when a film is banned by the state authority. Furthermore, in the international art-house film market, the label of being "banned in China," or what Nakajima terms "counter-political capital," is marketed effectively to enthusiastic audiences seeking

“underground” works from China, leading to a certain accumulation of economic capital. For instance, the DVD cover of Wang Xiaoshuai’s film *Frozen* (1997), widely available in the United States, prominently displays the phrase “BANNED IN CHINA” in a conspicuous orange font (Nakajima 2016).

At the same time, Nakajima (2016) discusses the transformations that have occurred in the Chinese cinematic field, particularly after China entered into the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001. One important directive was to accommodate the diversity of the Chinese film industry, which is divided into four subfields as examined by Nakajima: main melody films, commercial films, international Chinese films, and independent films. As an example, the Film Bureau contacted Wang Xiaoshuai, one of the leading directors in the independent film subfield, and proposed a roundtable discussion between independent film directors and State officials from the Film Bureau. Wang Xiaoshuai, along with other independent film directors, including Jia Zhangke and Lou Ye, agreed to participate in the roundtable, which took place on November 13, 2003, at the BFA. During the roundtable, seven individuals, including film directors, scholars, and critics, signed a petition requesting the relaxation of state film policies. In response to the petition, the government swiftly implemented three new film regulations in December 2003, which generally relaxed the State’s control over film production and censorship, as long as the films did not touch upon politically sensitive topics. For example, one of the regulations, SARFT Regulation Number 18, simplified the approval process for film production by requiring only a synopsis of the film script rather than the entire script when applying for permission to start shooting a film. Additionally, censorship of final products, except for films dealing with politically sensitive topics, would be performed by provincial-level film administration units rather than the central Film Bureau. These regulations were clearly intended to streamline the approval of film production by state censors to compete with the increasing number of imported entertainment films following China’s accession to the WTO. These conciliatory policy gestures by the government, in response to the broader political-economic environment, have brought about notable transformations in the four subfields (Nakajima 2016). Once again, it is visible the impact of international politics – China’s entrance into WTO – and global cinema – competition with Hollywood movies – on the Chinese film industry.

Regarding the specific changes in the independent film subfield, Nakajima (2016) argues that compared to the past, there is an apparent increase in conciliation between the subfield of independent films and the State film bureaucracy. Many, if not all, of the filmmakers active in the subfield have started making films with “official exhibition permissions” granted

by the Film Bureau. For example, Zhang Yuan has produced films with official approval, such as *I Love You* (2002), *Green Tea* (2003), *Little Red Flowers* (2006), *Dada's Dance* (2008), and *Beijing Flickers* (2012). Jia Zhangke's recent films, including *The World* (2004), *Still Life* (2006), *24 City* (2008), *I Wish I Knew* (2010), and *A Touch of Sin* (2013), have also been approved by the Film Bureau and produced by the State-owned Shanghai Film Group (Nakajima 2016). Moreover, some of these filmmakers' works are no longer necessarily low-budget productions. Lou Ye's *Purple Butterfly* (2003) had a budget exceeding RMB 10 million (US\$1.2 million), while Jia Zhangke's *The World* had a budget of RMB 8 million (US\$0.96 million). Therefore, in comparative terms, this group of directors is increasingly embracing the market logic. Additionally, they are replacing international Chinese film directors as regular participants in prestigious international film festivals such as Cannes, Berlin, and Venice. Thus, compared to the past, these directors are becoming more dependent on the logic of the economic field and rely on international recognition in the form of awards at international film festivals, taking the place previously held by international Chinese film directors, such as Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige.

However, Nakajima (2016) emphasizes that it is crucial to acknowledge that the State has not completely abandoned the political function of film in relation to the independent film subfield. An example illustrating the continued influence of political criteria is the incident involving Lou Ye's *Summer Palace* (2006). The film depicted the lives of two lovers against the backdrop of the 1989 Tiananmen Student Protest. Although the film competed for the Palme d'Or at the 2006 Cannes Film Festival, Lou Ye was banned from making films for five years since the film was submitted to the festival without official government censorship approval. Lou returned to filmmaking in 2009, before the ban was lifted, with *Spring Fever* (2009), but this was made possible only by registering the film as a Hong Kong-French co-production to bypass the censors. This example clearly demonstrates that political criteria, albeit often vague and negotiable, still exert significant influence on the contemporary Chinese cinematic field (Nakajima 2016).

Nakajima (2016) also highlights that an increasing number of formerly independent film directors are aligning themselves with the logic of the party-state, not necessarily by making explicitly political main melody films, but by seeking official permission for film production, distribution, and exhibition from the Film Bureau, as well as embracing market logic with increased budgets, as mentioned earlier. In response to this shift within the independent film subfield, some less-established independent filmmakers are distancing themselves further from both market and political logic. In other words, as some independent filmmakers gravitate

towards market logic, a group of filmmakers within the subfield is increasingly embracing the reinvigorated autonomous logic of film as an art form, filling the position once occupied by more established independent film directors (Nakajima 2016). And it will take time to see which direction this new cohort of more independent filmmakers will follow.

In this subchapter, I explored the history of Chinese cinema, focusing on its relations with the international community and the Chinese government. I aimed to illustrate how interactions with global cinema and the domestic political landscape influenced the narratives produced and exported by China.

During the early years of Chinese cinema, spanning from the final crisis of imperial China to the end of the Cultural Revolution, cinema played a pivotal role in reflecting and shaping debates surrounding Chinese identity. It served as a tool for promoting traditional culture during the collapse of the Qing dynasty and became intertwined with discussions between the Chinese Communist Party and the Chinese Nationalist Party. Cinema also acted as a means of resistance during Japan's invasion and facilitated national development post-war.

During the rule of the Chinese Communist Party, cinema came under State control, serving as a means to propagate the ideology of the CCP. However, during the Cultural Revolution, cinema encountered resistance as it was deemed bourgeois and experienced a decline in its progress. The nationalization of studios characterized this period. It wasn't until Mao Zedong died in 1976, signifying the end of the Cultural Revolution, that a shift occurred, leading to a revival of cinema during the Reform and Opening era.

The Fifth Generation of Chinese filmmakers emerged during this period, experiencing a unique upbringing in the "new China" and the Cultural Revolution. Their films garnered international recognition despite facing censorship within China. The admission of these directors to the Beijing Film Academy coincided with a period of reform and openness, further facilitating the internationalization of Chinese cinema. The Fifth-Generation filmmakers had diverse approaches, signaling a transitional phase rather than a new era.

The transformative factors that influenced the Fifth Generation also shaped the emergence of the Sixth Generation, with distinctive dynamics in their relationship with the past, the Chinese government, and the international sphere. These filmmakers depicted a transforming China, focusing on urbanization, reform, and opening. The Tiananmen Square incident had a profound impact on them. Global cinema played a significant role in shaping the future of Chinese cinema through travel experiences, exposure to international films, and international recognition.

The Sixth Generation faced challenges navigating government censorship tied to the

political system and technological advancements of the time. Also, an increasing number of formerly independent film directors are aligning themselves with the logic of the party-state, not necessarily by making explicitly political main melody films, but by seeking official permission for film production, distribution, and exhibition from the Film Bureau, as well as embracing market logic with increased budgets. In response to this shift within the independent film subfield, some less-established independent filmmakers are distancing themselves further from both market and political logic. In other words, as some independent filmmakers gravitate towards market logic, a group of filmmakers within the subfield is increasingly embracing the reinvigorated autonomous logic of film as an art form, filling the position once occupied by more established independent film directors.

The main focus of this subchapter was the dynamics between filmmakers, the government, and the international community. Except for the Cultural Revolution period, during which studios were nationalized, and cinema fell under State control, the Chinese government's involvement with cinema was predominantly passive, focusing on the regulation and censorship of filmmakers and their works to shape the narratives presented domestically and internationally. However, a notable shift occurred from the 1980s onward, as the government embraced a new approach, actively promoting its direct engagement in producing Chinese stories through main melody films, which I will delve into further in the next subchapter.

#### **4.2. Telling China's Stories on the Silver Screen: Chinese Soft Power Through Movies**

In the preceding sections, I debated the development of Chinese cinema, with a particular emphasis on its interaction with the international arena. It became evident that Chinese politics, both contemporary and historical, exerted a substantial influence on various aspects of filmmaking, encompassing themes, production methods, directorial experiences, studio access, and, notably, censorship. This subchapter aims to explore how the Chinese government actively employs cinema as a tool for exerting soft power. This endeavor is primarily accomplished through the creation of main melody films, commonly known as propaganda films in the West, which, though they are not a new phenomenon in China, have gained unprecedented strength in recent years.



Firstly, I will explain the concept of main melody films, discuss their origins, and demonstrate how they have evolved in China. Next, I will delve into a special type of main melody film, the military-themed main melody films that highlight China's military strength and prowess, both past and present. Lastly, I will explore some variations of this cinematic melody, focusing on how science fiction has increasingly been utilized to depict a future with Chinese characteristics. By undertaking this analysis, the aim is to identify the strategic narratives woven within these films, which have garnered significant popularity within China and aspire to achieve global blockbuster status, thereby influencing Chinese soft power and foreign policy.

#### *4.2.1. Main-Melody Film: Singing China's (Communist Party's) Histories*

In this section, I will investigate the concept of main melody films and explore their origin and initial development from the late 1980s. I will examine how these films evolved during the 1990s and the 2000s, particularly after China entered into the World Trade Organization, and analyze their impact on the Chinese film industry. Additionally, I will discuss recent developments that demonstrate the growing popularity of main melody films in China, as they increasingly incorporate Hollywood and Hong Kong talent and techniques. This shift signifies a departure from the direct reliance on State support that marked the origins of main melody movies, prompting us to question whether these films effectively convey China's narratives on the international stage and contribute to the expansion of Chinese soft power. Ultimately, I will explore the extent to which main melody films succeed in "telling China's stories well" and captivating global audiences.

Main melody films have a history in the mainland market and can be traced back to State-sponsored films with central themes (S. Y.-W. Chu 2022). These films, commonly known as propaganda films in the West, emerged after the cultural reforms in mainland China, which followed the country's open-door policy led by Deng Xiaoping (S. Y.-W. Chu 2022). The term "main melody films" (主旋律电影, *Zhǔxuánlǜ diànyǐng*) was officially introduced in March 1987 by Teng Jinxian, the Head of the National Film Bureau, who emphasized the need to prioritize patriotism, socialism, and collectivism while resisting money worship, hedonism, excessive individualism, and capitalism. This term was used to establish an official orientation against the commercialization of Chinese cinema that had accelerated since the implementation

of the reform and opening-up policy (Su 2016). This idea reflected the government's concern about the rise of "bourgeois liberalism" and the popularity of commercial films that deviated from the desired ideological control (Su 2016).

In July 1987, the Central Government established the Leading Group on Major Revolutionary and Historical Themes of Film and Television Creation, signaling a focus on revolution and paying tribute to the Communist Party of China (S. Y.-W. Chu 2022). The early main melody films, such as *The Kunlun Column* (1988), *Baise Uprising* (1989), and *The Birth of New China* (1989), were dedicated movies commemorating the fortieth anniversary of the People's Republic of China (S. Y.-W. Chu 2022). During this period, only sixteen state-owned studios were authorized to produce these films, which often resembled monotonous textbooks (S. Y.-W. Chu 2022).

The production of main melody movies is a State-sponsored endeavor (Su 2016). The party-state, through a special committee comprising party bureaucrats, directly participates in the entire process of film production, including screenplay writing, filmmaking, and censorship (Su 2016). The government provides subsidies for most of the filmmaking costs. These movies serve the purpose of promoting Marxism-Leninism-Maoism, socialism, patriotism, and collectivism. When it comes to distribution and exhibition, audiences are often mandated by their workplaces to watch these movies, with few voluntary ticket purchases (Su 2016).

The main melody films primarily focused on war, biographical events, and major revolutionary and historical themes. However, in the early 1990s, there was a shift in the Party's art policy, moving away from glorifying Party and State leaders towards broader themes emphasizing common virtues like patriotism, self-sacrifice, and loyalty (S. Y.-W. Chu 2022). Despite these changes, main melody films faced challenges in gaining commercial success as profit incentives began to erode their impact. They still heavily relied on government support for distribution and promotion (S. Y.-W. Chu 2022).

Stephen Yiu-Wai Chu (2022) highlights that a significant transformation occurred in Chinese main melody films in the new millennium, coinciding with China's further opening of its market after joining the World Trade Organization. The State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT) revised its policy, aiming to portray a socio-culturally diversified yet politically "harmonious" image of China. However, SAPPRT (formerly SARFT) still exercised control by strategically scheduling screenings of main melody films. With the influx of Hollywood money, the Chinese strategy shifted to using those funds to promote main melody films. Main melody films started merging with *dapian* (big pictures, high-concept blockbusters), and Zhang Yimou's *Hero* (2002) played a pivotal role in this development. It became a

blockbuster success, blending pro-establishment ideology with the contemporary Hollywood blockbuster style (S. Y.-W. Chu 2022).

Wendy Su (2016) underscores that during this period of opening up of Chinese market to Hollywood, the central policy of the Chinese government could be summarized as prioritizing China's national interest. In 1996, the director of the Film Bureau, Liu Jianzhong, expressed this policy as "*Yi wo wei zhu*" (China's national interest takes precedence). After the Ministry of Culture and SARFT introduced new reform initiatives in 2000, the guiding principle for the importation of foreign films became "*Yi wo wei zhu, wei wo suo yong*" (China's national interest takes precedence, and imports should serve China's agenda). According to this principle, all film imports must serve China's needs, national interests, and goals (Su 2016).

The government aimed to utilize Hollywood movies to meet the demand of the domestic market and generate revenue to alleviate the financial burden on the State caused by inefficient studios (Su 2016). Initially, the government believed that with its administrative power and strict censorship, it could control and benefit from Hollywood movies by employing revenue sharing to support the domestic film industry. To achieve this, the government adopted a strategy of promoting main melody films to compete with Hollywood and reduce its influence (Su 2016).

In any case, Su (2016) emphasizes that main melody movies are a distinct cultural product of post-socialist China. While consuming significant resources, they generate minimal market profits. From 1995 to 2000, approximately 80 percent of the 80 to 100 movies produced each year could be classified as main melody films. According to Su (2016), these movies typically feature three narrative storylines: the politically correct narrative of the revolutionary history of the Communist Party, the historical narrative of anti-Japanese and anti-imperialist struggles, and the positive portrayal of Communist Party cadres and their dedication to serving the people. Many of these films were created to commemorate significant anniversaries related to the People's Republic of China, the Chinese Communist Party, and victory in the antifascist war (Su 2016).

Collectively, main melody films serve as a crucial State ideological apparatus, aiming to educate and shape people's thinking in the "politically correct" way (Su 2016). They play a unique role in conveying the inevitability and validity of a socialist China, maintaining the ruling party's legitimacy, and cultivating a national identity aligned with the ruling party's best interests. The party-state intends to use these movies to pass on the revolutionary legacy and showcase a distinct Chinese socialist national identity to the world (Su 2016).

Darrell William Davis (2014) examines the notable case of *The Founding of a Republic* (2009), a film produced by the China Film Group Corporation and co-directed by its chairman, Han Sanping, along with Huang Jianxin. This film, cleverly disguised as a *dapian*, achieved blockbuster status as a main melody film. It featured an ensemble cast of renowned stars, high production values, and humanized portrayals of leaders from the Guomindang, the historical adversary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). With the inclusion of prominent actors such as Jet Li, Jackie Chan, Andy Lau, Donnie Yen, Leon Lai, Zhang Ziyi, Chen Daoming, Jiang Wen, Zhao Wei, Ge You, and many others, participation in this film became a coveted opportunity for actors due to its focus on the birth of the People's Republic and its director's influential position in Chinese cinema (D. W. Davis 2014).

Davis (2014) notes that the film skillfully merged marketing and marketization, entertainment and ideology, by incorporating a vast array of stars. It epitomized the concept of “enhanced main melody,” transforming Chinese high-concept cinema into a patriotic, socialist, and highly marketable endeavor. The film represented a departure from the monumental costume dramas of 2002-2008 and introduced the term “commercial mainstream blockbuster.” The “commercial” aspect underscored the market appeal of star power, while “mainstream” served as a euphemism for main-melody, symbolizing the fusion of Communist orthodoxy with entertainment values. Unlike traditional main melody films that were primarily State policy-driven and not expected to compete at the box office, this new designation of “commercial mainstream” indicated a novel market-oriented role for main melody films. Most importantly, the “commercial mainstream blockbuster” successfully reconciled revolutionary propaganda with market-driven cinema, revitalizing the tired *dapian* genre (D. W. Davis 2014).

Discussing *The Founding of a Republic*, Chu (2022, 9) highlights the emergence of the “enhanced main melody” approach, which aimed to combine compelling characters with the socialist ideology promoted by the Party while also prioritizing the films' commercial appeal. This led to the development of “main melody commercial blockbusters” that sought to evoke feelings of family and national pride, convey the spirit of the times, and achieve significant commercial success by subtly incorporating positive messages without resorting to crude propaganda. As a result, there was a noticeable improvement in the production quality of main melody films, aiming to generate widespread public interest (S. Y.-W. Chu 2022).

Chu (2022) also notes the significant role of Han Sanping in propelling main melody films into a new phase during the 2010s. Han's approach as a catalyst for the commercialization of main melody films aimed to entertain and educate the audience simultaneously. The success of *The Founding of a Republic* marked the beginning of a transformative era where the

boundaries between art, politics, and commerce started to blur. Films previously classified as “main melody” in China and labeled as “propaganda” abroad managed to captivate audiences by employing innovative techniques to engage their interest. The subsequent film, *Beginning of the Great Revival* (2011), co-directed by Han Sanping and Huang Jianxin, continued this approach by combining official main melody narratives with commercial expertise and leveraging global star power to enhance its commercial appeal (S. Y.-W. Chu 2022).

Chu (2022) further discusses the challenges of exporting Chinese films. While films and film festivals were seen as effective platforms to project China’s image internationally, the exportation of Chinese films has not kept pace with their rapid growth in the domestic market. The goal of Chinese cultural authorities and many filmmakers to create a blockbuster that can catapult Chinese films to mass popularity in the United States and other Western countries continues to be elusive. Chu cites Joseph Nye’s perspective on soft power, emphasizing the importance of public diplomacy in the form of soft power in the current competition between China and America. Chu argues that if main melody films continue to be “a love letter written to our mother country,” they should be beautifully composed to enhance positive energy and accumulate soft power by appealing to both domestic and foreign audiences (S. Y.-W. Chu 2022, 12).

Chu (2022) argues that the ongoing marketization of Chinese cinema has led main melody films to pay more attention to commercial values. In the context of a post-socialist State with capitalist characteristics like the People’s Republic of China, “propaganda” cannot be simply dismissed as a top-down and meaningless practice associated solely with censorship and suppression in a totalitarian regime. The rise of Chinese soft power and changes in government policy have given main melody films different meanings. Xi Jinping’s notion of “main melody” is closely related to the concept of “positive energy,” where social impact is prioritized while commercial values remain significant (S. Y.-W. Chu 2022). This has led to a surge of blockbuster-commercialized main melody films, such as the 2018 documentary *Amazing China*, which praised China’s achievements under Xi’s leadership and, according to Chu (2022), lived up to its name, being an amazing work.

In an interview with Sarah Zheng (2018), Chris Berry also offered his insights on the documentary *Amazing China*. According to Berry, the film was part of a larger strategy by the Chinese government to unite the Chinese population through a sense of national pride. He noted that, in this sense, the documentary can be seen as a form of propaganda aimed at promoting China’s soft power. However, Berry also emphasized the importance of examining the values being conveyed in the film. Rather than promoting class warfare or xenophobia, the film

focused on highlighting China's engineering capabilities and its role as a responsible global citizen. Berry pointed out that, despite the Communist Party's involvement, the film's attempt to gain legitimacy in the eyes of its audience was based on values and filmmaking styles that are similar to those employed in the West (Zheng 2018).

Amanda Morrison (2021) argues that in recent times, the Chinese government has changed its approach to the film industry. Instead of direct intervention, they now employ indirect incentivization to create economic conditions that favor patriotic cinema. This shift reflects the State's recognition of the market potential of patriotic message films, which now enjoy the highest chances of achieving box-office success. The government exercises control over the industry through various mechanisms, including financial incentives and censorship, ensuring that films align with its interests. Additionally, restrictions on foreign investors have reduced external influence in the industry. Film distribution remains largely under the control of State-owned enterprises, enabling them to shape the visibility and profitability of film releases. The government designates specific cinemas to receive subsidies and promote screenings of main melody films that propagate patriotism. State directives encourage positive coverage of patriotic films and discourage coverage of dissenting ones. While it is challenging to accurately gauge public opinion due to limited options and restricted critical platforms, audiences in China generally embrace patriotic films. Many directors and actors have embraced this trend, focusing on producing content exclusively for the Chinese market and projecting a patriotic image. Celebrities actively support the government's agenda, with some openly expressing patriotism and endorsing China's territorial claims (Morrison 2021).

Expanding on the idea of Chinese stars overtly supporting the government, Morrison (2021) mentions the case of Fan Bingbing, who posted an image on Weibo that included a map of China with Taiwan and the "nine-dash line," along with the hashtag "China, not even a dot can be missing." Her overt support for China's territorial claims in the South China Sea came after she apologized for tax evasion allegations and disappeared from the public eye for three months in 2018.

This ties in with discussions in previous chapters about the changing domestic landscape in China since 2018, which has had an impact on both the Chinese film industry and Hollywood-China relations. I also mentioned the issue of the "nine-dash line" when discussing the animation film *Abominable* (2019), a China-Hollywood co-production that highlighted the map containing the nine-dash line, generating controversy among China's neighboring countries.

Interestingly, the 2023 Hollywood movie *Barbie* sparked controversy even before its release due to the supposed inclusion of the nine-dash line. Vietnam has banned the film, citing a scene featuring a map that depicts contested Chinese territorial claims in the South China Sea, as reported by Nicholas Yong (2023). Meanwhile, in the United States, Republican Senator Ted Cruz has accused the movie of being Chinese communist propaganda, expressing concern about its potential influence on young girls (Rich 2023). In response to the polemic, a spokesperson for Warner Bros. Film Group, the movie’s producer, stated that “The map in Barbie Land is a child-like crayon drawing. The doodles depict Barbie’s make-believe journey from Barbie Land to the ‘real world.’ It was not intended to make any type of statement” (Donnelly 2023).



**Figure 7:** Still from the movie *Barbie* with the supposed representation of the nine-dash line map. **Source:** Donnelly 2023.

Upon closer analysis of the *Barbie* scene, it becomes apparent that the controversy may be exaggerated. Similar dashes can be found in other parts of the map, not only in close proximity to Asia, which raises questions about the specific concern regarding the representation of the nine-dash line map. However, the fact that an image from a movie trailer has prompted the involvement of officials from one of China’s neighboring countries and of a U.S. Senator underscores the significance of examining the dynamics between cinema and International Relations.

Returning to Morrison’s analysis (2021), the author also mentions the case of *Mulan* (2020). In 2019, the film’s star, Liu Yifei, expressed her support for the Hong Kong police on

Weibo and referred to the pro-democracy demonstrations as a “shame” for Hong Kong. Her comments, whether genuine or strategic, led to the hashtag #BoycottMulan, which resurfaced when viewers criticized the film’s recognition of Xinjiang government entities in its credits. Chinese authorities swiftly banned the *Mulan* hashtag and ordered media outlets not to cover the release. I already comment on this topic in Chapter 2.

According to Morrison (2021), an interesting case that sheds light on this new landscape of patriotism in China is the film *The Eight Hundred* (2020), a Chinese war epic that was the first major film to be screened in movie theaters after months of closures due to COVID-19. In June 2019, just minutes before its premiere at the Shanghai International Film Festival, the film was abruptly pulled from the screening because its final scene portrayed the nationalist army in a glorified manner instead of the communist army (Morrison 2021). Faced with the risk of losing their \$80 million investment in the film, Huayi Brothers made the decision to remove 13 minutes of footage, allowing for its release during the summer. Additionally, the company pledged to incorporate “party-building work into every aspect and step of the process of film and TV content creation” (Morrison 2021). In this new era of patriotic sentiment in China, depicting humanized versions of leaders from the Guomindang, the historical adversary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), as was done in the successful main melody film *The Founding of a Republic* in 2009, is apparently no longer feasible.

Morrison (2021) concludes by highlighting that propaganda is most effective when people are swayed in a way that makes them believe they arrived at their viewpoints independently. Nationalism is most enduring when it arises organically from the population. A similar phenomenon is occurring in the production of patriotic cinema, where producers create the films and audiences choose to view them. In this process, a chorus of voices is replaced by a single melody (Morrison 2021).

Indeed, in a 2018 *Global Times* article titled “China’s movie industry undergoes a patriotic makeover in the New Era,” Xie Wenting praises the success of Chinese main melody films, highlighting their portrayal of the country’s achievements in military power and economic development. The article also mentions the designation of around 5,000 “people’s cinemas” throughout China, which are authorized to screen Communist Party-approved films. Furthermore, popular Chinese actors are increasingly taking on roles that embody positive energy and patriotism (Xie 2018).

The article explores the relationship between politics and cinema, starting with Beijing’s call for the promotion of socialist core values. Chinese filmmakers responded by creating patriotic films that reflect recent national accomplishments. President Xi Jinping’s 2016



encouragement to strengthen confidence in Chinese culture and produce exceptional works that inspire national pride is highlighted (Xie 2018).

To ensure the widespread screening of patriotic films, the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT) designated 5,000 cinema halls nationwide as “people’s cinemas” (Xie 2018). These cinemas have the responsibility of regularly screening specified mainstream films, including important films during special events. The document issued by SARFT also outlines measures to support these cinemas, such as organized group viewing activities, discounted ticket prices, preferential policies, and financial support and bonuses. Each county must have at least one designated people’s cinema, and at the city level, there should be a minimum of one per district (Xie 2018).

The article mentions the growing popularity of reality-based films among Chinese audiences, using the documentary film *Amazing China* as an example. Co-produced by China Central Television and the China Film Company, the film achieved remarkable success at the box office and received praise on social media and film-rating websites (Xie 2018).

The topic of compulsory viewing is discussed, with the account of Ye, a CPC member and engineer, who shared his experience of attending viewing parties organized by his company for patriotic films (Xie 2018). Ye openly admits that he attended viewing parties organized by his company to watch two patriotic Chinese films, *Wolf Warrior 2* and *Beginning of the Great Revival*, acknowledging that he might not have seen these films if he had to personally pay for them (Xie 2018).

The perspective of Su Wei, a professor at the Party School of the Chongqing Committee, is presented, highlighting the educational role of organized film-viewing parties while cautioning against excessive consumption of personal time. Linda, an employee at a major cinema chain, mentions that commercial cinemas actively screen *Amazing China* to demonstrate their positive attitude toward the country (Xie 2018). A recent post shared on Wanda Film’s official WeChat account reveals that over 400 Wanda cinemas have scheduled screenings of *Amazing China*. A special discounted price of 30 yuan (\$4.74) per ticket is offered for those booking an entire hall (Xie 2018).

The article emphasizes that mainstream Chinese films have undergone a significant transformation in recent years by incorporating a more humanistic spirit into their narratives and featuring fresh-faced actors to appeal to younger audiences (Xie 2018). This shift is attributed to the involvement of seasoned Hong Kong directors who have helped make Chinese mainland mainstream films more relatable and enjoyable for ordinary moviegoers, addressing previous market neglect (Xie 2018).

This point is also debated by Chu (2022), who highlights that the signing of the Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement (CEPA) with the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) has led to an increase in mainland-Hong Kong co-productions, particularly blockbuster films. As these co-productions attracted more Hong Kong film talents to the mainland market, the Chinese film industry has gradually gained experience in producing Hollywood-style blockbusters (S. Y.-W. Chu 2022).

Xie (2018) highlights that a popular strategy used in mainstream Chinese films is to feature young and attractive male actors, commonly referred to as “fresh meat,” to appeal to millennials with disposable incomes. In the film *Operation Red Sea*, director Dante Lam cast Huang Jingyu, a post-1990s actor, as the lead, capitalizing on his popularity. It is worth mentioning that Huang had previously faced controversy when he was reportedly banned from the popular entertainment show *Happy Camp* due to his participation in the hit gay-themed web series *Addicted* (2016). Xie emphasizes that *Addicted* itself faced consequences as it was removed from Chinese streaming websites following a new television regulation that prohibited, and I am quoting here, “the depiction of abnormal sexual relations, including homosexuality,” which “is forbidden in China” (Xie 2018).

According to Xie (2018), Huang’s comeback in *Operation Red Sea* was well received by his predominantly female fan base, which boasts millions of supporters, contributing significantly to the film’s success at the box office. While the practice of casting young actors primarily for their popularity has faced criticism from some veterans in China’s film industry, Shi previously argued that the initial focus should be on attracting young audiences to the cinema using popular idols. This, in turn, can create a better opportunity for patriotic education through film. Su pointed out that given the influence of young idols on China’s millennial generation, the use of “fresh meat” as a term for young actors can effectively promote core socialist values among young Chinese viewers. Su emphasized that the tradition of the Party has always been to unite, nurture, and guide talent in all fields, and entertainment talents are no exception (Xie 2018).

Xie (2018) explores the challenges of navigating influences and discovering the authentic voice of Chinese cinema. The article references Hu Cheng, vice director of China Red Culture Research Association, who raises concerns about the loss of cultural confidence in Chinese films. According to Hu, the current focus on Hollywood and market-oriented approaches has resulted in a departure from the Party’s guiding principles. Su shares a similar perspective, acknowledging that while popular patriotic Chinese films draw inspiration from Western experiences, there is still room for further improvement. Su remains optimistic that as

China progresses, its film industry will develop a distinct narrative that reflects its own cultural identity. Despite the success of films like *Wolf Warrior 2*, which broke box office records, their Hollywood-style storytelling has not garnered significant international recognition. Shi points out that while art knows no boundaries, ideology does. Mainstream Chinese films are characterized by their strong ideological underpinnings, making international distribution less of a priority. As Shi concludes, “Even if Chinese mainstream films won’t win an Oscar, we have our own domestic awards to reward them” (Xie 2018).

There are several noteworthy points to consider in this article. One aspect is the construction of strategic narratives that depict China’s active role in fostering international peace on a global scale. These narratives are effectively communicated to the population through State media, showcasing the coordinated efforts of Chinese cultural diplomacy. An intriguing observation is the emphasis placed on Chinese main melody films in an article published in *Global Times*, which further reinforces the significance of these cultural productions in shaping China’s image.

Moreover, the article sheds light on certain topics that Western analysts might perceive as taboo in Chinese official media. Surprisingly, the government’s utilization of discounts and forced screenings to bolster domestic film box office numbers is openly discussed. The article also addresses film bans and theme censorship in a clear manner.

Furthermore, the article touches upon the challenges faced in exporting main melody films. Contrary to the perspective of many international analysts who attribute their failure abroad to an excess of ideology, it suggests that the ideological weakness of these films might be the reason behind their limited success in foreign markets. However, the article concludes by suggesting that the domestic market alone might be sufficient. It is important to note that this article is from 2018 and since then was removed from the air, and the version brought here was accessed through the Web Archive.

At this point, it is worth returning to the article I already debated in the introduction of this dissertation, with the comments of Wang Xiaohui, executive deputy director of the Central Propaganda Department and then director of the National Film Bureau. In February 2019, Wang expressed China’s aspirations of becoming a “strong film power” akin to the United States by 2035 (R. Davis 2019). He acknowledged that while China is already a significant film power, there is still room for its international influence to grow. In 2018, U.S. films generated \$2.8 billion in Chinese markets, whereas Chinese films earned only a fraction of that in American markets (R. Davis 2019). Wang highlighted the need for the Chinese film industry to align with China’s national status and emphasized the importance of quality storytelling that rivals that of

Hollywood or Bollywood. He advocated for at least 100 Chinese films annually that surpass \$15 million in overseas earnings, generate social impact and financial returns, and focus on realistic subjects that promote the “Chinese Dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” with patriotic themes. Wang also emphasized the necessity for film producers to convey clear ideological messages without challenging China’s political system (R. Davis 2019).

Therefore, it is evident that as the Chinese domestic market thrives, the Chinese government is actively determined to expand the influence of Chinese patriotic films in the international market. In pursuit of this objective, China has increasingly embraced the integration of both international talents and techniques, as well as those from its own creative landscape. A recent illustrative example of this is the collaboration of acclaimed Fifth-Generation director Chen Kaige in the production of *Battle at Lake Changjin*. This film featured popular actor Wu Jing from the *Wolf Warrior* franchise and teenage idol Jackson Yee. It was co-directed by Mainland’s Chen Kaige and Hong Kong’s Tsui Hark and Dante Lam, who are revered as “three legendary filmmakers” (R. Zhang 2022). While the film garnered mixed reviews in the West, with Richard Kuipers (2021) of *Variety* describing it as offering little beyond generic human drama amidst impressive battle scenes, and Phil Hoad (2021) of *The Guardian* commenting on its lack of subtlety, it still managed to secure two top awards at the 2022 China Golden Rooster and Hundred Flowers Film Festival (R. Zhang 2022).

In this context, it is pertinent to revisit excerpts from my interview with Dede Nickerson, where the producer provided insights on Wang Xiahui’s statement regarding China’s aspirations to become a strong film power like the US by 2035 and export patriotic films. According to Nickerson, “It’s irrelevant as to what China wants because all this is driven by audience demand... even if the Chinese government said we’re going to put a billion dollars a year to work to create Chinese content, who would buy the content? Who would the audience be? And who would watch it? That kind of thinking, if you will, it’s just that, it’s not a reality.”

In any case, it is worth reiterating that the quality of main melody films has significantly improved within a short span of time. Although attaining success in Europe and the U.S. remains challenging, these films have already achieved regional success (Kokas 2018) and gained popularity in countries participating in the Belt and Road Initiative (Peng and Keane 2019). While it is still uncertain whether they will attain international success, it is evident that a stronger China has the potential to promote strategic narratives through its films. This includes the attraction of international talent to enhance the effectiveness of storytelling, thereby bolstering Chinese soft power.

In this section, I explored main melody films and their evolution over time. I traced their origins back to 1987 when they emerged as a means to promote socialist values and ideals during China's reform and opening-up era. Initially characterized by didactic storytelling, these films underwent a transformation by incorporating blockbuster techniques from acclaimed Hong Kong directors, which added a more commercial and engaging narrative style.

Furthermore, I examined the recent surge in patriotic sentiment within China and its impact on the prominence of main melody films. These films have become a priority in terms of both production and exhibition, receiving strong support from renowned Chinese celebrities and directors who align themselves with the patriotic wave and the Chinese government's agenda. Despite debates about limited options in Chinese cinemas, these films have consistently achieved high box office results, resonating well with domestic audiences. Although international success remains a goal yet to be attained, main melody films have gained traction in regional markets and among countries involved in the Belt and Road Initiative.

Consequently, there is support for the argument that as China strengthens its position, it gains greater influence in shaping strategic narratives through its films. This is further bolstered by the incorporation of international talent to enhance storytelling, contributing to the growth of Chinese soft power.

In the next session, I will delve into a specific subgenre of main melody films: military-themed movies.

#### *4.2.2. Military-themed Main-Melody Film: Telling Patriotic Tales*

In this section, I will explore the realm of military-themed main melody films. Due to the inherent nature of main melody films, which aim to celebrate patriotism, socialist values with Chinese characteristics, and the history of key figures in the Chinese Communist Party, war films naturally find a fitting place within this melody. Moreover, the utilization of war films to amplify patriotic sentiments is by no means exclusive to China. Consider, for instance, the descriptions used to portray *Wolf Warrior 2*, often hailed as the Chinese equivalent of *Rambo* and *Top Gun*. It is evident that the Hollywood counterparts of *Rambo* and *Top Gun* are, well, *Rambo* and *Top Gun*. Nonetheless, Chinese main melody films of this nature present captivating qualities that merit analysis in the context of comprehending the interplay between cinema, politics, and International Relations.

While *Wolf Warrior 2* stands as perhaps the most prominent and widely recognized exemplar of military-themed main melody films in China (which will be thoroughly analyzed in a dedicated subchapter), there exist numerous others that I will explore in this section. These films showcase not only China's current military prowess and its involvement in overseas operations but also its active global engagement, leading rescue missions, keeping its citizens safe, and contributing to world peace. Furthermore, they depict historical events such as the Japanese invasion of China, World War II, and the Korean War. As we delve deeper, it becomes evident that both contemporary and historical episodes are pivotal in shaping the strategic narratives that China seeks to disseminate about its global role. Thus, analyzing these films offers insight into how China utilizes cinema to propagate its strategic narratives and bolster its soft power.

In previous sections, I presented a historical account of the development of main melody films, demonstrating how they have evolved to incorporate techniques, narratives, and stars to enhance their commercial appeal, attracting a larger and more diverse audience, and becoming popular productions. Furthermore, I highlighted that while these films have yet to gain a substantial international following, expanding their global reach is undoubtedly one of the objectives of these productions. Therefore, in this section, I will examine these recent releases, genuine Chinese blockbusters with global aspirations.

Xiao Yang conducted a detailed analysis of what she termed the "wolf warrior cycle," which comprises four prominent Chinese blockbuster movies: *Wolf Warrior* (2015), *Operation Mekong* (2016), *Wolf Warrior 2* (2017), and *Operation Red Sea* (2018). These films share a distinctive theme centered around China's military engagements abroad, a subject that had been relatively unexplored in previous Chinese war/action blockbusters. Yang situates these movies within the larger context of China's proactive global strategy in the 2010s, which emphasizes its leading role in globalization, symbolized by the Belt and Road Initiative.

According to Yang (2023), the production of the wolf warrior cycle films was significantly influenced by the Belt and Road Initiative, resulting in a trend of politicization within the Chinese film industry's commercial blockbusters. She argues that these films align with the goals of the Belt and Road Initiative by presenting "Hollywoodized" adventure stories that portray China's leadership in regional and global affairs. The wolf warrior cycle films play a crucial role in shaping the perception of "wolf warrior diplomacy" by reinforcing China's assertive diplomatic approach and reinforcing nationalistic stereotypes within Chinese society regarding international relations.

Yang (2023) explores the significant transformation undergone by the Chinese film industry over the past decade. Since the 2010s, Chinese cinema has experienced increased commercialization, market growth, and the emergence of numerous new films and directors. In addition to the observation of the ‘marketization of politics’ trend in Chinese main melody films since the 2000s by Stanley Rosen (2012), Yang (2023) identifies another trend of the ‘politicization of entertainment’ in commercial filmmaking since the mid-2010s, as seen in the production of the wolf warrior cycle films. Unlike State-sponsored main melody movies, the wolf warrior cycle films are commercial films produced by private companies for the entertainment market, with limited involvement from the State during production. While films like *Wolf Warrior 2* and *Operation Red Sea* received recognition from the Chinese government after their release, the producers of the wolf warrior cycle films chose to embody main melody ideologies under the influence of the State’s foreign policies (X. Yang 2023).

Yang (2023) explains that the dichotomy between propaganda films and entertainment films has been evident throughout China’s socialist and post-socialist periods. However, since the mid-2000s, when China sought greater integration into globalization, a hybridization trend has emerged between State-produced main melody films and entertainment films. Examples include *Assembly* (2007), a commercial movie that embodied main melody themes, *The Founding of a Republic* (2009), which established a style for the State-sponsored ‘new main melody films,’ and *The Founding of a Party* (2011), which combined main melody themes with the casting of movie stars, Hollywoodized cinematic expression, and extensive marketing strategies. Yang (2023) argues that the wolf warrior cycle films were produced against the backdrop of this industry trend. Private companies recognized the market potential of main melody blockbusters and chose to produce films aligned with the state’s global strategies.

The Bona Film Group, known for its mainland-Hong Kong co-produced main melody blockbusters, is one such private enterprise (X. Yang 2023). *Operation Mekong* and *Operation Red Sea*, two films in the wolf warrior cycle, are main-melody co-production blockbusters produced by Bona. These projects were initiated by the Ministry of Public Security and the Chinese Navy to showcase China’s efforts in countering drug dealers and terrorists overseas. The production rights of these films were outsourced to private companies, and Bona won the bids. Rather than being propagandistic, Bona employed the Hong Kong director Dante Lam to produce these films in a Hollywood blockbuster style, characterized by fast-paced narratives, renowned actors, and visually stunning spectacles created using 3-D and CGI technologies (X. Yang 2023).

*Wolf Warrior* and *Wolf Warrior 2* are both main melody action movies and were directed by Wu Jing, a renowned kung fu star and filmmaker. *Wolf Warrior* follows the story of Leng Feng, a soldier in the Chinese special forces tasked with protecting China's territorial borders. The film achieved great success, grossing 545 million yuan at the box office in mainland China (X. Yang 2023). Despite receiving support from the Nanjing Military Region of the PLA in terms of personnel and equipment, the movie was produced by Beijing Dengfeng International Media, Wu Jing's private film company, rather than a State-owned production company. The production and distribution of *Wolf Warrior* involved several private enterprises, including Chunqiu Shidai (Tianjin) Pictures, Beijing Dengfeng International Media, and Hengye Pictures. Wu Jing's production company, Dengfeng, also produced *Wolf Warrior 2*, which presents the evacuation of Chinese citizens from Libya during the country's civil war in 2011 with a Hollywood-style approach (X. Yang 2023).

Yang (2023) argues that the wolf warrior cycle films reflect China's increasing attention to its role in globalization. As main melody films always convey the ideologies of the Chinese government, the emergence of China's overseas missions as a new topic in these blockbusters can be seen as a reflection of the Chinese State's objectives. To understand why the wolf warrior cycle films came about and their propagandistic elements, it is essential to examine China's interactions with the world in the 2010s through its foreign policies and diplomacy (X. Yang 2023).

According to Yang (2023), the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) represents a significant shift in China's foreign policy, moving from a low-profile approach to pursuing a leading role in global and regional affairs. The BRI aims to construct a new structure of globalization to sustain China's economic growth during uncertain times. Yang highlights that this proactive global strategy by the Chinese State has also prompted new agendas for the cultural industries, including the film industry. In response to the BRI, the Ministry of Culture issued a plan for developing Chinese culture from 2016 to 2020, emphasizing increased cultural communication between China and BRI countries and enhancing the international influence of Chinese culture. The plan called for the production of film and television projects related to the BRI, along with the promotion of local literature and art addressing the BRI theme (X. Yang 2023).

The Film Industry Promotion Law of the People's Republic of China, examined by Yang (2023), legitimizes the State's support for films featuring "key topics" that disseminate socialist culture and core socialist values. These key topics vary over time and depend on the State's policies and priorities. While the BRI was not initially identified as a key topic, the schedule for developing television dramas during the 14th Five-Year Plan listed the tenth



anniversary of the BRI as one of the key topics. Yang (2023) argues that although the wolf warrior cycle films were not directly initiated by the government, the producers recognized the State's global strategies and changes in the cultural industry, prompting them to incorporate topics aligned with these changes. The funding opportunities and support provided by the State further incentivized the inclusion of key topics in film projects (X. Yang 2023).

Yang (2023) explains that the number of films addressing the BRI has been limited compared to other key topics in the past decade. This is due to the BRI's underperformance in many countries (X. Yang 2023). The availability of funding and support for BRI-related films will depend on the development and success of the initiative. Examining the wolf warrior cycle films in detail, Yang (2023) argues that while their main theme revolves around the protection of Chinese citizens overseas by the Chinese State and PLA, these films also promote China's new global strategy by portraying China's evacuation missions and presenting the country as a powerful and responsible global force. However, these portrayals may contain stereotypes rooted in nationalism (X. Yang 2023).

In the next subchapter, I will delve deeper into Yang's analysis of those movies, particularly focusing on *Wolf Warrior 2*. But it is worth noting how Yang (2023) emphasizes the emergence of blockbuster action movies showcasing Chinese military power and overseas actions as a prominent trend in the Chinese film industry since the mid-2010s. The wolf warrior cycle films serve as examples of this trend and illustrate the highly commercialized production mode of main melody films during this period. Understanding how the wolf warrior cycle aligns with Chinese politics by addressing key topics provides insights into Chinese cultural policies and films under other key topics as well (such as the Korean War since July 2020). Furthermore, Yang (2023) notes that the academic analyses of the wolf warrior cycle films largely overlook the voices of audiences from the Global South, indicating regional disparities and imbalances in audience demographics during the overseas distribution of these films.

In addition to revisiting the topics discussed in the previous section, such as the evolution of main melody films towards a more market-driven approach, Yang's analysis offers valuable insights. One of these is a deeper understanding of the subtle ways in which the Chinese government influences the production of main melody films. While censorship and state-owned studios producing main melody films are the most visible aspects of this influence, Yang points out that the four films in the wolf warrior cycle were produced by private companies. Nevertheless, it is evident that government incentives have played a significant role, whether through direct support in the form of funds and resources or by guiding the exploration of central themes.

Another noteworthy point is the lack of attention given to the audience of main melody films in the Global South, which aligns with an argument I consistently emphasize in this dissertation. The perception of these films' failure to achieve international box office success is often based on examining revenues generated in the United States and Europe, neglecting other markets that are not only significant but also the primary focus of these films. Yang's analysis reveals how the wolf warrior cycle movies not only reflect but also attempt to shape China's new foreign policy for the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Conducting a more comprehensive study on the reception of these films in BRI countries – many of them in the Global South<sup>41</sup> – could provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of these cinematic initiatives.

Lastly, Yang highlights the emergence of new prominent topics, particularly mentioning the Korean War, which has been listed as a central theme by the Chinese government since July 2020. In fact, an official communication from the Chinese government in 2020 revealed that the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television planned the broadcast of TV dramas with key themes. The communication emphasized that one of the goals was “to highlight the ideological value, carry forward the spirit of the Anti-Japanese War and the spirit of resisting US aggression and aiding Korea, and tell a touching story about China's actions to fight the new coronavirus epidemic.”<sup>42</sup>

Once again, the correlation between the incentives provided by the Chinese government and the narratives depicted in main melody films becomes apparent. Regarding the Korean War (1950-1953), the name of the conflict in China – “War to Resist U.S. Aggression and Aid Korea”<sup>43</sup> – provides further clues as to why this topic has resurfaced. As highlighted by Renouard and Liu:

For Americans, Korea is “the forgotten war” – a faraway conflict that is overshadowed in popular memory by World War II, the Vietnam War, and more recent conflicts in the Middle East. But in China, the Korean War holds a prominent place in public memory, and it serves a political purpose that has no parallel in America. What's in a name? Quite a lot. While Americans use the neutral

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<sup>41</sup> According to the Green Finance & Development Center, from Fudan University, In December 2023, the number of countries that have joined the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) by signing a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with China is 148. From those, 44 countries are in Sub-Saharan Africa, 35 are in Europe and Central Asia, 25 are in East Asia and Pacific (including China), 21 are in Latin America and the Caribbean, 18 are in the Middle East and North Africa, and 6 are in South East Asia. The BRI also works with 18 countries of the European Union (EU) and 9 countries of the G20. Available at: <https://greenfdc.org/countries-of-the-belt-and-road-initiative-bri/>.

<sup>42</sup> The original is in Chinese, and the translation was provided by Google. Available at: [https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2020-07/23/content\\_5529344.htm](https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2020-07/23/content_5529344.htm).

<sup>43</sup> “Resist U.S. Aggression and Aid Korea.” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of The People's Republic of China. Available at: [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/ziliao\\_665539/3602\\_665543/3604\\_665547/200011/t20001117\\_697840.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/ziliao_665539/3602_665543/3604_665547/200011/t20001117_697840.html).

term “The Korean War,” there is no ambiguity in the People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) official nomenclature: “The War to Resist America and Aid Korea” (Renouard and Liu 2020).

The cinematic portrayal of China’s achievements in the “War to Resist America and Aid Korea” can be witnessed in the main melody film *The Battle at Lake Changjin* (2020). This film has broken China’s all-time box office record, surpassing the previous milestone set by *Wolf Warrior 2* (Frater 2021b). With a box office revenue of US\$902 million, *The Battle at Lake Changjin* was the second highest-grossing movie worldwide in 2020, trailing only *Spider-Man: No Way Home*, which crossed the \$1 billion mark despite not being released in China (Rubin 2021).

According to Wang Yichuan, the significance of *The Battle at Lake Changjin* lies in its establishment of a national aesthetic paradigm for Chinese blockbusters. This is primarily manifested in its use of a panoramic film structure, creating a solemn yet grand aesthetic style, portraying Chinese heroes, fostering a sense of kinship and patriotism, and reinterpreting historical justice through stylized depictions (Yichuan Wang 2022). The film’s recent box office success underscores the importance of Chinese blockbusters embracing this newly developed national-image aesthetic paradigm and continuing to explore diverse aesthetic styles (Yichuan Wang 2022).

The Chinese media’s portrayal of *The Battle at Lake Changjin* deserves further consideration. In an article titled “‘The Battle at Lake Changjin’: a successful cultural export to make the world begin to listen to the voice of China,” published in the *Global Times*, Gong Qian (2021) asserts that the film stands out among nationalist movies in China due to its unparalleled impact within the country. Not only is it set to become China’s highest-grossing film, but it has also achieved a remarkable level of national empathy and cultural influence abroad, a rare accomplishment for commercial movies. Gong describes how deeply moved audiences have paid tribute to the sacrifices made by the Chinese People’s Volunteers during the War to Resist U.S. Aggression and Aid Korea (1950-53). Gong shares emotional anecdotes, such as a student expressing the need to appreciate their lives without complaint and the screening of the film for a CPV veteran who displayed reverence for history by saluting the screen with his mutilated arm. This “Changjin Lake Effect” has resonated across society, evoking strong patriotic sentiments and compelling the world to reevaluate this historical period and listen to the voice of China (Gong 2021).

The reference to the voice of China holds significance, particularly because, as reiterated throughout this dissertation, one of Xi Jinping's explicit goals is to effectively tell China's stories well. Gong suggests that

We seem to have become accustomed to watching omnipotent superheroes flying across the big screen and accepting cultural input from the West, especially Hollywood, including the beautification of the US military. But this time, *The Battle at Lake Changjin* is a movie that truly belongs to the Chinese, and has shaped Chinese heroes and told a good Chinese story. *The Battle at Lake Changjin* comes at just the right time, especially as the US military evacuated Afghanistan in embarrassment. Unlike the illusory superhero stories in the West, China's *The Battle at Lake Changjin* is from real history. Our predecessors and martyrs are more remarkable and true legends compared with those heroes that only exist in movies. The truth is more powerful than any fictional story (Gong 2021).

Once again, it is possible to see direct references to many of Xi Jinping's speeches and statements, especially the idea of telling a Chinese story and presenting an authentic history of China (Xi 2014; 2017; 2022). Additionally, the movie revives historical events, but they are brought into the present moment with a clear connection to both past and current events in the United States. References are made to the recent U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and the portrayal of fictional heroes in American films. Thus, these main melody films depict historical episodes, aiming to reflect present realities, both in China's domestic politics and its global presence. These films showcase past historical achievements to underscore China's current strength in the world.

Another crucial point to consider is that, despite the article's assertion that the film is a "successful cultural export that captures the world's attention to the voice of China," and Gong's claim of significant national empathy and cultural influence in Chinese films' international expansion, there is a lack of clear evidence supporting this success in foreign markets. The examples mentioned in the article solely revolve around Chinese cases within different regions of the country. Furthermore, according to Box Office Mojo,<sup>44</sup> out of the total worldwide box office earnings of US\$902,548,476 generated by *The Battle at Lake Changjin*, approximately US\$899,400,000 came from the Chinese market, accounting for roughly 99.65% of the total box office revenue.

Nevertheless, if, as Yang (2023) highlighted, there is a lack of academic attention towards the reception of Chinese main melody films in the Global South, I would like to seize this opportunity to shed light on how the film was received in Brazil. I will provide two examples to illustrate this.

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<sup>44</sup> Available at: <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/releasegroup/gr3283177989/>.

The first example is an article published on *G1*, the leading digital news portal in Brazil, belonging to *Globo*, the country's largest media conglomerate.<sup>45</sup> The article – which was produced by *BBC News* and apparently only translated into Portuguese (although there is no indication to that effect) – describes *The Battle at Lake Changjin* as a “Chinese propaganda film about the Korean War.” It states that the film's box office success is positive news for the Chinese film industry, which has been severely affected by the pandemic. The article mentions the film's connection to ongoing tensions between the U.S. and China and how it is seen as a patriotic duty to watch the film. It also emphasizes the tight control exerted by authorities over film distribution in China, with limited competition for the film in theaters. The article raises concerns about the authenticity of online reviews and the potential consequences of criticizing a government-supported production. The cinematic elements and the renowned directors involved in the film are praised. The article mentions the challenges faced by foreign competitors, including Hollywood, in the Chinese film market and the need for collaboration between China and Hollywood. And argues that, despite rising Chinese film production values, Hollywood still offers universal stories that China cannot or chooses not to tell (*G1* 2021).

Another example of how the film was received in Brazil is an article published by critic Inácio Araujo in *Folha de São Paulo*, the most widely circulated newspaper in Brazil with approximately 2 billion website views per year.<sup>46</sup> According to Araujo, *The Battle at Lake Changjin* stands out as more than just a typical film. It offers a rare opportunity to view a historical episode from a non-Anglo-Saxon perspective, particularly distinct from the Hollywood lens. Moreover, it functions as a mirror, where the traditional elements of adventure or action cinema are reversed (Araujo 2022).

Araujo (2022) highlights the Western influence evident in the film's style, including its use of fast editing, frequent angle changes, special effects, and drone cinematography reminiscent of Netflix productions. The film credits six directors, some familiar to Western audiences like Chen Kaige, Dante Lam, and Tsui Hark. It portrays heroism and national unity, with the Chinese army acting as a cohesive unit. However, individual heroes, particularly the brothers Wu Qianli, played by Wu Jing and, and Wu Wanli, interpreted by Jacson Yee, also feature prominently (Araujo 2022).

Araujo (2022) points out two subtle yet significant elements in the film. Firstly, the strong bond between the brothers, who come from a family of three, alluding to China's recent

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<sup>45</sup> *Sobre o G1* (About G1). Available at: <https://g1.globo.com/institucional/sobre-o-g1.ghtml>.

<sup>46</sup> *Folha de S. Paulo. Circulação e Audiência*. Available at: <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/institucional/circulacao.shtml?fill=5>.

policy of increasing fertility rates. Secondly, the children's focus on building a house for their parents reflects the construction industry's significance in modern China (Araujo 2022).

The soldiers in the film, moved by the sight of the Great Wall of China, demonstrate unwavering determination when facing the superior force of the American army, whose vulnerability lies in their arrogance symbolized by MacArthur's belief in a swift and decisive war (Araujo 2022).

Araujo (2022) also suggests that *The Battle at Lake Changjin* perfectly exemplifies contemporary China's mass culture policy. While China may yield to the West in certain aspects, the film serves as a means to reconnect viewers with local values such as family, nation, unity, and belief in the Party's ideals. As a revered and thoughtful figure, Mao remains present in the narrative, symbolizing the foundation upon which modern China stands. Araujo further emphasizes that the film is instructive, as it highlights how cinema can shape the real world to align with official interests and ideologies (Araujo 2022).

The critic argues that until now, Hollywood's portrayal of wars was often considered the definitive truth. However, *The Battle at Lake Changjin* emerges as an equally ideological counterpoint, showcasing the relativity of perspectives conveyed through visual images. Araujo suggests that the Chinese focus on the ability to create cinematic myths, serving as a not-so-subtle reminder to Americans that China is ready to face any challenge posed by their reliance on military power in economic conflicts. Araujo concludes: "In many ways, this film is instructive – in many others, it is somewhat frightening" (Araujo 2022).

Based on the comments above, several observations can be made. It is intriguing to see how the Brazilian media is increasingly paying attention to the topic of China-Hollywood relations, as highlighted in the *GI* article. What's even more fascinating is that this discussion is being initiated through the translation of a *BBC* article, thereby introducing predominantly Western perspectives on the subject. The *GI* article directly labels the film as propaganda and explores the Western viewpoint on how China is utilizing cinema to disseminate its ideologies, censor themes, silence dissenting voices, and present its "propagandist" vision to the world.

In contrast, the article published in *Folha de São Paulo* features the analysis of a Brazilian film critic regarding *The Battle at Lake Changjin*. Some noteworthy points arise from this examination. The Brazilian critic acknowledges that the Chinese war film is just as ideological as its Hollywood counterparts. Moreover, by contrasting Chinese and Hollywood movies, it invites us to question the notion that Hollywood films represent the sole truth. This contrast helps us understand that reality is multifaceted, with different versions presented by China and Hollywood, none representing an absolute truth.

The Brazilian critic effectively demonstrates that it is possible to identify the themes of the Chinese film and draw parallels with Chinese policies from a Global South perspective, particularly from Brazil. References to China's birth encouragement policy and the valorization of the construction industry serve as evidence. Additionally, the film emphasizes the valor and bravery of Chinese soldiers in the face of American arrogance, indicating China's preparedness for the challenges it confronts. The critic also directly references the current tensions between China and the United States, concluding that the film is both enlightening and somewhat disconcerting.

The contrast between these two articles, published in major Brazilian newspapers, reveals that the Western narrative surrounding China's use of cinema for propaganda still dominates, given the influence exerted by Western media outlets in Brazil. However, it is evident that there is also room in prominent media platforms for the circulation of indigenous perspectives that are uniquely Brazilian, arguing that both China and the United States employ their films as propaganda tools.

It is worth noting that Hollywood films can also serve as propaganda, although this adjective is rarely associated with movies like *Rambo* or *Top Gun*. Interestingly, some analyses simultaneously deem *Wolf Warrior* as a propaganda film, portraying it as China's equivalent of *Rambo* and *Top Gun*, without acknowledging that *Rambo* or *Top Gun* themselves could be seen as propaganda films for the United States. It is important to remember, as mentioned in previous chapters, that many Hollywood films receive logistical and financial support from the U.S. government, often leading to script interference, ranging from inserting more favorable portrayals of American institutions to demanding scene removals. Nevertheless, it is uncommon for these films to be labeled as propaganda.

I will provide some examples. In a 2022 Washington Post article, Zenou discusses the collaboration between *Top Gun: Maverick* and the U.S. military, facilitated by the Department of Defense (DOD). The DOD provided support, including equipment and personnel, continuing its long history of involvement in filmmaking. The original *Top Gun* film in 1986 also received DOD support, setting a precedent for the Military-Entertainment Complex. The Pentagon offered military assets, like the Miramar Naval Air Station and fighter jets, for \$1.8 million, making the film possible. In exchange, script changes were made, such as altering the character Goose's fate. While the Pentagon can request revisions for accuracy, it claims not to interfere with the artistic process. *Top Gun's* success led to increased interest in Naval Aviator applications (Zenou 2022).

In contrast, Zenou (2022) mentions that films like *Top Gun* have also inspired imitations in China. In recent years, Chinese authorities have encouraged the production of similar “patriotic blockbusters.” Zenou highlights: *Wolf Warrior* is a way for China to flex its muscles as a superpower. Its tagline says it all: ‘Anyone who offends China will be killed no matter how far the target is.’ The propaganda is not exactly subtle.” However, Zenou acknowledges that movies sponsored by the Pentagon, such as *Top Gun*, have faced criticism for promoting jingoism. Director Oliver Stone referred to *Top Gun* as fascist propaganda, while journalist David Sirota claimed it established a blueprint for the Military-Entertainment Complex, influencing pro-war films such as *Armageddon*, *Pearl Harbor*, and *Battle Los Angeles*. Even Tom Cruise, the star of *Top Gun*, acknowledged in a 1990 *Playboy* interview that some people perceived the film as right-wing propaganda to promote the Navy. Cruise, however, wanted young viewers to understand that the film did not reflect the reality of war. He also stated his decision not to continue making sequels like “*Top Gun II*,” “*III*,” “*IV*,” and “*V*,” considering it irresponsible, though this statement was made without the foresight of the next three decades (Zenou 2022).

It should be emphasized that the term “propaganda” is only mentioned once by Zenou (2022), specifically in relation to Chinese films like *Wolf Warrior*. Despite acknowledging the promotion of war and its utilization by pro-war individuals, the label of being propagandistic is never ascribed to *Top Gun*.

It is worth highlighting that the Pentagon had involvement in shaping the script of *Top Gun: Maverick* as well, as stated by Hunt. Following the initial clearances, Captain JJ “Yank” Cummings and Commander Tim “Sparky” Charlebois collaborated with screenwriter Eric Singer and director Joseph Kosinski for several months. Their objective was to ensure that the Navy was “accurately, positively, and professionally” portrayed in the film. In an interview with *GQ*, Cummings discussed his advisory role, guiding Singer and Kosinski on what to include, modify, or exclude to accurately showcase the Navy and emphasize US military superiority (Hunt 2022). Notably, the *GQ* article does not mention the term “propaganda.”

Now, let’s compare this with the treatment dispensed to *Born to Fly*, often referred to as China’s equivalent of *Top Gun*. Phil Hoad (2023) published an article in *The Guardian* with a title that already sets the tone: “*Born to Fly* review – Chinese *Top Gun* puts tech propaganda in the frontline.” Hoad begins by noting that “In lieu of any real plot, the film centres on political pep talks and jingoism, making it more foreign policy document than flyboy blockbuster.” Hoad further comments that *Born to Fly* is just “Another in China’s seemingly never-ending line of propagandistic, government-backed action films,” which is “only distinguished in



dunderheaded patriotism from its American 80s and 90s equivalents by its absence of any functioning sense of humour.” Although there is a connection drawn between *Born to Fly* and American films, only the Chinese movie is labeled as propagandistic. The propagandistic nature of American films can be inferred, as they associated to “dunderheaded patriotism,” but it is not explicitly pointed out.

The concept of “censorship” follows a similar pattern. As Zhao Yuanyuan points out, while it is not uncommon for the Pentagon to offer support, in the form of consultancy or equipment, to TV and film projects in return for editorial control over the scripts, American reports on this arrangement generally do not label it as “censorship” (Y. Zhao 2023).

As highlighted in Chapter 1 of this dissertation, it is important to note that this commentary on the presence of censorship in Hollywood does not seek to draw a direct parallel between the situations in China and the U.S. In Hollywood, for example, there are numerous instances of films that openly criticize the U.S. military and militarism. While these films may not receive endorsement from the U.S. Armed Forces due to their critical viewpoints, they can still be produced and freely distributed. This stands in stark contrast to China, where the government holds decisive control over all aspects of film production and exhibition.

As this chapter extensively discusses, films that deviate from the Chinese government’s sanctioned narrative can be created in China, yet they often remain on the outskirts of mainstream cinema, with no prospect of being shown in Chinese theaters. Moreover, directors can be fined and prohibited from filming. This dynamic is markedly different from the situation in the U.S. Moreover, when commercial interest is present, patriotic films from other countries can be screened in the United States without government intervention in the distribution process. A case in point is the screening of *The Battle at Lake Changjin* in the U.S. In contrast, China’s government exercises full authority over the screening of foreign films within the country.

In light of these distinctions, it is evident that the situations are not comparable. Nonetheless, it is worth acknowledging that this does not negate the possibility of recognizing the existence of censorship in the U.S., while also acknowledging the paradox of accusing other nations of practicing censorship while concurrently engaging in similar practices.

One last point raised by the Brazilian critic Inácio Araujo that I would like to discuss here is the role of cinema in constructing myths, especially regarding significant historical events. A notable example is *The Eight Hundred*, a film depicting the war of resistance against Japan before World War II, which ties into a broader discussion examined by Rana Mitter (2020). Mitter explores China’s evolving perception of World War II and argues that this reassessment is central to the country’s newfound confidence and growing nationalism. The

discourse surrounding the war has expanded beyond academic circles to encompass public memory, including museums, films, and social media. This shift has given rise to various perspectives, including the reevaluation of Chiang Kai-shek's wartime efforts and the portrayal of Beijing as a creator and defender of the international order (Mitter 2020).

In the realm of cinema, Mitter (2020) contends that Chinese filmmakers and audiences have been impressed by the Western use of World War II imagery to shape perceptions of the war. However, Chinese movies depicting their own wartime experiences have faced limited success in the West. Similarly, Western films focusing on the war in China have often neglected the Chinese perspective, instead focusing on European characters within the Chinese setting. During the 2000s, cinema played a crucial role in China's endeavor to reimagine the war, serving both as a tool for domestic propaganda and as a means of projecting China's contribution to the global anti-fascist struggle. As China's economic power faces increasing caution and hostility from the liberal world, this dual agenda has gained even greater urgency (Mitter 2020).

In this context, *The Eight Hundred* emerges as a significant film, boasting a budget exceeding \$80 million and being the first Chinese production entirely shot in the IMAX widescreen format. However, as previously mentioned, the film faced the sudden cancellation of its premiere at a festival in 2019, followed by a cancellation of its general release in China. The question arises: what led to this last-minute decision to veto the film? Mitter (2020) suggests that the Guofen phenomenon, an online community of supporters nostalgic for the former Nationalist government, similar to the Confederate nostalgia in the United States, may shed light on the resistance towards acknowledging the Nationalist government's wartime record in public culture. Parastatal organizations such as the Chinese Red Culture Association, affiliated with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, also criticized the film for its overly positive portrayal of the Nationalist government's contribution to the war. This influence, in addition to censorship, further complicated state intervention in the arts. In any case, the discussion underscores how cinema plays a pivotal role in shaping historical narratives, fostering a sense of national identity, and promoting strategic narratives for China.

In this section, I explored main melody films with a military theme, highlighting their focus on the Chinese spirit, the achievements of the Communist Party of China, and prominent party figures. It is evident that the military theme aligns well with these films' core elements. Furthermore, I highlighted that the use of military films to mobilize the population and foster national spirit extends beyond China, with the United States also providing numerous examples and models. I discussed the technical evolution of military-themed main melody films,

featuring acclaimed directors from Hong Kong and China, like Chen Kaige in *The Battle at Lake Changjin*. Additionally, I analyzed the media reception of the film in Brazil, comparing two articles: one translated directly from the *BBC*, which offered a Western perspective focusing on the film as a propaganda tool and the limitations of expression in China, and another article providing a nuanced approach, considering the highly ideological nature of both Hollywood and Chinese films. This comparison sheds light on the possibilities that arise from contrasting different cinemas, offering a broader view of historical events and constructing a more comprehensive worldview. While these films have gained increasing success in China, they still face challenges in achieving global blockbuster status.

Another avenue through which China seeks to promote its strategic narratives is through main melody films with a science fiction theme, which will be discussed in the next section.

#### 4.2.3. *A Future with Chinese Characteristics: The Case of Chinese Sci-Fi Films*

In a post published on the official website of the Shanghai International Film Festival (SIFF), a timeline tracing the development of Chinese science fiction movies is presented. It commences with the release of the highly popular Spring Festival film *The Wandering Earth* in 2019, marking the inception of Chinese sci-fi movies (Shanghai International Film Festival 2021). Subsequently, in 2020, the China Film Administration and the China Association for Science and Technology jointly issued “Several Opinions on Promoting the Development of Science Fiction Films.” This document proposed a set of 10 policy measures known as the “Ten Articles for Science Fiction,” aimed at bolstering support and guidance for the creation, production, distribution, and screening of sci-fi films, as well as advancements in special effects technology and talent training. These measures have ushered in a new era of development for Chinese science fiction movies (Shanghai International Film Festival 2021).

During a discussion held at the 24th Shanghai International Film Festival (SIFF) titled “Reshape Imagination · Define Future – New Thinking on Chinese Science Fiction Films,” experts and scholars from the film and television industry, along with the field of popular science, emphasized the significance of Chinese sci-fi films in narrating unique Chinese stories. They highlighted the importance of exploring localized creation, while encouraging bold imagination and innovation (Shanghai International Film Festival 2021).

In this section, I will follow this timeline, starting with an analysis of the success of *The*

*Wandering Earth* (2019), moving on to the publication of the Chinese government's guidelines for the development of Chinese science fiction films, and exploring the subsequent increase in the production of science fiction films. The aim is to highlight how these films strive to effectively portray Chinese stories and disseminate strategic Chinese narratives, often with clear indications from the Chinese government regarding the main themes to be promoted. Additionally, I will discuss how examining the growing field of Chinese science fiction, particularly Chinese science fiction films, can help us understand both the strategic narratives that the Chinese government aims to promote and China's global strategies.

In early 2019, *The Wandering Earth* (2019) was released, a film adaptation directed by Frant Gwo based on the short story of the same name by Liu Cixin. The movie became one of the biggest box office successes in the history of Chinese cinema (IMDb 2020), securing a lucrative global distribution agreement with Netflix (Kokas 2019b). As a result, the film garnered attention from film analysts who reacted by stating that the film "certainly proves that the Chinese film industry can hold its own at the multiplex" (Kenigsberg 2019), and that "China challenges Hollywood with its own sci-fi blockbuster" (Kuo 2019).

I have previously conducted an analysis of the film *The Wandering Earth* (Menechelli 2021). The main objective of my study was to analyze the movie in order to identify Chinese perspectives on aspects of International Relations, particularly in relation to International Organizations and global governance (Menechelli 2021). As a science fiction film, *The Wandering Earth* explores alternative possibilities and challenges the existing world order by depicting potential futures. Considering the significant control exercised by the Chinese government over content creation, distribution, and exhibition within the country, my investigation delved into how the film addresses themes such as the necessity of making drastic decisions for the survival of the human species, the prioritization of collective interests over individual ones, and, most importantly, the strategic management of plans to ensure humanity's preservation (Menechelli 2021).

Throughout the film's narrative, there is a notable emphasis on the significance of international institutions and global governance. A key portrayal is the establishment of the United Earth Government (UEG), an International Organization operating within the framework of the United Nations. Guided by the Wandering Earth Law, the UEG assumes the responsibility of formulating plans to safeguard humanity, which require approval from member countries. Notably, the film showcases documents signed by the 5 permanent members of the current UN Security Council, implying their continued possession of veto power in the future. In my analysis, I argued that this depiction aligns with broader elements of Chinese

culture, such as collectivism, strategic planning, and long-term vision, as well as with the official Chinese discourse valuing international organizations and global governance (Menechelli 2021).

This perspective stands in contrast to the solutions presented in the Hollywood films I examined in comparison to *The Wandering Earth*, specifically *Armageddon* (1998), *Deep Impact* (1998), and *2012* (2009). In these films, there is no international management of rescue plans, and the fate of humanity is largely reliant on American leadership (Menechelli 2021).

By exploring these themes, my aim was to shed light on the distinct approaches to international cooperation and global governance depicted in Chinese and Hollywood films, providing insights into the underlying values and perspectives shaping each cinematic representation (Menechelli 2021).

It is worth noting the stark differences between Liu Cixin's short story and Frant Gwo's film, which present contrasting visions of how humanity must change to achieve a favorable outcome in their narratives, including the necessary transformation to confront a dystopian future (van Vuren 2020). Mitchell van Vuren (2020) argues that Liu Cixin, in accordance with his own principles of science fiction, addresses the moral status quo of humanity through a Chinese lens. By allegorically positioning characters and nations, he weaves a tale of the world and envisions how humanity can reshape its self-conception in relation to science to confront the challenges of ecological disasters and other science fiction scenarios in the near future (van Vuren 2020). On the other hand, Frant Gwo's film questions not the essence of humanity, but rather China's position in the world. The film uses rebellion in its narrative to expose the flaws of current global governance and envisions a path to salvation and a utopian future by following China's methods. While the film has international appeal by representing various territories and populations, it ultimately tells a story of China as the world, asserting its monopoly in guiding humanity towards survival. The film's moral, much like its narrative, appears to be caught halfway between Liu's story, where hope has not yet wavered (van Vuren 2020).

Liu Cixin is an acclaimed author who enjoys immense popularity both in China, where his novels are cherished by readers, including influential figures in Beijing, and in the West, as evidenced by *The Three-Body Problem*'s prestigious Hugo Award win and its inclusion on the summer reading lists of Barack Obama and Mark Zuckerberg (Callahan 2023). Given his remarkable success, delving deeper into Liu Cixin's works is undoubtedly worthwhile. Furthermore, it is valuable mentioning the high acclaim received by the sequel, *Wandering Earth II* (2023), which further solidifies Liu's impact. Additionally, Netflix's plans to adapt *The Three-Body Problem* into a television series underscore its global appeal.

In his essay “China’s Global Strategy as Science Fiction,” William A. Callahan (2023) argues that in order to understand China’s global strategy, it is necessary to go beyond traditional sources of analysis and explore Chinese science fiction, particularly the novels of Liu Cixin. By critically examining works such as *The Wandering Earth* and the *Three-Body Problem* trilogy, Callahan (2023) suggests that Chinese sci-fi prompts us to think creatively about important themes, including the relationship between humans and technology, science and politics, and the interactions between political communities.

According to Callahan (2023), the rise of Chinese sci-fi coincided with China’s emergence as a superpower, and it reflects the country’s unique global governance structures. He identifies three dynamics within Chinese sci-fi: pessoptimism, neo-socialism, and *tianxia* (All-Under-Heaven). Pessoptimism refers to the simultaneous presence of both pessimistic and optimistic attitudes in individuals (Callahan 2023). In China, this concept is prevalent as people express optimism about their country’s achievements while harboring pessimism about its future. On a larger scale, Xi Jinping’s China Dream of national rejuvenation is intertwined with the nightmare of past humiliations inflicted by the West and Japan. At a personal level, individuals desire change but also fear it (Callahan 2023). Mingwei Song (2018) suggests that this blend of positive and negative emotions is commonly found in Chinese sci-fi stories, reflecting heightened aspirations for change alongside deep anxieties about the future. Thus, Callahan (2023) emphasizes that pessoptimism, sci-fi, and China’s global strategy reveal the need to embrace contradictions and multiple perspectives, acknowledging the coexistence of pessimism and optimism, happiness and sadness, greed and generosity, rationality and emotion. Therefore, it is essential to recognize and empathize with these diverse perspectives rather than expecting a single explanation to encompass everything (Callahan 2023).

I find this point particularly relevant because, as I emphasized in my analysis of the film *The Wandering Earth*, the story can evoke a contradictory sensation among Western audiences accustomed to Hollywood’s typical happy endings (Menechelli 2021). This is because, within the first few minutes of the film, the premise is summarized: the sun is expanding and will eventually annihilate the Earth. Given my familiarity with numerous Western films featuring similar scenarios, I anticipated the deployment of a Chinese equivalent of Bruce Willis who saves the day by exploding something (Menechelli 2021). However, this expectation is subverted. Instead, the plan to ensure humanity’s survival involves the use of ten thousand high-thrust engines, transforming Earth into a spaceship and propelling it towards another solar system, away from the imminent threat. Yet, during this arduous journey, the unbearable cold forces a portion of civilization to seek refuge in underground cities for 2,500 years, awaiting

the time when the descendants of the 100th generation can finally experience everlasting happiness (Menechelli 2021).

For those accustomed to the conventions of Hollywood cinema, such a resolution may appear somewhat frustrating (Menechelli 2021). The most viable solution for the future of civilization encompasses: 1) accepting the unfortunate fate of over half the human population freezing to death; 2) consigning the survivors to a life in precarious underground conditions; and 3) ultimately relying on the optimistic hope that, if everything proceeds according to plan, the distant descendants of the present generation will possess a new sun to call their own (Menechelli 2021). This dissonance between expected and actual outcomes, as experienced by readers accustomed to a Western perspective of conclusively positive endings, can be associated with the concept of pessoptimism proposed by Callahan (2023).

Back to Callahan's analysis: neo-socialism, similar to pessoptimism, combines contradictory elements to form a loose assemblage. It represents a way of life and thinking that shapes problem-solving approaches. Callahan (2023) further argues that Liu Cixin's science fiction novels embody neo-socialist perspectives on the relationship between humanity and technology, as well as China's role in the world. Liu's works worship science and technology, aligning with the Chinese Communist Party's emphasis on scientific socialism. His novels depict grand technological solutions to global challenges, often at the expense of the environment and certain segments of humanity (Callahan 2023).

Another aspect explored by Callahan (2023) is *tianxia*, which goes beyond China-US geopolitics and represents a civilizational view of global order – as I debated in Chapter 1 of this dissertation. *Tianxia* encompasses a planetary perspective, akin to Liu's *The Wandering Earth*, where the entire planet acts as a spaceship. It reflects China's concept of an alternative world order and emphasizes peaceful coexistence and civilizational vigor.

Callahan (2023) also notes that Liu's works tend to portray a Chinese-centric view of humanity, with little agency given to other ethnicities or nationalities. This aligns with the PRC's soft power agenda. Additionally, Liu's conceptual scheme reflects China's hierarchy of civilizations, which can be seen in its treatment of minority groups and the control of knowledge (Callahan 2023).

Ultimately, Callahan (2023) encourages readers to consider dynamic dilemmas posed by *tianxia*, sci-fi, and China's global strategy. These dilemmas involve addressing problems at individual, national, civilizational, or planetary levels; adopting a cosmopolitan or civilizational view of community; navigating open or closed systems of knowledge; and choosing between peaceful coexistence or a zero-sum struggle.

In conclusion, Callahan (2023) suggests that Liu Cixin's science fiction serves as a parable for US-China relations, reflecting China's perception of itself as an underdog engaged in a scientific and civilizational struggle with the US. While Liu's vision may align with China's current global strategy, it is not the only possible future. By exploring alternative narratives, we can avoid dystopic scenarios and approach these key issues with creativity and productive engagement.

Overall, Chinese sci-fi pushes us to think beyond geopolitical binaries and consider the evolving global politics of the twenty-first century. As Liu himself states, China is a futuristic country, and this realization highlights the increasingly science-fiction-like nature of the world (Callahan 2023).

Another intriguing analysis of the movie *The Wandering Earth* is presented by Zhuoyi Wang (2021). The author discusses the concept of planetarianism, originally proposed by Masao Miyoshi in the context of literature and literary studies. Planetarianism advocates for a new perception and organization of human unity that embraces inclusivity, opposing the divisions, exclusions, repressions, and self-centered consumption perpetuated by neoliberalism. Ironically, it is the global neoliberal economy that provides the only realistic foundation for such a comprehensive unity, albeit under unfavorable circumstances. This economy has led to rapid environmental degradation that affects every individual on the planet, regardless of their identity. Humanity is faced with a binary choice: either forge new collective relationships among ourselves and with the planet or succumb to the environmental devastation caused by our relentless consumption, exploitation, divisions, and conflicts (Z. Wang 2021).

According to Wang (2021), the 2019 Chinese science fiction blockbuster *The Wandering Earth* serves as a significant case study for exploring the diverse manifestations of the idea of planetarianism within a concrete ideological and creative context. The author argues that the film's futuristic imagination possesses the commendable potential to promote a shift from exclusionary individualism, as depicted in the Hollywood science fiction model, towards an inclusive form of planetarianism. However, the film's persuasiveness is notably restricted by the dual restraints imposed on it by the State and the market (Z. Wang 2021).

Returning to the timeline mentioned earlier in this section, following the success of *The Wandering Earth*, the China Film Administration and the China Association for Science and Technology collaborated in 2020 to release the "Several Opinions on Promoting the Development of Science Fiction Films." These opinions introduced a series of 10 policy measures, commonly known as the "Ten Articles for Science Fiction," with the aim of providing enhanced support and guidance for the creation, production, distribution, and



screening of science fiction films, as well as advancements in special effects technology and talent development. These measures have marked the dawn of a new era characterized by growth and progress for Chinese science fiction movies.

In fact, as discussed throughout this chapter, the involvement of the Chinese government in main melody films often occurs indirectly, not through official studio production or censorship, but rather through the issuance of official documents and guidelines. This was the case for the science fiction film sector, with the joint issuance of guidelines by the China Film Administration and the China Association for Science and Technology in 2020 (*Xinhua* 2020). According to Davis (2020b), “the document highlights how the sci-fi genre aligns with the broader ideological and technological goals of the ruling Communist Party.” The document emphasizes that to create impactful films, the top priority is to thoroughly study Xi Jinping’s Thought, as it will assist in crafting narratives that showcase Chinese values, cultural heritage, aesthetics, and the contemporary innovations of China (R. Davis 2020b). Additionally, these films are expected to portray China positively as a technologically advanced nation, promoting scientific thinking and bolstering the morale of scientists (R. Davis 2020b).

The film industry has indeed responded to these guidelines, with notable box-office hits such as *The Wandering Earth II* (2023). An article in the *China Daily* (2023a) highlights the tremendous success of this sci-fi blockbuster, which not only achieved significant box office results but also ignited enthusiasm and discussions among audiences about its scientific and technological elements, including space elevators, quantum computers, and nuclear fusion. The film’s topics and themes have trended on the popular social media platform Weibo, capturing the audience’s keen interest in its intricate details and futuristic technologies. Scientists and researchers have actively engaged in online discussions, analyzing and exploring the possibilities of the technologies depicted, ranging from moon rovers and space elevators to Internet root servers, quantum computers, and underground city life (*China Daily* 2023a).

This serves as a clear demonstration that the concept of using science fiction films to showcase the innovative and scientific spirit of the Chinese people has not only been successfully executed but has also been explicitly recognized by the official Chinese media.

The film has also garnered acclaim beyond mainland China. Catherine Wong (2023), writing for the *South China Morning Post*, argues that the film “shows how China’s tech progress has bolstered its sci-fi credentials,” highlighting the director’s assertion that the series’ success is closely tied to China’s technological advancements. James Marsh (2023), also writing for the *South China Morning Post*, declares that with *The Wandering Earth* films, “China has emerged as a leading global force in science fiction cinema,” and these movies have

set new benchmarks for the genre. Marsh points out that the franchise follows in the footsteps of influential predecessors in Hollywood cinema, such as James Cameron's *The Abyss* (1989), Michael Bay's *Armageddon* (1998), and Christopher Nolan's *Interstellar* (2014). Unlike those films, however, it is China and not the US that is spearheading the mission to save the world – and audiences have responded with unbridled enthusiasm to this spectacular display of national heroism (Marsh 2023).

An intriguing article penned by Yao Minji for the *Shine.cn* portal, and notably reposted on the official website of the Shanghai Municipal People's Government, delves into the issue of ideology in *The Wandering Earth II*. It explores the unique aspect of China, alongside the assistance of other nations, taking on the role of saving the world, diverging from the traditional portrayal of Americans in such narratives. In the article titled ““The Wandering Earth II's' appeal is nothing to do with ideology,” Yao Minji (2023b) asserts:

I know of friends who wanted to watch the movie but worried about being brainwashed by the Chinese ideology supposedly contained within. I tried to figure out what the Chinese ideology is in the film. Chinese rescuing the planet along with others? When it comes to rescuing Earth, shouldn't we be fulfilling the mission together at any cost? Or, what is the non-Chinese alternative? Not rescuing the world and going extinct? Fighting each other and dying together? So, then, I prefer Chinese ideology. Watching movies was so much easier before. Years ago, when I watched “Independence Day,” I wasn't troubled by America saving the globe, with a few minutes saved for its British allies. I was never concerned by the American president's motivational speech, in which he said that “the Fourth of July will no longer be known as an American holiday” before hopping on a fighter jet and firing missiles at an alien spaceship. It was an entertaining film, and I rewatched it again after the awful sequel. “The Wandering Earth II” is equally entertaining and saves humanity along with everyone else. When I watched the film for the second time, I tried to count the number of languages and badges of nationalities that appeared in the film. I gave up after 30 minutes because it was simply impossible. The film begins with a monologue by an Indian scientist. One can hear English, French, Russian, Spanish, Portuguese and other languages as well throughout the film.

The mention of the President's speech on *Independence Day* merits further examination. Here is the speech:

In less than an hour, aircraft from here will join others from around the world. And you will be launching the largest aerial battle in the history of mankind. Mankind ... that word should have new meaning for all of us today. We can't be consumed by our petty differences anymore. We will be united in our common interest. Perhaps it's fate that today is the fourth of July. And you will once again be fighting for our freedom. Not from tyranny, oppression, or persecution but from annihilation. We're fighting for our right to live, to exist. And should we win the day, the Fourth of July will no longer be known as an American holiday, but as the day the world declared in one voice, “We will not go quietly into the night. We will not vanish without a fight. We're going to live on. We're going to survive. Today, we celebrate our Independence Day.”<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> The whole speech can be watched here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9t1IK\\_9apWs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9t1IK_9apWs).

As Cynthia Weber (2021) highlights in her Critical IR Theory textbook, the scene can be criticized as an embodiment of Post-Cold War idealism and a celebration of US hegemony.

It is worth noting that the 1994 film *Independence Day* did not receive support from the US government. Documents obtained through the Freedom of Information Act, as referenced by Secker and Alford (2017a), reveal objections raised by the Department of Defense (DOD), including concerns that “all advances in stopping the aliens are the result of actions by civilians,” contrasting with the “anemic US military response.” The DOD also expressed serious reservations about the portrayal of Area 51. Producer Dean Devlin shed light on the matter, explaining, “In fact, the United States military was going to support this and supply us with a lot of costumes and airplanes and stuff. Their one demand was that we remove Area 51 from the film, and we didn’t want to do that. So they withdrew their support” (Secker and Alford 2017a). Even when the producers “civilianized” Area 51 and the associated characters, it failed to meet the Pentagon’s criteria for support. Interestingly, Secker and Alford underscore the irony that the Pentagon did provide promotional backing to the significantly inferior sequel, *Independence Day: Resurgence* (2016), even utilizing it as a cross-marketing opportunity to entice individuals to join the army for a chance to combat aliens. As discussed in Chapter 1 of this dissertation, *Independence Day: Resurgence* (2016) was accompanied by a promotional video funded by the US Army, which stated, “When the soldiers in the movie rise up, when they adapt to a new threat facing the world, when they find a way to win no matter what, remember where Hollywood gets that from” (Secker and Alford 2017c, 399).

This debate adds depth to the analysis of how cinema can function as an instrument of a country’s soft power. In the case of *Independence Day*, the film not only lacked government support but also faced objections from the Pentagon during its production. Nevertheless, it is this very film that features a speech often regarded as the epitome of post-Cold War American superiority.

Regarding Chinese films, particularly those of the main melody subfield, government intervention is often more direct, sometimes involving production through state-owned studios. However, as discussed in this chapter, there is a growing trend of these films being produced by private studios, driven by financial incentives and government guidelines that address topics considered significant by the authorities.

Nonetheless, this does not dismiss the possibility that these directors are also addressing topics they find relevant. Wu Jing, the director and lead actor of the *Wolf Warrior* films, expressed that he made the films because he believed the Chinese population desired to see

China portrayed not as a victim of foreign aggression and wars but as a protagonist in the pursuit of global peace (Osnos 2018). Similarly, in the realm of science fiction films, it is plausible to consider that directors and actors are influenced by China's current circumstances and ambitions.

Hence, it is pertinent to revisit Professor Joseph Nye's debate on the reasons behind China's perceived soft power deficit. According to Nye, soft power should emanate from the people rather than the State, and China's soft power efforts suffer from excessive State influence (Nye 2012). Cinema serves as a prime example of soft power for the United States, as often mentioned by Nye. Considering this, if we acknowledge that a speech like that of the US President on *Independence Day* reflects the sentiments of society during a specific historical moment, could we not apply the same perspective to the current Chinese main melody films, increasingly produced by private studios without direct state interference? Following Nye's definition, shouldn't these films be considered potential soft power assets? I would argue that yes, they should.

In any case, the analysis of the film *The Wandering Earth II*'s reception, both inside and outside China, holds significant importance. Yimin Xu and Guangyi Pan (2023) explore this topic in their article for *The Conversation* titled "What the Sci-Fi Blockbuster *Wandering Earth II* Can Teach Us About China's Global and Local Aspirations." They argue that the film reflects China's growing desire for global leadership and its embrace of collectivism and consequentialism. Xu and Pan (2023) assert that these political themes are deeply rooted in China's political traditions and its science fiction literature.

The authors highlight how *The Wandering Earth II* continues the tradition of promoting the potential of science under communism and positioning China as a global power (Pan and Xu 2023). China invests significant resources in the mission to save Earth, while the Western world is portrayed as either a rival or a witness to China's triumph. In the film, the United States seeks advice from a Chinese diplomat resembling Zhou Enlai, China's first premier under Mao Zedong's leadership, reflecting China's assertive position in global politics (Pan and Xu 2023).

Xu and Pan (2023) also examine how *The Wandering Earth II* exemplifies Chinese collectivism, as elderly astronauts willingly participate in a suicide mission without the opportunity to voice their opinions. China's historical narrative is rooted in political myths of individual sacrifice, stemming from its authoritarian regime. Individual interests are subordinated to national service, reflecting the collective ideology of conspicuous consequentialism. In the film, the supreme artificial intelligence tests humanity's willingness to unite, despite jeopardizing their lives and leaving many stranded. Curiously, no one questions

this decision-making logic, and the surviving humans eulogize the AI's intelligence at the film's conclusion (Pan and Xu 2023).

The authors also draw parallels between *The Wandering Earth II* and contemporary Chinese society, particularly in terms of individual sacrifices (Pan and Xu 2023). They observe that in present-day China, the emphasis on achieving results often leads to moral dilemmas, where individual losses are seen as a necessary cost on the path of development. This perspective contrasts with Kant's notion about humans as ends, not means. Both *The Wandering Earth II* and Chinese politics prioritize the collective over individual aspirations (Pan and Xu 2023).

In China, as I have already highlighted, the film *The Wandering Earth II* has received acclaim for its technological advancements and its strong connection to China's own progress. An article from *China Daily* (2023) titled "China's sci-fi blockbuster wows audiences, boosted by sci-tech development" features Frant Gwo, the director of both films, expressing his awe by saying, "When we see the equipment, we think our imagination cannot keep pace with reality. The reason we have such confidence in making science fiction films is that there are already such technologies in real life" (*China Daily* 2023b). Frant Gwo points out that people often come across news about Chinese astronauts conducting extravehicular activities and lunar landings, which reinforces their belief in the scenes depicted in sci-fi movies. He further explains that scientific and technological progress has provided a solid foundation for sci-fi literature and art, while economic development has fostered a substantial market for sci-fi creation (*China Daily* 2023b).

The article also emphasizes how these films utilize the universal language of cinema and science fiction to convey Chinese stories. Ji Shaoting, the head of the Future Affairs Administration, a sci-fi cultural company, states, "Both movies and science fiction are universal languages, and we now use such languages to tell the stories of the Chinese people, the emotions of the Chinese people, and the choices that the Chinese people will make when they see humanity as a whole" (*China Daily* 2023b).

This demonstrates the film's alignment with China's strategic narratives, including the effective portrayal of China's stories and the presentation of an authentic vision of the nation. Moreover, the film aims to showcase China as a technologically advanced country, prepared to assume a responsible role in international relations and contribute to the salvation of humanity.

It is also worth noting that the film also highlights the actions and presence of foreigners. This aspect is also emphasized in an article published by Chen Xi and Xia Wenxin (2023) in the *Global Times* titled "International Actors in 'The Wandering Earth II' Amazed by Chinese

Story about Family, Homeland, Unity.” The article discusses how the internationalization of Chinese films has led to the inclusion of more foreign faces in the industry, as seen in the successful sci-fi blockbuster, *The Wandering Earth II*. The film has made history by featuring a large number of foreign actors in its cast, with director Frant Gwo stating that 20,000 foreign actors appear in the film (Xi Chen and Xia 2023). The article acknowledges the significant contributions of these foreign actors to the film’s box-office success. Chen Xi and Xia Wenxin (2023) conducted interviews with three foreign actors who played major roles in the film, and they shared their interesting stories about pursuing their acting dreams in China and their understanding of the film’s theme of “a global community of shared future.” Among the interviewees were Russian actor Vitalii Makarychev, who portrayed Russian pilot Andrey Galaktionov; U.S. actor Andy Friend, who portrayed the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations; and Zambian actor Kawawa Kadichi, who played the character Herbert. Kadichi expressed his excitement about working alongside his idol, Wu Jing, and mentioned his admiration for Wu’s previous movies (Xi Chen and Xia 2023). This perspective aligns with the argument made constantly in this dissertation that the success of Chinese films should not be solely measured by their reception in the U.S. and Europe, but should also consider the perspectives of the Global South.

The article highlights that these three foreign actors expressed confidence that China’s domestically made sci-fi film could captivate audiences worldwide, as it conveys a message of unity among all human beings. Makarychev stated, “We live on the same planet. When the Earth is facing threats, each country should help each other and provide what it has as much as possible” (Xi Chen and Xia 2023).

This point is particularly relevant considering China’s recent decrease in the presence of foreigners, which has caught the attention of authorities. For instance, on May 9, 2023, Wang Wen, Executive Dean of the Chongyang Institute for Financial Studies at Renmin University of China, delivered a speech at a seminar on Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy and its relevance to the “international community around us” (J. Liu, Yuan, and Wang 2023). The seminar was organized by various institutions, including the Tianjin Municipal Foreign Affairs Office and the China Institute of International Studies. Wang, formerly an editor for the *Global Times* and now an influential opinion leader in China, raised concerns about the significant decline in the number of foreigners in China. He called for reflection and emphasized the Chinese government’s commitment to “comprehensive opening up to the outside world” and the importance of formulating specific policies that promote international exchanges at all levels (J. Liu, Yuan, and Wang 2023).

Therefore, a science fiction film that promotes cooperation with foreign nations and receives positive coverage from state media, highlighting the friendship and shared experiences of these foreigners in China, serves as a remarkable example of how films are utilized to promote Chinese strategic narratives.

It is noteworthy to mention the connection with Brazil in this case. In the film *The Wandering Earth II*, one of the characters is Emilia Soares, a Brazilian spaceship captain tasked with saving the Earth's moon, portrayed by Brazilian actress Daniela Tassy. Yao Minji (2023a) from *Shine.cn* reported, "After nine years living in China, Brazilian actress Daniela Tassy went to the moon and helped save humanity." The article highlights Tassy's journey from a translator to realizing her acting aspirations in China, far exceeding her expectations. In an interview, Tassy expressed her excitement, stating, "I had an acting dream, but this is much bigger. Playing the role of a Brazilian in a big production that has already made history in the movie industry is completely different. I'm really happy to be part of this history." She added with a touch of humor, "Now I'm the first Brazilian woman to go to the moon. And quite possibly the first Brazilian to save the world in a movie. You don't have many Brazilians saving the world in non-Brazilian movies, do you?" (Yao 2023a).

Yao (2023a) emphasizes Tassy's appreciation for the film's captivating special effects and its message of global unity to confront the imminent threat of a burning sun. Tassy commented, "This idea of a world community and the message that we must be united to save the planet are very compelling and relevant to our real world now. It is a message that should shed light on our reality." She stressed the multinational makeup of her spaceship, including the main character Liu Peiqiang (portrayed by Wu Jing), highlighting the significance of every individual in the mission's success.

Tassy also appeared in a video produced by *New China TV*, affiliated with Chinese media *Xinhua*, where she expressed her joy in filming the movie in China and fulfilling her lifelong dream of becoming an actress. Furthermore, Tassy emphasizes that she remains optimistic about China's future, believing that there are no limits to its potential (New China TV 2023).

An article in *China Daily* from 2022, before *The Wandering Earth II* was released, already underscored how Tassy enjoys prominence in China. The article states, "Daniela Tassy is approaching her acting dream thanks to China's large film market and the friendly relationship between China and Brazil" (*China Daily* 2022). Tassy shared her experiences on social media, donning traditional Chinese costumes and immersing herself in Chinese cultural performances, aiming to raise awareness about China among Brazilians. As an aspiring actress,

Tassy noticed the popularity of Chinese TV dramas among Brazilian youth, with an increasing number of Brazilian actors venturing to China to pursue their passion for the stage. The article also quotes Tassy's perspective on other matters, including the 14th BRICS Summit. She expressed her belief in the close and amicable relationship between China and Brazil, stating, "I can strongly feel a close and friendly relationship between China and Brazil" (*China Daily* 2022). Over the years, she has witnessed China's remarkable progress in environmental protection, noting significant reductions in air pollution and the implementation of measures like afforestation in deserts and arid areas. Tassy concludes, "We could also cooperate in more aspects, not only bringing famous Brazilian actors to China but also bringing Chinese actors or even the production team to Brazil" (*China Daily* 2022).

Tassy has also been featured in Chinese media articles in Brazil (*Rádio Internacional Da China* 2023; *China Hoje* 2023) and can be found on the official Instagram profile of the Chinese Embassy in Brazil talking about famous Brazilian films in China while filming herself on The Great Wall of China.<sup>48</sup>

It is evident that China is portrayed as a welcoming country that embraces foreigners, offering them opportunities to pursue their dreams and succeed in life, reminiscent of an idea that was historically associated with the United States.

Finally, it is important to highlight the project of adapting the *Three-Body Problem* trilogy for Netflix. This is noteworthy because Netflix, a major global streaming platform, is expanding its Chinese-language content by acquiring licenses for new titles. Although Netflix is not allowed to operate its streaming platform in China, it recognizes the demand for Chinese-language content from international audiences, viewers in Chinese-speaking regions of Asia, and overseas Chinese (Frater 2019).

Furthermore, this case underscores the intersection of cinema and politics. When Netflix announced its intention to adapt the trilogy by Chinese author Liu Cixin, five Republican U.S. senators expressed concerns and urged Netflix to reconsider its plans due to Liu's comments supporting the Chinese government's treatment of Uyghur Muslims (Flood 2020). In response, Dean Garfield, Netflix's VP of Global Public Policy, clarified that the company does not endorse Liu's statements as they are unrelated to his book or the Netflix project. Garfield emphasized that each initiative is assessed based on its own merits (Patten 2020).

This situation also presents an interesting aspect to consider – the existence of other adaptations of Liu Cixin's trilogy in China, where the choice of narratives can be observed both

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<sup>48</sup> Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/reel/Ctr6oPwOTxD/?igshid=Y2IzZGU1MTFhOQ==>.



domestically and internationally. Igor Patrick (2023), in an article for *Folha de São Paulo*, analyzed the differences between Liu's book and a series adaptation which is been produced by Tencent Video. A central issue is related to politics, especially the Cultural Revolution. Patrick highlights that Liu Cixin's book begins in 1967 during the Cultural Revolution, depicting violent public humiliations and demanding confessions from individuals, like Ye Zhetai, who included the theory of relativity in the academic curriculum. The refusal to comply leads to Ye being beaten to death in front of his daughter, who later becomes one of the villains in the story (Patrick 2023).

In 2006, when Liu's book gained critical and commercial success, this particular scene became problematic for studios interested in adapting the work. Patrick (2023) mentioned that an almost completed film adaptation was shelved, and an animated series had to make significant alterations to the original material before its release. Another series produced by Tencent Video remained in limbo for months until it obtained approval from the authorities (Patrick 2023).

The Tencent adaptation, released in late 2022, attracted fans worldwide. However, the way it navigated the censorship issue exemplifies the challenges faced by Chinese creators in maintaining creative freedom (Patrick 2023). The vivid depiction of violence during one of the bloodiest periods in contemporary Chinese history was transformed into an opportunity to criticize the West. Ye, a proponent of the scientific method, tells his daughter in a scene that "it took him a while to realize the greed of Western science." Patrick (2023) highlighted that this nationalist tone aligns with China's goal of promoting its cultural productions. State media enthusiastically praised the series, with the *Global Times* applauding it as "an example of Chinese collective heroism, contrasting the individualism observed in Western societies." Patrick (2023) underscored that the production adhered faithfully to the guidelines issued by the National Film Administration in 2020, which emphasized the meticulous implementation of Xi Jinping Thought, the promotion of Chinese values, the elevation of scientists' spirit, and the cultivation of contemporary Chinese innovation while upholding national culture and aesthetics.

According to Patrick (2023), Beijing aims to use its science fiction to portray a technologically advanced China. However, the increasing constraints on cultural production discourage domestic creators. Consequently, what could be a genuine export product may be perceived as propaganda by an increasingly skeptical international audience.

Patrick (2023) concluded that Chinese artists face three paths forward: compliance with state censorship, confronting nearly insurmountable challenges to maintain creative

independence, including funding and distribution obstacles, or seeking opportunities in the West, where they must also contend with creative interference, distortion of cherished concepts in Chinese society, and unanimous criticism from both sides. He remarked that “there are tougher jobs out there, but being an artist in China certainly shouldn’t be on the list of best professions in 2023” (Patrick 2023).

As I mentioned earlier, it is important to acknowledge that many of the films produced in China may be the result of genuine creative expression by their creators. However, it is also undeniable that there exists a notable level of government interference in the country, which can, to some extent, restrict the creativity of Chinese civil society. Nonetheless, it is evident that as China grows in strength, it will increasingly have the ability to shape the strategic narratives conveyed through its films.

In this section, I explored a specific genre of main melody films, namely science fiction films with distinct Chinese characteristics. I highlighted the clear state determination to promote the appreciation of such films, evident after the success of *The Wandering Earth*, which is based on a story by renowned Chinese science fiction writer Liu Cixin. These films are intended to promote Xi Jinping thought, celebrate China’s traditional and modern culture, showcase China as a technologically advanced nation, and honor the spirit of scientists.

Furthermore, I discussed how the film industry responded to these incentives by producing successful box office hits like *The Wandering Earth II*, which not only achieved remarkable success domestically but also garnered attention internationally. This film serves as an example of how China positions itself at the forefront of science fiction film production on a global scale.

I also examined how these two films contribute to the dissemination of Chinese strategic narratives, incorporating elements such as the emphasis on collective values over individual interests, the idea of making sacrifices for the greater good of the collective, and the importance of uniting nations to address global challenges. These narratives reflect key themes often present in Chinese foreign policy discourse, promoting action through international institutions and advocating for global governance.

Moreover, both films touch on issues related to the appreciation of science, environmental debates, and the future of humanity and the planet. These themes are uniquely presented with Chinese characteristics and are based on China’s strategic narratives.

I also discussed the significant differences between Liu Cixin’s original texts and some of the film adaptations, highlighting the heightened scrutiny and censorship faced by cinema as a chosen medium for disseminating Chinese strategic narratives. This scrutiny is evident in the

contrasting elements between the short story *The Wandering Earth* and its film adaptation, as well as the variations in the audiovisual adaptations of “Three-Body Problem.” Notably, I mentioned how Tencent’s adaptation of the *Three-Body Problem* faced delays as it awaited government approval and underwent substantial changes. These observations point to the current environment of heightened censorship in China, particularly concerning representations of historical facts and events in the country.

I would like to take this opportunity to draw a parallel with a discussion I had in Chapter 3, concerning the film *The Great Wall*. During that discussion, I explored the use of genre films as a means to increase cultural accessibility, catering to audiences with limited cultural knowledge by incorporating easily understandable elements. In this context, the selection of science fiction films to promote Chinese strategic narratives appears intentional. Throughout this section, various articles have highlighted that Chinese science fiction films often share similarities with Western science fiction stories. These common references and genre conventions contribute to their potential for international success and the dissemination of Chinese strategic narratives.

In the next subchapter, I will analyze perhaps the most emblematic Chinese main-melody film, *Wolf Warrior 2*.

#### **4.3. An analysis of *Wolf Warrior 2* (2017)**

In an article titled “West Feels Challenged by China’s New ‘Wolf Warrior’ Diplomacy,” the Chinese newspaper *Global Times* (2020) explained that Chinese diplomats were traditionally known for their conservative and discreet approach to domestic and international affairs. This demeanor often led to perceptions of Chinese diplomats as enigmatic, and the Chinese people were characterized as “inscrutable.” During this period, there was less hostility and fewer instances of excessive criticism from the Western world. However, both the global landscape and Chinese diplomats themselves have undergone a transformation. In the eyes of some Western observers, Chinese diplomats have adopted a more assertive style of diplomacy known as the “Wolf Warrior” approach, named after a patriotic action film released in 2015 and its subsequent sequel in 2017. This shift in diplomatic strategy has created a sense of challenge and unease among Western nations (*Global Times* 2020).

In this section, I will analyze the Chinese blockbuster film *Wolf Warrior 2*, which has

played a significant role in shaping China's diplomatic approach, known as Wolf Warrior diplomacy. The film's impact on China's diplomatic reputation justifies its inclusion in this thesis conducted at an Institute of International Relations, emphasizing the integration of popular culture in the field of International Relations.

*Wolf Warrior 2* was once China's highest-grossing film until it was surpassed by another blockbuster in 2022, *The Battle at Lake Changjin*. This achievement highlights the film's embodiment of the themes discussed in this chapter. Produced by a private studio, *Wolf Warrior 2* draws on Hollywood techniques and expertise to create a mainstream film with broad appeal, aspiring to become a global blockbuster. It successfully combines technological innovations with Chinese strategic narratives, reflecting shifts in the country's strategic policy and projecting a more assertive and engaged China on the world stage.

As a product of a private studio, *Wolf Warrior 2* exemplifies the current landscape of Chinese blockbuster production. It navigates a nuanced relationship with the state, adhering to government guidelines and interpretations of national interests while also allowing room for the filmmakers' creative aspirations. Director and lead actor Wu Jing stated that he made the film in response to the Chinese audience's desire for something different. Consequently, analyzing this film provides valuable insights into how China uses cinema as a soft power tool to advance its strategic narratives.

This subchapter will begin by examining the historical context surrounding the production of *Wolf Warrior 2*. Subsequently, I will delve into an analysis of the film itself, interpreting its central themes and narratives. Finally, I will explore the significant lessons that *Wolf Warrior 2* conveys regarding China's use of cinema as a soft power instrument for promoting strategic narratives. The goal is to understand its potential influence on Chinese foreign policy and its relationship with the United States.

#### 4.3.1. History and Contextualization of *Wolf Warrior 2*

In an article titled "*Wolf Warrior 2: Imagining the Chinese Century*," Chris Berry (2018) examines the context surrounding Chinese blockbusters like *Wolf Warrior 2*. He notes that scholars have been studying China's global ambitions, particularly President Xi Jinping's vision for the Belt and Road Initiative, launched in 2013 and aimed at creating a global trade network. To support these economic interests, China established its first overseas military base

in Djibouti in 2017. Berry (2018) questions how Chinese cinema has responded to these developments, considering the historical absence of Chinese encounters with foreigners in films.

Berry (2018) highlights that in the past, Chinese cinema focused on foreigners coming to China, with little exploration of narratives set outside the country. The “reform and opening up” policy in the late 1970s did introduce foreign elements, but the emphasis was still on foreign things entering China. However, Berry (2018) notes a shift in recent years, with Chinese films increasingly featuring at least one scene set overseas. While full stories set abroad remain rare, except for travel romances, even these films often avoid narratives involving actual Chinese encounters with foreigners, limiting romances to Chinese characters.

Regarding films depicting China’s global military presence, Berry (2018) acknowledges that they have been infrequent and not particularly successful at the box office. This changed with the release of *Wolf Warrior 2* in 2017, a highly successful action-adventure film reminiscent of *Rambo*. The movie is set in an unidentified failing state, with Islamic extremist insurgents as the main villains (likely inspired by China’s concerns about its Xinjiang province), along with American and European mercenaries (C. Berry 2018).

Berry (2018) points out that commentators have observed *Wolf Warrior 2*’s borrowing from Hollywood conventions. Given the lack of a local tradition in military adventure films, it is understandable that Chinese filmmakers would draw inspiration from Hollywood. Although some critics have criticized the film for adopting what they perceive as negative aspects of Western culture, it has resonated with local audiences (C. Berry 2018).

As previously discussed, it is worth noting that Xiao Yang (2023) has also brought attention to the crucial role played by the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in shaping what she refers to as the wolf warrior cycle. In the upcoming section, I will delve deeper into her analysis. In essence, Xiao Yang (2023) asserts that these films present China’s foreign policies through three distinct lenses: showcasing economic assistance to BRI member countries, highlighting China’s commitment to regional cooperation, and depicting China’s active involvement in global governance.

Ying Zhu (2020) explores the Chinese film industry’s determination to create globally appealing blockbusters that are distinctly Chinese and feature their own action hero. One notable example is *Wolf Warrior 2*, which follows a muscular Chinese action hero as he battles rebels and Western mercenaries in an unnamed African country, where China is portrayed as constructing hospitals and providing humanitarian aid. The movie’s massive success, grossing \$854 million and generating Hollywood media attention, stands in contrast to the lukewarm reception of the 2016’s co-production *The Great Wall* (Zhu 2020).

Zhu (2020) highlights the cultural significance of *Rambo: First Blood* when it was screened in China in 1985. While Western audiences debated the film's fascist undertones, Chinese officials readily endorsed its plot, which depicted a Vietnam veteran resisting oppressive capitalist authorities represented by US military personnel, state police, and a sheriff wearing a US flag shoulder patch. Chinese audiences were captivated by the film's action sequences involving helicopters, four-wheel-drive vehicles, and powerful firearms, which were novel experiences for many Chinese viewers. Rambo made Sylvester Stallone an overnight sensation in China. Zhu notes that it took 32 years for China to develop its own version of Rambo, featuring a Chinese rebel fighting against evil Western forces rather than against his own government (Zhu 2020).

Furthermore, Zhu (2020) emphasizes the involvement of Hollywood in the production of *Wolf Warrior 2*. Director and lead actor Wu Jing enlisted the expertise of Joe and Anthony Russo as consultants, Sam Hargrave as the stunt director, and Joseph Trapanese as the composer, along with a predominantly foreign sound unit. American actor Frank Grillo also played an antagonist alongside Wu. This combination of action, comic relief, English dialogue, and the participation of seasoned Hollywood talent as antagonistic forces proved successful, resonating with Chinese audiences who appreciated the film's patriotism and relentless action. Although not a co-production, *Wolf Warrior 2* showcased China's generosity in Africa and its growing international power by employing American talent. China has shifted from collaborating with Hollywood to purchasing its expertise, technology, and talent to construct and promote its own narrative. Zhu (2020) suggests that this marks a transition from soft power, based on attraction and persuasion, to sharp power, which aims to influence the political and information environments of targeted countries.

Sheldon Lu (2021) examines how contemporary Chinese cinema and visual culture contribute to shaping China's national image. One strategy to create a global sensation, as argued by the author, is through the production of Chinese blockbusters that depict China's international exploits and growing strength. These Hollywood-style Chinese action and science fiction films serve to depict and envision China's ascent on the global stage. Lu includes notable examples of such films include *Wolf Warrior* (2015), *Wolf Warrior 2* (2017), *Operation Mekong* (2016), *Operation Red Sea* (2018), and *Sky Hunter* (2017).

Lu (2021) explains how these films revolve around special Chinese task forces operating both within and beyond China's borders, venturing into regions such as Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. The films feature an international cast comprising individuals from various ethnic backgrounds, including Chinese, white, black, Asian, African, American, and

European. Within the narratives, the Chinese navy, air force, and special task forces come to the rescue, thwarting the plans of bandits and terrorists led by white European and American mercenaries.

Shaun Breslin (2020) argues that the historical narrative of the “Century of Humiliation” plays a crucial role in shaping Chinese perceptions of the world as a ruthless jungle where only the strongest survive. This narrative strongly influences how Chinese people view the “West,” particularly countries that are perceived to have exploited China during the century following the Opium Wars, including Britain, France, the United States, and Japan. The enduring impact of the “Century of Humiliation” is also evident in Chinese perceptions of the United States and Western Europe (Breslin 2020).

Breslin (2020) points to the 1993 television drama *A Beijinger in New York* as an example of the emergence of anti-American sentiment in China during the post-Tiananmen era and the “patriotic education” campaign of the early 1990s. The drama featured repeated racist comments about Americans and portrayed the protagonist fulfilling a male Chinese nationalist fantasy by defeating his male American rival and engaging in relationships with white women. Despite its controversial content, the show was widely popular (Breslin 2020).

Breslin (2020) further highlights the film *Wolf Warrior 2*, in which director and lead actor Wu Jing portrays Leng Feng, a Chinese counterpart to Rambo, who ultimately kills an American mercenary named “Big Daddy” in the climactic scene. The film’s promotional poster features Leng raising his middle finger with the slogan, “Anyone who offends China, no matter how far, will be exterminated.” These depictions of revenge are no longer concealed, reflecting a shift in Chinese sentiment and storytelling (Breslin 2020).

Stephen Teo (2019) highlights the exceptional impact of *Wolf Warrior 2*, which has been described as a “phenomenon-grade” movie due to its significant influence in both the market and social contexts. According to Teo (2019), the film’s market success and its content are inherently connected, albeit with certain contradictions. The main contradiction lies in the film’s portrayal of its hero, who embodies individualistic and militaristic traits in a Hollywood style, while also representing a “third-world” socialist chivalric archetype reminiscent of Maoist propaganda from the 1960s. Teo (2019) argues that regardless of one’s opinion about the film, *Wolf Warrior 2* will likely be remembered as a game-changer in the Chinese film industry, propelling it towards becoming the largest film market globally.

Teo (2019) emphasizes the importance of the film’s success, noting that it grossed over US\$800 million, setting a new record in the Chinese and global film markets. It ranks fifty-sixth among the highest-grossing films of all time, with no other Chinese film on the list. Teo

(2019) highlights that the film's remarkable box-office performance drew attention not only to the film itself but also to the vast film market in mainland China. This market, which experienced uncertain development in the early 2000s, has now flourished.

Teo (2019) associates this success with the evolution of the Chinese film market, a topic I have discussed throughout this dissertation. The scholar mentions the reforms that the Chinese film market underwent during the 1980s and 1990s, noting that they were more cautious compared to reforms in other sectors of the economy due to the government's desire to maintain control over production and distribution for ideological reasons. Private production and distribution companies began to emerge in the early 2000s but still faced constraints, as the state played a guiding role in the production of main-melody films.

China's film market experienced rapid growth in the six to seven years following 2010, marking a breakthrough into market-driven growth after three decades of reforms and readjustments (Teo 2019). The success of *Wolf Warrior 2* represented the peak of commercial hits within the boundaries of Chinese mainstream ideology. The market had already reached a new high in 2010. Subsequently, growth continued to rise, fueled by the construction of new multiplexes and the increasing number of screens, making China the country with the most film screens worldwide. In 2015, growth reached a record 48.7%, leading some observers to speculate that China would soon overtake the U.S. as the world's largest single film market (Teo 2019).

However, Teo (2019) highlights that the Chinese film market faced setbacks during its growth and evolution. In 2016, the market experienced a sudden decline, leading commentators to declare the end of a period of tremendous growth. Although the market was still expanding, the rate of growth was comparatively modest at 3.7%. This slowdown mirrored China's overall economic slump, as people sought less expensive alternatives for entertainment. Many discussions focused on the film sector's bubble, with concerns about unreliable box-office statistics inflated by ticket sales subsidies from online platforms. Nonetheless, Teo (2019) argues that the downturn was more likely due to audiences staying away because of poor film quality, mentioning that consumers had become more discerning, rational, and mature in their movie choices.

It is particularly noteworthy that the government responded to the downturn by enacting the Film Industry Promotion Law in November 2016 (Teo 2019). This law aimed to boost the film industry through increased investment, reduced taxation, and market reforms targeting fraud and false reporting of ticket sales (Teo 2019). This aligns with the recurring argument in this dissertation about the Chinese government's interventions to guide the growth of the film



industry, in line with Xi Jinping's emphasis on strengthening the industry and effectively telling China's stories (Xi 2014; 2017; 2022).

Implemented in March 2017, the law paved the way for the market's resurgence, highlighted by the extraordinary success of *Wolf Warrior 2* in the summer of that year (Teo 2019). The film's remarkable performance led to a revitalization of the market, with a significant increase of up to 13.45% and renewed optimism among industry players (Teo 2019). Prior to this unexpected success, the market had been anticipated to remain sluggish, with box-office revenue considerably lower than in 2016. *Wolf Warrior 2* single-handedly reinvigorated the market, restoring investor confidence and propelling China further towards dominance in the global film market (Teo 2019).

Teo (2019) argues that doubts surrounding the market reflect China's macroeconomic challenges, including economic slowdown, mounting debt, and the property bubble, as well as concerns about the domestic industry's ability to produce high-quality blockbusters that can attract audiences. China is in the process of learning about the intricacies of the market and managing its complexities. The rapid expansion of the film market over the past decade has been a remarkable phenomenon. Even in 2002, when Zhang Yimou's blockbuster film *Hero* achieved unprecedented success, the Chinese film market was considered too insignificant to sustain such triumphs. However, the triumph of *Wolf Warrior 2* completely transformed this dynamic, indicating that the domestic market is self-sustaining for domestic blockbusters and capable of accommodating the ambitions of foreign films.

In relation to the influence of Hollywood, Teo (2019) cites Wendy Su (2016), who argues that Chinese film professionals have not only imitated Hollywood's big-budget, high-tech model but also embraced its distribution and exhibition system. This has led to the development of a market-oriented film industry, where box office revenue is the primary measure of a film's success (Su 2016). Teo (2019) agrees with Su's assertions, especially when considering the success of *Wolf Warrior 2*. The film's "phenomenon" status can be attributed to its successful emulation of various aspects of the Hollywood paradigm, including the militaristic action-adventure formula prevalent in main-melody films. It signifies a more mature stage in China's adoption of Hollywood's distribution-exhibition system, as it is the first Chinese film to achieve massive box office success by following the Hollywood formula (Teo 2019).

Teo (2019) cautions that while *Wolf Warrior 2* has been a massive success in China, it has struggled to resonate with international audiences. The film's failure to appeal globally can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, the West may not be ready for a Chinese hero from

mainland China, unlike the popularity of Bruce Lee in the 1970s. Secondly, Wu Jing, the star of *Wolf Warrior 2*, lacks the pre-existing Hollywood presence that Lee had. Additionally, the display of Chinese patriotism in the film may be off-putting for Western audiences, despite double standards regarding Western nationalism in films. Furthermore, non-Western films historically face challenges in cultural acceptance by Western audiences, and the political factors portrayed in *Wolf Warrior 2* may further hinder its reception. Nonetheless, Teo (2019) emphasizes that *Wolf Warrior 2* is undeniably political, depicting China's geopolitical ambitions and military capabilities while reflecting mainstream values of selfless heroism and love for the country.

In contrast, Ying Zhu (2020) presents a different explanation for the film's international failure. According to the scholar, the excessively violent nature of the Chinese film did not resonate as widely as Rambo did on a global scale, as the jingoistic elements masked as Chinese patriotism and the racist portrayal of the nameless and ignorant Africans are not aligned with contemporary sensitivities (Zhu 2020). The world is not eager to replace American heroes with Chinese heroes. *Wolf Warrior 2* only achieved a gross of \$2.3 million in the North American market, while the Chinese box office accounted for 98.1% of the total earnings. Zhu (2020) argues that China must consider the type of influence it wishes to project to the rest of the world through its cinematic images, now that it has the capability to produce such images on its own terms. On the domestic front, the film surpassed Hollywood imports at the box office, bolstering the Chinese film industry and serving as a reminder that the domestic market is lucrative enough in itself, regardless of its global cultural impact (Zhu 2020).

Truly, it is crucial to view this "failure" from a broader perspective. Despite the majority of its box office earnings coming from the domestic market, they were astonishing. As highlighted by Schwartzel (2022), *Wolf Warrior 2* generated more revenue in China in 2017 than the global earnings of *Thor: Ragnarok* and *Wonder Woman* combined. This blockbuster success has revolutionized the landscape in China. As Schwartzel suggests, they now have a homegrown blockbuster to celebrate. While China initially relied on the American film industry for financial gains and entertainment at the beginning of the decade, they reached a point where they no longer depended on American content.

Schwartzel (2022) argues that *Wolf Warrior 2* successfully packaged Xi's propagandistic message within an entertaining cinematic experience. It presented Chinese audiences with a hero who could stand alongside the likes of *Captain America*, resonating with the emerging spirit of a rising nation. This achievement paved the way for subsequent Chinese-made blockbusters that offered reinterpretations of beloved American classics from the 1980s.

Hollywood studios turned to Chinese partners who understood the themes that would captivate discerning Chinese audiences, who had become more selective and no longer satisfied with whatever Hollywood offered. The global film industry, which had previously held the dominant position, now found itself learning from China, which, both in the on-screen success of *Wolf Warrior 2* and its box office triumphs, emerged victorious. The past decade had been leading up to this moment, and *Wolf Warrior 2* served as the catalyst. Stories circulated of audiences spontaneously singing the Chinese national anthem as the credits rolled, indicating that China had a blockbuster that evoked pride and celebration among its people (Schwartzel 2022).

One of the notable aspects to consider in relation to *Wolf Warrior 2* is its status as a private project. Wu Jing, the director and star of the films, acted as an individual while being indirectly influenced by the Chinese government. Schwartzel (2022) narrates that Wu Jing grew up in the new China, born in Beijing in 1974, and was sent to learn martial arts at the Beijing Wushu Academy, continuing a family tradition since the Qing dynasty. Inspired by Bruce Lee movies, Wu Jing decided to follow in his footsteps. In 2008, during a visit to earthquake-affected Sichuan villages, he witnessed Chinese soldiers rescuing victims, which deeply moved him. This experience motivated him to create a film to honor their heroism (Schwartzel 2022). Wu Jing took a financial risk by securing a second mortgage to finance the \$12 million cost of producing the original *Wolf Warrior* film. Although it achieved moderate success, grossing \$81 million, it was unlikely to anticipate a more than tenfold increase in revenue for the sequel. However, *Wolf Warrior 2* struck a chord with the audience, especially Chinese viewers who had long been exposed to Western heroes and were now emotionally invested in seeing their own represented on screen (Schwartzel 2022).

Schwartzel (2022) highlights the success formula employed by Beijing Culture, the production company that collaborated with Wu Jing on *Wolf Warrior 2*. Instead of relying on state-produced propaganda, Beijing Culture created patriotic movies that blended pro-China messaging with the commercial appeal of action films (Schwartzel 2022). Originally established in 1997 as Beijing Tourism, the company initially owned temples, parks, and hotels. As Xi encouraged companies to venture into the entertainment industry, Beijing Tourism, along with Wanda and other companies, acquired production companies (Schwartzel 2022). This led to the formation of Beijing Culture, an entertainment company with a mission to promote Chinese culture through movies.

Schwartzel (2022) also points out Wu Jing's connections with Hollywood. To develop *Wolf Warrior 2*, Wu sought assistance from professionals in the West who had worked on major Hollywood blockbusters. The Russo brothers, known for directing *Captain America* films and

the *Avengers* series, collaborated with Wu in creating Leng Feng, China's own superhero. As a gesture of gratitude to Beijing Culture for their investment, the Russo brothers provided filmmaking advice during a meeting at Disney's studio lot, with Wu even appearing in camouflage attire (Schwartzel 2022). They recommended hiring Sam Hargrave, a stuntman and action coordinator known for his work on *Avengers*, *Captain America*, and *Hunger Games* movies, to enhance the film's fight scenes. Additionally, Frank Grillo, an actor they had previously directed as a villain in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, was paid \$1 million to play the character of Big Daddy. Despite their involvement, the Russo brothers declined an executive producer credit, cautious about potentially jeopardizing their reputation by associating their name with the movie (Schwartzel 2022). Beijing Culture maintained a Chinese focus for the story and characters while outsourcing specific components that contribute to a film's sophistication, such as special effects, fight choreography, and music. Wu emphasized the importance of learning from foreign counterparts like Hollywood while preserving the unique "Chinese flavor" by showcasing stories that reflect Chinese lives (Schwartzel 2022).

Teo (2019) also highlights the intriguing aspect of *Wolf Warrior 2* being a project led by a private studio, which may have taken the government by surprise. Teo (2019) draws an interesting comparison with *The Founding of an Army*, a state-commissioned film released simultaneously with *Wolf Warrior 2* to commemorate the ninetieth anniversary of the People's Liberation Army. Unlike *Wolf Warrior 2*, *The Founding of an Army* failed to resonate with audiences, possibly due to its lack of an individualistic yet selfless superhero and its adherence to the outdated conventions of Party heroism. Despite its attempt to modernize by emulating Hollywood's big-budget, high-tech approach through Hong Kong's director Andrew Lau's involvement, it failed to break free from the limitations of traditional main-melody war films.

While the success of *Wolf Warrior 2* may not have displeased the Chinese authorities, it may have caught them off guard since the film was not a state-commissioned project (Teo 2019). This unexpected triumph has prompted them to contemplate the formula for success employed by a privately-funded production like *Wolf Warrior 2*. Chinese scholars suggested that the film's positive reception is attributed to the protagonist's alignment with the audience's aesthetic expectations and emotional resonance (Teo 2019). Leng Feng, depicted as a complex character with both strength and introspection, embodies an iron-fisted hero as well as a compassionate adult. His mission involves seeking personal revenge while shouldering the burden of collective struggle. *Wolf Warrior 2* effectively transforms the traditional didactic ideological style into a formula that readily embraces mainstream values among the younger generation. Its success demonstrates the vast potential for development within the main-melody

film subfield, and with the right creative approach, it can achieve artistic, commercial, and mainstream success (Teo 2019).

Teo (2019) concludes that the *Wolf Warrior 2* phenomenon is significant not only for its groundbreaking impact on the market but also for its transformation of the main-melody tendency in Chinese cinema. It introduces innovative conceptual themes in Chinese heroism, combining the self-assertiveness of the hero's muscular physique with selfless dedication to duty and offering friendship and assistance to Africans. Wu Jing personifies both the individualistic body and the selfless martial hero in ways not seen in Chinese-language cinema since the time of Bruce Lee. The film's transformative role in reconfiguring the main-melody film genre reflects the overwhelming influence of the state on Chinese cinema. While the hero and narrative invoke and reveal the main melody, in this film, the main melody resembles a tune of Hollywood rather than August First (the film studio founded by the PLA). The film's immense box office success in China solidifies its position as one of the highest-grossing films of all time. The question now is whether Chinese cinema will transform its cinematic products into a truly global phenomena or if the domestic market alone will suffice to fulfill the ambitions of Chinese filmmakers and the Chinese state (Teo 2019).

In this section, I discussed the context and history of the film *Wolf Warrior 2*. I demonstrated how the film relates to a broader context of China's more assertive and expansive foreign policy, as the country increasingly engages with its surroundings and international relations. A key highlight is the Belt and Road Initiative, launched in 2013 by Xi Jinping, which embodies the idea of a more globally present China, echoed in many main-melody films, including *Wolf Warrior 2*. I also discussed how the evolution of the Chinese film market, as previously mentioned throughout this dissertation, has led to the adoption of foreign film models, as China had long restricted the entry of foreigners into the country and films depicting these narrative dynamics. Therefore, the model was based on traditional main-melody films that portrayed the history, successes, and triumphs of China, but lacked a representation of China's presence abroad. Thus, the association with *Rambo* makes sense, as it represents a model that aligns with China's reform and opening-up process in the 1980s and captures the attention of the Chinese audience. I also discussed how, during the market reform process, there was an improvement in the quality of films, as seen in previous sections. However, in the early 2010s, there was a stagnation in 2016, reflecting China's overall economic difficulties, and the audience became more selective about the films they watched. Nevertheless, the government intervened by issuing guidelines to strengthen the film industry, and the market responded by producing films like *Wolf Warrior 2*, once again demonstrating the government's active role in

strengthening the film industry, both in terms of the economy and the capacity to convey strategic messages and narratives through films. I also pointed out the interesting aspect of the film being produced by a private studio rather than a state-owned studio or a production commissioned by the government. I mentioned that Wu Jing, the film's star, actor, and director, reflects these changes in China, and he produces a film that showcases China's heroism, supported by a company that has transformed into a film production company under the government's guidance to tell more stories about China through cinema. Thus, we see that the context of China's increasing assertiveness, its ongoing transformation to be more globally present and tell its stories to the world, has influenced private studios, actors, and directors who no longer solely produce main-melody films as guided or commissioned by the state, but instead aim to share their narratives of a more assertive China. In the next section, I will analyze the film itself, seeking to understand its main themes and narratives and linking them to the strategic narratives of China's foreign policy that the government aims to promote through its main-melody films.

In this section, I explored how the film *Wolf Warrior 2* aligns with China's assertive foreign policy and its global engagement. The Belt and Road Initiative, initiated by Xi Jinping in 2013, exemplifies China's aim for a stronger international presence, a theme echoed in many main-melody films, including *Wolf Warrior 2*.

I discussed the evolution of the Chinese film market and main melody movies. Traditionally, main-melody films focused on China's history and achievements but lacked representation of China's presence beyond its borders. The entry of *Rambo* during the 1980s reform and opening-up period resonated with Chinese audiences, showcasing military actions abroad.

Market reforms have led to improved film quality, although a mid-2010s stagnation reflected China's economic challenges and a more discerning audience. However, government intervention and industry guidelines revitalized the film industry, resulting in films like *Wolf Warrior 2* that convey strategic messages and narratives.

Notably, the film's production by a private studio, guided by Wu Jing, also reflects China's evolving landscape. It demonstrates how private studios and filmmakers now strive to share narratives of a more assertive China, departing from state-guided main-melody films.

In the next section, I will analyze the film's themes and narratives, connecting them to Chinese strategic narratives promoted through main-melody films.

#### 4.3.2. *Wolf Warrior 2: the film*

Big Daddy (played by the American actor Frank Grillo): People like you will always be inferior to people like me. Get used to it. Get fucking used to it.

Leng Feng (played by the Chinese actor Wu Jing): That's fucking history.

In the final scene of *Wolf Warrior 2*, this dialogue between the hero and the villain unfolds. Big Daddy, portrayed by Frank Grillo, a familiar face from his role as a villain in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, represents an English-speaking Western mercenary. On the other hand, our hero, Leng Feng, played by the Chinese star Wu Jing, embodies a former member of the PLA's elite group, now leads a life as a freelancer security guard while dedicating his spare time to rescuing endangered citizens from extremists and English-speaking white mercenaries. The confrontation escalates as Leng Feng passionately stabs Big Daddy in the neck multiple times, ultimately delivering a frenzied and fatal blow.

In this section, I will delve into the analysis of the film *Wolf Warrior 2*, aiming to identify its core themes and their alignment with Chinese strategic narratives. To begin, it is important to understand the concept of "Wolf Warrior diplomacy" and its significance in the Chinese context. As mentioned earlier in this subchapter, the article from the *Global Times* titled "West Feels Challenged by China's New 'Wolf Warrior' Diplomacy" sheds light on this matter. The article argues that as China assumes a more prominent position on the global stage, alongside the relative decline of the West, many Western countries feel uneasy and resort to unwarranted accusations against China. The perception among Westerners is that China no longer demonstrates the same level of humility as before. The West, rooted in a self-centered mindset, believes it holds the moral high ground and possesses the exclusive authority to criticize those it deems subservient (*Global Times* 2020).

According to the article, the days of China's subjugation are long gone, and its elevated status in the world necessitates an unwavering defense of its national interests. This perceived "Wolf Warrior" style of Chinese diplomacy arises from the shifting power dynamics between China and the West. When the West fails to uphold its own interests, it resorts to frantic and hooligan-esque diplomacy as an attempt to salvage its diminishing dignity. In facing disgrace, Western diplomats gain a glimpse of China's "Wolf Warrior" diplomacy. Moreover, as Chinese diplomacy increasingly represents the interests of its people, the nation has become more astute in diplomatic affairs, no longer content with a feeble diplomatic approach (*Global Times* 2020).

Furthermore, the *Global Times* states that some argue China is deviating from its

longstanding principle of “hiding its ability and biding its time,” which it adhered to over the past 30 years. However, the “Wolf Warrior” style of diplomacy does not contradict this principle; it is simply less subtle. The initial rationale behind this principle was to mitigate ideological conflicts and prioritize development, as China’s national policy has always emphasized economic growth. China embraces globalization and multilateral cooperation. The growing global influence of China can largely be attributed to internationalization and the power of market forces. The article concludes by suggesting that perhaps the West is wary of China’s “Wolf Warrior” style of diplomacy because it fearlessly exposes the true face of the West (*Global Times* 2020).

In this editorial from the *Global Times*, there are clear indications of China’s interpretation of the term “Wolf Warrior diplomacy.” The article’s assertion that “the days when China could be subjugated are long gone” (*Global Times* 2020) closely aligns with the sentiment expressed in the dialogue of *Wolf Warrior 2*. Additionally, the article’s explanation that there is no contradiction with the long-held principle of “hiding its ability and biding its time,” but rather a less subtle approach (*Global Times* 2020), is strongly exemplified by the overt manner in which the Chinese character triumphs over the American character in the film’s final battle. It represents a new stance befitting a new China, one that is more aware of its global position and strengths, no longer yielding to the dictates of external powers, and fearlessly revealing the true face of the West.

The director and lead actor of the film, Wu Jing, also discussed the theme. In an interview with Evan Osnos of *The New Yorker*, Wu Jing mentioned that in the past, Chinese films primarily focused on topics such as the Opium Wars, depicting how other countries waged wars against China. However, Wu Jing emphasized that the Chinese people have always desired to see their country empowered to protect its citizens and contribute to global peace (Osnos 2018). Additionally, Kurt Campbell (Campbell 2018) suggests that China’s rapid expansion of power and ambition could have implications beyond the Asia-Pacific region, as its leaders make decisions that may shape events on a global scale for the first time in history.

But what is the movie’s plot? Leng Feng (portrayed by Wu Jing) is a former member of the Wolf Warriors, an elite group in the People’s Liberation Army, residing in a fictional and unnamed African country. When a civil war breaks out in the nation instigated by Western mercenaries, Leng Feng takes it upon himself to rescue innocent civilians and brings them to the safety of the Chinese embassy. Throughout his journey, he encounters various challenges and embarks on daring missions to save more lives, including that of an American doctor. Eventually, Leng Feng confronts and defeats the American mercenary villain, leading the



rescued civilians to safety, all under the protection of the Chinese flag.

As Schwartzel points out, this storyline is reminiscent of familiar American action films, following what he refers to as the “Bruce Willis template.” Wu Jing’s character, in his efforts to protect the locals from terrorists and mercenaries, embodies the spirit of Sylvester Stallone (Schwartzel 2022). Despite being surrounded by machine-gun fire, he miraculously avoids getting hit. He effortlessly takes down numerous adversaries using switchblades and martial arts techniques. He displays compassion towards young children and outperforms others in drinking contests. In an impromptu soccer match, he scores a goal and proudly flexes his muscles to impress the women. When resources are scarce during a critical battle, he ingeniously crafts a deadly arrow using poisonous sap extracted from a desert cactus, demonstrating his resourcefulness in the face of adversity (Schwartzel 2022).



**Figure 8:** The muscular Leng Feng in *Wolf Warrior 2*. **Source:** Xinhua.

Chris Berry (2018) engages in a discussion regarding the comparison between Leng Feng and Rambo. In the film *Wolf Warrior 2*, Leng Feng, portrayed by Wu Jing, shares similarities with Sylvester Stallone’s troubled character, Rambo. Like Rambo, Leng Feng is a former special-ops soldier with a tendency to defy orders and exhibit unrestrained behavior, as depicted in the original *Wolf Warrior* film from 2015.

Berry (2018) highlights that the film has faced criticism for seemingly adopting negative aspects of Hollywood formulas and applying them in a Chinese context. These critiques, both internal and external to China, focus on two primary concerns. Firstly, Leng Feng's portrayal of violent and unpredictable behavior is seen as an example of "toxic masculinity" that resolves conflicts through excessive violence. Secondly, Africa is once again depicted as a chaotic and violent setting where local women and children require protection from foreign men, aligning with Orientalist notions of the "white man's burden" (C. Berry 2018, 39).

However, Berry (2018) emphasizes that *Wolf Warrior 2* also reflects Chinese concerns and conditions alongside Hollywood influences. The choice of Leng's adversary is not accidental. Just as Bruce Lee confronts villains from various ethnicities before facing a white antagonist in his films, Leng Feng follows a similar pattern in *Wolf Warrior 2*. Eventually, he confronts and defeats the evil American mercenary, Big Daddy, in a climactic scene that showcases his inability to control his righteous anger, reminiscent of Rambo's character.

Berry (2018) argues that comprehending the focus on defeating the white antagonist requires an understanding of China's history. In the final confrontation, Big Daddy triggers the Chinese audience by asserting, "People like you will always be inferior to people like me," to which Leng Feng defiantly responds, "That's fucking history," before launching into his frenzied attack. This exchange resonates with China's historical humiliation and the ongoing desire to overcome it. The "century of humiliation," starting with the Opium Wars in the nineteenth century, has been a significant narrative in Chinese history, officially ending with Japan's defeat and the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949. However, President Xi Jinping frequently invokes this history to cultivate patriotic sentiment in present times (C. Berry 2018).

This more assertive tone is also evident in a recent speech delivered by Xi Jinping during the commemoration of the centenary of the Communist Party of China in 2021. In the official English translation of the speech, released by the Chinese media, Xi Jinping made the following statement:

We Chinese are a people who uphold justice and are not intimidated by threats of force. As a nation, we have a strong sense of pride and confidence. We have never bullied, oppressed, or subjugated the people of any other country, and we never will. By the same token, we will never allow any foreign force to bully, oppress, or subjugate us. Anyone who would attempt to do so will find themselves on a collision course with a great wall of steel forged by over 1.4 billion Chinese people (Xi 2021).

It is a remarkably clear expression in defense of national interests. However, a seemingly contentious translation issue led to a much less subtle message. As highlighted by

David Crawshaw and Alicia Chen (2021) in *The Washington Post*, Xi “strongly criticized unspecified ‘foreign forces’ and warned that any external attempts to subjugate the country would result in ‘heads bashed bloody against a Great Wall of steel.’” In *The New York Times*, Chris Buckley and Keith Bradsher (Buckley and Bradsher 2021) reported that, clad in a Mao suit, Xi Jinping proclaimed, “The Chinese people will never allow foreign forces to bully, oppress, or enslave us. Anyone with delusions of doing so will have their heads cracked and blood spilled on the Great Wall of steel forged from the flesh and blood of 1.4 billion Chinese people.”

As Viola Zhou (2021) points out, the Chinese president issued a seemingly ominous warning to foreign adversaries, although scholars hold different interpretations of it. Xi Jinping utilized a common Chinese phrase composed of four characters that literally translates to “head breaks, blood flows” as he vowed to defend China against hostile foreign forces. However, the everyday colloquial usage of this idiom does not always evoke images of shattered skulls and gushing blood. In ordinary conversations and writings in China, the idiom is employed to describe someone’s battered condition following a fight or accident. For example, one might say, “I fell and got my head broken, blood flowing.” Some analysts and journalists argue that Xi employed the phrase simply to convey a sense of determination, while others suggest that its deliberate inclusion in a carefully orchestrated event could imply a veiled threat of war (V. Zhou 2021). Regardless, whether more or less subtle, there was undeniably a forceful assertion that China will no longer tolerate aggression. Or, as Leng Feng put it to Big Daddy in *Wolf Warrior 2*: “That’s fucking history.”



**Figure 9:** Big Daddy and Leng Feng fighting at the end of *Wolf Warrior 2*. **Source:** promotional material.

Chris Berry (2018) also discusses the ending scene of the film, where a picture of a Chinese passport appears on-screen, accompanied by the message: “Citizens of the People’s Republic of China, when you encounter danger in a foreign land, do not give up! Please remember, at your back stands a strong motherland.” Berry (2018) suggests that the inclusion of this message reflects a broader concern about the anxiety of venturing overseas as a new experience, as well as a specific worry about the Chinese government’s ability to assist its citizens in times of trouble. In the past, few citizens of the People’s Republic ventured abroad, but over the last decade, there has been a significant increase in Chinese students and businessmen traveling worldwide. Chinese outbound tourism has experienced explosive growth, surpassing the United States as the most important outbound tourism market.

Furthermore, Berry (2018) points out that the film’s setting is not coincidental, considering recent events. During the Arab Spring in 2011, the Chinese government faced challenges evacuating around 35,000 overseas workers and expatriates from Libya, with the Chinese military arriving too late to provide substantial help. However, when trouble emerged in Yemen in 2015, the Chinese navy was prepared and successfully rescued not only its own nationals but also foreigners, garnering attention in China. This history suggests that the choice of Africa as the setting in *Wolf Warrior 2* carries significance (C. Berry 2018). It also underscores the importance of analyzing popular culture and cinema in the field of International Relations.

Berry (2018) also delves into the characteristics of autonomy, individualism, and masculinity embodied by the character Leng Feng. Berry (2018) acknowledges the rebellious and individualistic nature of Leng, and many critics argued that these traits deviate from the Chinese ideal and align with the Hollywood model of Rambo. Despite the strong patriotism depicted in *Wolf Warrior 2*, Leng's portrayal demonstrates a certain level of autonomy from the state, which is noteworthy given its combination with immense patriotism. The film's success suggests that although individualistic masculinity remains a contentious topic in China, the portrayal of unrestrained masculinity still resonates with many audiences, warranting further exploration of its significance (C. Berry 2018).

However, Berry (2018) cautions against hastily concluding that the success of *Wolf Warrior 2* indicates the establishment of jingoistic American masculinity in China. He notes that the film situates Leng outside the People's Republic of China, having been expelled from the Chinese armed forces due to his disobedience in the first film. This pattern evokes an older model, according to Berry. In Chinese culture, there are two positive models of masculinity. The first is *wen* masculinity, characterized by refinement and cultural sophistication, often associated with the scholar-gentleman who lacks aggressive traits. The second is *wu* masculinity, closer to what the West perceives as macho masculinity (C. Berry 2018). Interestingly, in Chinese culture, it is the *wen* masculinity that is regarded as attractive to women, while the *wu* masculinity requires suppressing desires to be an effective warrior. The *wen* man governs the kingdom and the home, while the *wu* man operates in the space outside civilization, safeguarding its borders and pursuing wrongdoers. This space is known as the *jianghu*, the "rivers-and-lakes outlaw world," familiar to martial arts film enthusiasts (C. Berry 2018).

Considering this dual model of masculinity, Berry (2018) highlights that Leng in *Wolf Warrior 2* draws not only from Rambo but also from the *wu* model of macho masculinity. However, in response to the need for narratives that reflect China's new global role, the *jianghu* is no longer confined to China but is represented by Africa in the film. This shift in geographical imagination raises intriguing questions about China's perception of the world beyond its borders and its role in that world. In the *jianghu*, anything goes in the pursuit of defeating enemies and protecting friends, contrasting with the strict self-control and ethical behavior expected in a civilized society. In light of the perspective presented in *Wolf Warrior 2*, Berry (2018) raises the question of whether the world outside the People's Republic is equivalent to the *jianghu*, an outlaw universe where anything is permitted in the pursuit of victory. This inquiry is interestingly related to the assertiveness expressed by Chinese leaders in what is

known as wolf warrior diplomacy, as mentioned earlier.

Berry (2018) concludes by discussing the parallels between Leng Feng and the Monkey King, a prominent figure in Chinese culture. Like Leng, the Monkey King is loyal and possesses superhuman fighting skills, but also exhibits impulsiveness, anger, and a lack of self-control. *Wolf Warrior 2* resembles an episode from the Monkey King's story, where he is banished and must prove himself to be forgiven. This process involves not only testing his martial skills but also assessing his ethical worth. Whether Leng has done enough to be redeemed remains to be seen, perhaps in the sequel (C. Berry 2018).

Berry's discussion on the historical and cultural aspects of China highlights the impact of cultural knowledge on our understanding of history. The lack of familiarity with a culture, which encompasses the shared background knowledge of a community (Y. Qin 2020a), can hinder our access to different layers of history. Additionally, it can shed light on the inclination towards genre films, such as adventure-action movies, as a means to promote Chinese strategic narratives. These films serve as a gateway to comprehending history by aligning with what Schwartzel (2022) described as "The Bruce Willis Template," thus having a high cultural discount.

Berry's conclusion highlights that *Wolf Warrior 2* has introduced a fresh subgenre to Chinese cinema known as the action-adventure overseas film. It is worth noting that this film is not the first to feature a protagonist who defies conventions and is exiled from China. *Operation Mekong* (2016) precedes it, where a similarly enraged hero bends the rules to aid Chinese authorities in combating drug trafficking in the Golden Triangle. Nonetheless, Berry argues that *Wolf Warrior 2* signifies a new chapter in Chinese cinema, aligning with the global resurgence of nationalism. The film portrays China transcending its previous isolation from and attempts to accommodate the West, opting instead for open hostility and confrontation towards Western powers (C. Berry 2018).

In this sense, Schwartzel (2022) argues that Leng Feng's battles against extremists and mercenaries in Africa in *Wolf Warrior 2* are intertwined with an underlying adversary: the United States. Schwartzel provides several instances to support this claim. For example, American sailors express admiration for Leng as their hero, overshadowing their own military contributions. When faced with a crisis, Leng and a woman contemplate seeking refuge at the U.S. consulate, where Marines are stationed. However, Leng questions the absence of their assistance, asking if the U.S. Marines are truly the best in the world. Later, when the woman calls the U.S. consulate for help, she is met with an answering machine. The film's primary antagonist, Big Daddy, the leader of the mercenary soldiers, embodies a repugnant portrayal of

American arrogance and entitlement. He dismisses the African villagers Leng seeks to protect, portraying China's stance to the continent: America has abandoned you, but we are here to offer aid. Schwartzel (2022) asserts that while Hollywood studios eliminated Chinese villains from their films, Chinese filmmakers did not reciprocate this gesture.

One of the points raised by Schwartzel relates to China-Africa relations. This issue was also mentioned by Berry (2018). In one notable scene during the factory rescue episode, there is a suggestion to separate the Chinese citizens from the local workers. However, all the characters with People's Liberation Army training, including Leng, reject this division and advocate for saving everyone associated with the Chinese-owned plant. Berry (2018) argues that this moment reflects class tensions in China, where the widening wealth gap has undermined the acceptance of Deng Xiaoping's idea of allowing some people to become wealthy first. Despite appearing subversive, this aligns with Xi Jinping's regime, which employs nationalism and an anti-corruption campaign fueled by resentment toward the wealthy to bolster its legitimacy. The rescue also reinforces China's portrayal as a friend to the African people rather than a new colonizer, rooted in its historical aid to countries like Ghana, Zambia, and Tanzania during the Mao era (C. Berry 2018).

Teo (2019) also discusses the significance of *Wolf Warrior 2* being set in Africa. According to the author, understanding the setting requires considering China's strong real-world connections with the continent, exerting power and influence through economic relations and military presence in UN peacekeeping missions (including a naval base in Djibouti). Teo emphasizes that the film, being a private enterprise production, differs qualitatively from traditional films where all heroic characters are Party members or acting on behalf of the Party. The African location, therefore, marks another important distinction, showcasing private Chinese individuals engaging in business or aiding the development of a foreign country. Leng Feng's unconventional nature is also evident in his attitudes towards Africans, as he has an African godson and readily offers his (and China's) protection to others. This reconfiguration of a Hollywood-style Chinese hero aligns with the aspirations of the modern Chinese state for global leadership, demonstrating China's rise as a powerful state that is still developing and seeking solidarity with other developing nations (Teo 2019).

Indeed, the film tackles several themes that are of great importance to the Chinese government, particularly concerning the China-Africa relationship. These themes include technical cooperation in healthcare and the strategic partnership between China and African nations. As noted by Joshua Eisenman and David H. Shinn (2018), China's engagement with Africa has undergone a transformation from ideological to a focus on securing resources,

accessing markets, and exerting strategic influence. The establishment of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2000 has marked a new phase in China's engagement with African countries. This framework has allowed China to institutionalize various initiatives, such as technical training programs, debt relief, financial assistance, political leadership development, and infrastructure projects across the continent (Eisenman and Shinn 2018).

The film consistently highlights the positive relationship between the Chinese and Africans. In one notable scene, the Chinese Ambassador in the fictional African country bravely stands in front of guns during a civil war to protect civilians, proclaiming, "Stand down! We are Chinese! China and Africa are friends." Miraculously, the rebels lower their weapons, and the innocent civilians find refuge on a Chinese vessel. In another instance, while traveling with survivors in a pickup truck through a conflict-ridden area, Leng Feng raises the Chinese flag high above his head to demonstrate their peaceful intentions. The rebels immediately recognize the flag and refrain from firing, acknowledging, "It's the Chinese! Hold your fire!"



**Figure 10:** Chinese flag saves the day in *Wolf Warrior 2*. **Source:** promotional material.

It is noteworthy that Leng Feng not only raises the flag but also becomes the flagpole, symbolizing Chinese patriotism in a quite literal sense. The symbolism of the characters under Leng Feng's leadership and rescue is also fascinating, as they represent a diverse mix of black, yellow, and white individuals. This portrayal, although symbolic, seems to align with Xi Jinping's vision of projecting a "credible, loveable, and respectable China" (*BBC News* 2021).



However, some representations in the film have been criticized as paternalistic and stereotypical. One scene, for example, shows African workers dancing around a bonfire while Chinese characters observe with affectionate smiles, commenting, “Our African friends, it doesn’t matter if it’s war, disease, or poverty, once they are around the bonfire, all their cares go away.” Actor Dorea Taty from Congo, who was part of the movie, expressed his thoughts on the matter, stating, “As a film, it was a masterpiece, but the storyline is based on stereotypes, which frustrates Africans” (C. Huang 2019).

In this context, Ying Zhu (2020) highlights that it is not coincidental that 98% of the film’s remarkable box office success was achieved in China itself, rather than internationally. Zhu (2020) suggests that the disguised jingoism of Chinese patriotism and the racist portrayal of nameless and foolish Africans failed to resonate with audiences outside of China.

Indeed, Beaton Galafa (2019) highlighted that *Wolf Warrior 2* portrayed the continent as chaotic, marked by lawlessness, devastated by wars and diseases, and destined for destruction. The scholar emphasized the roles given to the Chinese characters in the film, which perpetuated stereotypes about Africa and contrasted with the current era of increasing Sino-African economic, political, and diplomatic engagement based on principles of equality. According to Galafa (2019), despite the absence of a colonial history linking Africa and China, the film reveals a “White Savior Complex” in the Chinese characters, reminiscent of Western colonial narratives. This led the scholar to reference Joseph Conrad’s novel “Heart of Darkness” (1902) in the title of his article (Galafa 2019).

Nicole Talmacs conducted a study on the responses of Chinese university students to *Wolf Warrior 2* (2017), providing insights into the dynamics of the Sino-African relationship. Talmacs (2020) found that the reactions of Chinese students reflected a racialized discourse that objectified black Africans as the “Other” and exposed existing skepticism towards Sino-African relations. The scholar emphasized the importance of understanding these responses in the context of the students’ trust in mediated messages from Chinese leadership, social media rumors, and the established patterns of the film industry, which heavily influence their perceptions of “Africa” and “Africans” during their audiovisual experiences (Talmacs 2020).

However, Talmacs (2020) also highlighted the potential of the Chinese film industry to foster racial awareness among the Chinese audience. To achieve this, a shift in the film industry’s objectives is necessary, moving away from the current emphasis on patriotic education towards portraying China and the Chinese as equal members of an interconnected global community. This transformation would enable Chinese cinema to contribute positively to the audience’s understanding of race and promote inclusivity (Talmacs 2020).

*Wolf Warrior 2*'s connection to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is worth discussing. As highlighted by Teo (2019), the African setting plays a crucial role in the phenomenon of *Wolf Warrior 2*, touching upon Chinese geopolitical strategy and its development policy, such as the Belt and Road Initiative. China's involvement in the BRI countries extends beyond mere economics and holds geopolitical strategic significance. Leng Feng serves as the muscular symbol of Chinese involvement, translating the rhetoric of the Belt and Road Initiative into cinematic action and projecting how China may be accepted by others (Teo 2019).

Xiao Yang (2023) explored how the film reflects China's foreign policies, specifically examining how China's economic assistance to BRI member countries is portrayed in the film, including investments in local factories, infrastructure development, and provision of medical and financial aid. According to the BRI official website, China invested approximately \$770 million in 138 BRI member countries between 2013 and 2020. These investments primarily focused on energy, transportation, and related industries such as roads, factories, and communication infrastructure. In *Wolf Warrior 2*, the fictional African country where Leng Feng resides is seen as a representation of a BRI member country that has received China's assistance in building its infrastructure. The film showcases this assistance through its settings and characters, such as China-funded factories and Chinese doctors. For instance, during the local civil war, the Chinese navy is involved in evacuating Chinese workers from a Sino-African joint venture factory situated in the conflict zone. The factory, owned by a young Chinese entrepreneur pursuing his career in Africa, employs both Chinese and African workers (who are also rescued by the protagonist). This representation highlights the economic cooperation between China and Africa, where China's investment in factories benefits the local economy by creating job opportunities and manufacturing products (X. Yang 2023).

Moreover, *Wolf Warrior 2* portrays China's commitment to health and sanitation assistance in BRI member countries, aligning with China's foreign aid policy in the 2010s (X. Yang 2023). Dr. Chen, a Chinese scholar working in an African hospital, symbolizes China's medical aid projects by providing equipment and medical teams to African countries. The film emphasizes the importance of China's medical aid, as the PLA and Leng Feng embark on a mission to rescue Dr. Chen, who has developed a medicine to combat the contagious and deadly "Lamanla virus" prevalent in the country. The film's antagonists are local rebels who seek to obtain the formula for the medicine and control its production for their own gain. While the portrayal of China's medical aid underscores its significance in assisting countries in the Global South, it can also be seen as biased, presenting China as a superior savior to vulnerable African populations suffering from disease and reliant on external assistance (X. Yang 2023).

The utilization of Chinese soft power through cinema within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative is an intriguing subject to explore. This allows us to revisit a discussion raised in Chapter 1 of this dissertation regarding Qin Yaqing's concept of relational theory, which emphasizes the significance of culture as a shared background knowledge within a community (Y. Qin 2018). It is noteworthy to mention the research conducted by Khun Eng Kuah (2019) on the relationship between soft power and the BRI. Kuah (2019) formulated a model that seeks to understand cultural flows and their impact on interactions and connectivity, resulting in the formation of imagined communities based on shared cultural interests rather than nation-state boundaries. According to Kuah (2019), the Chinese state and its institutions have utilized education and philanthropy as key elements to enhance their global reach along the BRI corridors. This has led to the creation of cultural basins that transcend national borders, fostering a sense of shared invented tradition. Kuah (2019) argues that this conscious effort by China to exert soft power extends beyond the economic realm, ultimately fostering greater openness to the global world.

Peng and Keane's research highlights the significance of culture and cinema within the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). They propose that co-productions between Eurasian countries, which share a historical connection, offer new opportunities to integrate Chinese stories into a narrative of shared prosperity. By doing so, China's economic power is bolstered by cultural policies that draw upon both a historical past and a shared future (Peng and Keane 2019).

The authors discuss various movie-related initiatives within the BRI that align with the concepts of "heritage diplomacy" and a "community of shared future." These initiatives include mechanisms for international exchange, domestic cooperation agreements, the establishment of Chinese cultural centers along the proposed routes, as well as plans to promote art, preserve cultural heritage, develop Silk Road cultural industries, and foster international cooperation in the video game industry, among others (Peng and Keane 2019).

According to the authors, from a cultural perspective, China aims to foster a constructive dialogue on representations of the Silk Road. By positioning the BRI as a platform for cultural development, the Chinese party-state seeks to enhance Chinese civilization and culture while creating a harmonious framework for a "new world order" (Peng and Keane 2019, 8).

This discussion is crucial in reinforcing the recurring argument put forth in this dissertation regarding the need for a closer examination of the perceived failure of Chinese films to resonate on the international stage. While the overwhelming success of *Wolf Warrior 2* at the domestic box office underscores the challenges of promoting these narratives abroad and gaining global appeal, it is equally important to acknowledge that certain countries in the

Global South have exhibited a relatively higher acceptance of Chinese storytelling.

This acceptance may be attributed to various factors, including cultural proximity, as observed in countries participating in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and China's neighboring regions. Additionally, it may stem from political openness to diverse narratives. As demonstrated in the previous subchapter through Brazilian critic Inácio Araujo's analysis of the film *The Battle of Lake Changjin*, it is essential to recognize that both Chinese and Hollywood films are ideological in nature, representing distinct worldviews. Consequently, they need not be mutually exclusive but rather can be seen as complementary, offering a more comprehensive portrayal of the world.

In this section, I analyzed the film *Wolf Warrior 2*. I began with a discussion on why the term "Wolf Warrior Diplomacy" is used to describe China's new foreign policy. As detailed in an editorial from the *Global Times*, I pointed out that China no longer adopts a discreet and reserved approach in its diplomacy, as the country's status demands a firmer stance in defending national interests, and this has alarmed Western powers. Recent statements by Xi Jinping also reflect this less subtle approach in China's foreign policy to safeguard its national interests, which is prominently depicted in the film *Wolf Warrior 2* through the actions of the hero Leng Feng, who violently defeats his enemy and explicitly expresses that the idea of being subjugated is a thing of the past.

I also explored how the film's setting in Africa is not coincidental. I emphasized the importance of China's relations with African countries, where China seeks to diversify its engagement through technical cooperation, scientific collaboration, and healthcare initiatives. Many of these elements are directly represented in the film *Wolf Warrior 2*. Furthermore, I highlighted the comparison often made between *Wolf Warrior* and the Hollywood hero *Rambo*, showing that they share certain traits in common, such as being somewhat problematic, and challenging authority, but also being highly skilled and caring for those around them, even if they occasionally lose control when facing enemies. However, I noted that such characters have historical references in Chinese culture, such as the Monkey King and the contrast between *wu* and *wen* masculinities. Therefore, I underscored once again the importance of understanding Chinese culture to grasp the layers of such cinematic representation.

At the same time, I also acknowledged that perhaps understanding the complexity of these various nuances, the choice of an action-adventure film in the "Bruce Willis Template" may not be coincidental, as this format carries a high cultural discount. Lastly, I pointed out the connections the film has with the Belt and Road Initiative, a foreign policy priority for China that is depicted in the movie through investments, actions, connections, and friendships

portrayed between Chinese characters and the unnamed African characters.

It is worth reinforcing that the portrayals of Africans in the film were heavily criticized for being paternalistic and reproducing Orientalist and racist stereotypes. This is an aspect that will be further addressed in the lessons to be learned from the film *Wolf Warrior 2*.

Thus, there are multiple strategic narratives present in this highly successful main-melody film from China. Once again, it is crucial to emphasize the significance of *Wolf Warrior* as an experiment that combines elements such as private enterprise, cooperation with Hollywood, and main-melody storytelling, potentially serving as a model to disseminate Chinese strategic narratives and promote China's soft power.

In the next section, I will discuss the main lessons from the film *Wolf Warrior 2* regarding the use of films as instruments of China's soft power.

#### 4.3.3. Possible lessons from *Wolf Warrior 2* for the future of Chinese film diplomacy

The film *Wolf Warrior 2* (2017) offers valuable insights into using cinema as an instrument of China's soft power. One key lesson is the potential of integrating society and the State. Notably, *Wolf Warrior 2* was not produced by a state-owned studio or commissioned by the government. Instead, a private studio created it, guided by a filmmaker who believed that the Chinese audience desired a fresh perspective on their country. This perspective portrayed China as more assertive, globally engaged, caring for its citizens, and contributing to global peace. This alignment of societal aspirations with the state's narratives likely contributed to the film's success, making it a potent example of using cinema to express shared values.

Simultaneously, the film *Wolf Warrior 2* is also, to some extent, a product of State-led initiatives. As mentioned earlier, the main-melody film sector underwent significant reforms to contend with the rise of Hollywood films in the 1980s, the increasing presence of international films following China's entry into the World Trade Organization in 2001, and challenges in a somewhat struggling film market, including competition from other forms of entertainment and pirated film distribution. These reforms were largely driven by the State and played a crucial role in enhancing the Chinese film industry.

Various measures were implemented to elevate main-melody films, such as utilizing imported films to invigorate the market and using the revenue generated from foreign film entries to improve main-melody productions. Additionally, collaboration with filmmakers from

Hong Kong was encouraged, bringing their commercial expertise to main-melody films, enhancing their appeal to broader audiences and eliminating the reliance on state-sponsored screenings with mandatory attendance. These proactive measures demonstrate how the State has the ability to shape the direction of the film industry, both in commercial and ideological aspects, through strategic narratives incorporated in these films.

These transformative processes were vital in solidifying cinema's role as a tool for disseminating ideas deemed significant by the State. However, a shift is occurring, and genuine public interest in watching these films is now on the rise. It's important to acknowledge that the State still retains control over the entry of foreign films, ensuring they do not overly compete with films aligned with the State's interests.

I also demonstrated that, on occasion, the State needed to intervene directly to steer the course of main-melody films, as it did in the mid-2010s when the entire film sector faced challenges, possibly mirroring broader economic difficulties experienced by China at that time. The State issued documents encouraging improvements in main-melody films and providing clear guidelines on the desired directions and strategic narratives that should be reflected in these films. The Chinese film sector responded swiftly, resulting not only in the release of *Wolf Warrior 2* in 2017 but also a series of new domestic box office successes among other Chinese films.

Hence, this aspect may also serve as an important lesson for utilizing these films as instruments of soft power, granting the State the ability to shape the trajectory of these films, both in commercial terms and ideologically, through the strategic narratives they embody.

However, the failure of *Wolf Warrior 2* to resonate with an international audience, with nearly all its box office revenue generated within China, also offers valuable lessons for utilizing cinema as an instrument of China's soft power. Numerous analyses have sought to understand the reasons behind this setback. One aspect that was highlighted was the film's excessive patriotism and jingoism, which might have contributed to the limited appeal abroad. Moreover, criticisms arose regarding the film's emulation of some of the negative attributes of 1980s Hollywood cinema, particularly the borderline fascist characteristics found in pro-war films like *Rambo* and *Top Gun*. These critiques need to be carefully considered in order to create films that can effectively promote soft power within China, fostering confidence among the Chinese population in their country's new status, while also resonating with international audiences.

The association with *Rambo* and *Top Gun* is intriguing because, although these films once championed pro-war views and are now being openly questioned, they still enjoyed

considerable international success. Therefore, understanding how to strike a balance between these narratives to disseminate new perceptions while captivating international audiences could prove to be a crucial lesson when employing cinema as an instrument of China's soft power.

Another lesson that seems to have already been embraced by the Chinese film industry is the use of genre films, which carry a higher cultural discount and are more easily comprehensible to audiences less acquainted with Chinese culture and history. The case of *Wolf Warrior 2* serves as an illustration; as previously mentioned, the film shares direct associations with the narrative of *Rambo*, portraying a complex hero who challenges the typical military hierarchy but possesses remarkable skills, training, and compassion for those around him. He is resolute in accomplishing his mission, seeking vengeance against his enemies, and ultimately saving the day, in what is also known as the "Bruce Willis Template". While *Wolf Warrior 2* incorporates Western elements and narratives, it also presents numerous analyses of elements from traditional Chinese culture, such as the *wu* and *wen* masculinities and associations with the Monkey King. Thus, the utilization of genre films, particularly action and sci-fi films, aids in the understanding of these narratives, even for audiences without a shared background knowledge of Chinese society.

Moreover, considering shared background knowledge can potentially serve as an effective approach to disseminating Chinese films as a soft power tool, particularly among China's neighboring countries and those involved in the Belt and Road Initiative, where cultural exchange and mutual understanding are becoming more prominent.

Finally, the danger of racist representations is a critical point to address. As we have observed, the film *Wolf Warrior 2* faced justified criticism for its highly problematic portrayal of Africans, even drawing disapproval from some of the actors involved due to the perpetuation of stereotypes. In Chapter 2, I delved into how China has been vocal about its disapproval of many Hollywood films that reinforce stereotyped and racist narratives about the Chinese, spanning from early Hollywood portrayals of the "yellow peril," exemplified by characters like Fu Manchu, to more recent films like *Seven Years in Tibet* (1997), which was banned in China. Even *Mulan* (2020), analyzed in Chapter 2, faced backlash in China for its lack of sensitivity toward Chinese themes and its use of stereotyped representations.

For China to effectively utilize its films as instruments of soft power to disseminate strategic narratives, it must take this issue seriously. Firstly, avoiding racism and stereotyping is of utmost importance due to its intrinsic ethical implications. Secondly, neglecting this consideration could lead to disinterest or even resistance from the populations to which China aims to export these films. Just as China has previously expressed its dissent toward Hollywood

films, other countries might react similarly to misrepresentative portrayals. Therefore, a crucial lesson for improving the quality and effectiveness of Chinese films as instruments of soft power is the accurate and respectful portrayal of diverse cultures and identities, including the inclusion of people from those cultures as actors and creators in the filmmaking process. This aligns with the demand China has made to Hollywood, and it can significantly enhance the appeal and impact of Chinese films in promoting the strategic narratives envisioned by the Chinese government.

In this chapter, I explored the history of Chinese cinema, exploring its relationship with the international community and the Chinese government. The interplay between global cinema and domestic politics has significantly influenced the narratives produced and exported by China. From its early years, Chinese cinema played a crucial role in reflecting and shaping debates surrounding Chinese identity, promoting traditional culture during the collapse of the Qing dynasty, and being intertwined with discussions between the Chinese Communist Party and the Chinese Nationalist Party. It also served as a means of resistance during Japan's invasion and contributed to national development post-war.

Under the rule of the Chinese Communist Party, cinema came under State control, acting as a tool to propagate the ideology of the CCP. The Cultural Revolution, however, led to resistance and decline in cinema's progress. After Mao Zedong's death, a revival occurred during the Reform and Opening era, leading to the emergence of the Fifth Generation of Chinese filmmakers, whose works gained international recognition despite facing censorship within China.

The transformative factors that influenced the Fifth-Generation filmmakers also shaped the emergence of the Sixth Generation, reflecting distinctive dynamics in their relationship with the past, the Chinese government, and the international sphere. These filmmakers depicted a transforming China, focusing on urbanization, reform, and opening. Tiananmen Square had a profound impact on them, while global cinema played a significant role in shaping the future of Chinese cinema through travel experiences, exposure to international films, and international recognition.

In recent times, the Sixth-Generation filmmakers faced challenges navigating government censorship and the changing technological landscape. Some formerly independent film directors embraced the logic of the party-state, seeking official permission for film production and distribution, while others distanced themselves from market and political logic. This shift reflects the evolving nature of Chinese cinema and the diversity of perspectives within the industry.



Throughout the history of Chinese cinema, the government's involvement has primarily been passive, focusing on regulation and censorship to shape narratives presented domestically and internationally. However, a notable shift occurred from the 1980s onward, as the government actively promoted its direct engagement in producing Chinese stories through main melody films.

The evolution of main melody films from didactic storytelling to blockbuster, incorporating techniques from acclaimed Hong Kong directors and experts from Hollywood, has been evident. The recent surge in patriotic sentiment in China has led to the prominence of main melody films, receiving strong support from celebrities and directors who align themselves with the patriotic wave and the Chinese government's agenda.

Science fiction-themed main melody films have also emerged, positioning China at the forefront of global science fiction film production. These films contribute to the dissemination of Chinese strategic narratives, incorporating themes of collective values, sacrifices for the greater good, the relevance of scientific development, and the importance of international cooperation, painting a compelling picture of a future with Chinese characteristics.

The film *Wolf Warrior 2* aligns with China's assertive foreign policy and global engagement, reflecting China's aim for a stronger international presence. Its setting in Africa reflects China's relations with African countries, where technical cooperation, scientific collaboration, and healthcare initiatives are part of China's diversifying engagement. The Belt and Road Initiative has also an important role in the background. However, the film's portrayal of Africans has faced criticism for reproducing racist stereotypes.

Despite limited global success, *Wolf Warrior 2* serves as an experiment combining private enterprise, cooperation with Hollywood, and main-melody storytelling, potentially becoming a model to disseminate Chinese strategic narratives and enhance China's soft power.

In conclusion, China's strengthening position has enabled it to wield greater influence in shaping strategic narratives through cinema. The incorporation of international talent further reinforces this trend, contributing significantly to the growth of Chinese soft power. While success in finding a global audience remains uncertain, Chinese films continue to be a potent tool in expressing and disseminating China's strategic narratives to the world, "telling China's stories well" on the Silver Screen.

## CONCLUSION

“China is never short of good stories. But why do so many narratives that tell a good China story end up being cliched or fail to deliver the message?” This intriguing question emerged during a comprehensive full-day webinar on June 22, 2023, organized by the China Centre for International Communication Development (CCICD), an affiliate of the Communist Party’s central publicity department (Ma 2023). An insightful summary of the event on CCICD’s social media platforms revealed its primary aim: to address the challenges posed by ineffective messaging targeting international audiences. Often, these messages mirrored the approach used for domestic audiences, resulting in a lack of resonance with foreigners. In fact, the summary highlighted a significant concern that “There is no distinction between external and internal propaganda, and external propaganda has become like internal propaganda,” posing a noteworthy obstacle to current international communication efforts. In conclusion, the webinar emphasized that storytelling proves more effective when it focuses on individual narratives or targets specific audiences, rather than attempting to encapsulate a grand and all-encompassing story about China (Ma 2023).

I began the introduction of this dissertation with a quote from the then-director of China’s National Film Bureau Film, who, in 2019, expressed China’s ambition to become a formidable film power akin to the U.S. by 2035. In this concluding chapter, I commented on a meeting that occurred in June 2023, organized by an affiliate of the Chinese Communist Party’s Department of Publicity, aimed at understanding the challenges China faces in promoting its messages on the global stage. Intriguingly, the dates of these two events, 2019 and 2023, serve as bookends for this doctoral program, culminating in the completion of this dissertation.

The significance of these coinciding dates is no mere happenstance. My objective is to illustrate that China’s pursuit of using cinema as a soft power instrument, the central theme of this dissertation, remains an ongoing and paramount undertaking. Even as I write, events, discussions, and documents continue to be orchestrated and produced, underscoring the profound relevance of this topic for the Chinese government, evident through their steadfast initiatives.

Furthermore, the debates highlighted in both the introduction and conclusion encapsulate the core themes explored throughout this dissertation. These themes encompass the importance placed by the Chinese government on soft power and cinema, the imperative of

effectively disseminating China's stories and strategic narratives, and the significance of reaching global audiences.

Throughout this dissertation, I delved into several conceptual issues, exploring culture, soft power, strategic narratives, and propaganda, both within the Western context and within the realms of Chinese academia and politics. Many of these topics were also prevalent in the two events mentioned in the introduction and conclusion.

Finally, these two events shed light on the triumphs and hurdles faced by China in utilizing its cinema to promote its strategic narratives abroad. As a result, it seems that the government itself draws conclusions in some sense related to those discovered in this dissertation, which I will expound upon in the subsequent paragraphs.

This dissertation sought to explore the relationship between China's growing power and its use of films as soft power tools to disseminate strategic narratives. The central argument of this research posits that as China's influence increases, so does its capacity to promote strategic narratives through cinema, bolstering Chinese soft power and advancing its foreign policy objectives. This study also recognized the counterargument that China's rise in power may encounter resistance, hindering its ability to disseminate strategic narratives through films, particularly in its relations with the United States. The argument and counterargument were examined throughout the study.

The research began with the premise that Chinese leaders and strategists recognize the importance of cultivating positive perceptions about the country while mitigating negative reactions to its growing military and economic clout. Consequently, China has made a substantial commitment to soft power initiatives, seeking to shape international perceptions and present a more approachable and less intimidating image. Under President Xi Jinping's leadership, this pursuit of soft power has become even more central, with a dedicated effort to win friends and influence people through various means, including films.

Cinema has emerged as one of the most potent avenues for shaping China's international image. The noteworthy growth in the number of movie theaters in China, which made it the global leader in cinema screens by 2016, coupled with its ascent to the world's largest film market by 2020, has significantly amplified cinema's role in disseminating China's strategic narratives. Strategic narratives serve as a means for political actors to construct shared meanings of past, present, and future international politics, exerting influence on both domestic and international actors. These narratives play a crucial role in extending influence, managing expectations, and shaping discursive landscapes, all of which align precisely with China's soft power endeavors. Chinese leaders, particularly Xi Jinping, have underscored the importance of

effectively telling China's stories and strengthening Chinese soft power.

Focusing on the twenty-first century, particularly after China's entry into the World Trade Organization in 2001, which marked a crucial milestone in pressuring for the opening and globalization of the Chinese film industry, this dissertation examined three multifaceted strategies employed by China to disseminate strategic narratives through films. These strategies were identified as the most representative based on the comprehensive literature review conducted. The first strategy involves leveraging the significance of the Chinese film market and China's position in Hollywood. The second strategy revolves around a novel China-U.S. co-production model, integrating Chinese investment and talent with major Hollywood stars. The third strategy entails the Chinese film industry's efforts to create its own global blockbusters.

To effectively address the research questions, the dissertation was structured into four chapters, in addition to the introduction and conclusion. Chapter 1 established the theoretical-methodological framework, delving into how the International Relations literature discusses the relationship between culture, particularly films, and foreign policy, with special attention given to Chinese authors. The subsequent three chapters explored each of the three most relevant strategies China has employed to enhance its international image through films: Hollywood movies tailored to the Chinese audience (Chapter 2); co-productions between China and the U.S. (Chapter 3); and the emergence of Chinese global blockbusters (Chapter 4). Additionally, each chapter analyzed one film, representative of the respective strategy. Now, I will outline some of the key conclusions drawn from each of these chapters within this study.

In Chapter 1, I stressed the critical significance of culture in the context of International Relations. Mainstream theories in this field often overlook culture, adopting a universal outlook that disregards alternative worldviews and diverse approaches. Nonetheless, there is a growing recognition of the need for global inclusivity, acknowledging perspectives beyond the Western-centric view. Esteemed scholars like Buzan and Acharya advocate for a more comprehensive perspective in International Relations known as Global IR.

Qin Yanqing, a renowned Chinese IR scholar, emphasizes the vital role of culture in the analysis of International Relations. Qin's relational theory offers an alternative to Western perspectives by focusing on relationships and interconnectedness within China's relational society. This perspective shapes the interpretation of significant themes like war and cooperation, emphasizing harmony over conflict.

Furthermore, I explored other Chinese theories of International Relations, including Yan Xuetong's moral realism and Zhao Tingyang's *Tianxia* system, which are deeply rooted in

Chinese cultural background knowledge. Additionally, I mentioned the views of Wang Huning, a prominent theorist and advisor to Xi Jinping, on cultural sovereignty and soft power.

The primary aim of this discussion was to underscore the significance of culture in International Relations. By incorporating diverse cultural perspectives, the analysis becomes enriched, promoting pluralism, diversity, and integration in the field.

Next, I explored the longstanding use of cinema as a political tool by States, a practice that traces back to the early days of the film industry. Even in the 1920s, Hollywood representatives were already focused on promoting American worldviews and values internationally, a practice that continues to this day. State censorship in the United States further contributed to shaping a positive image of the military and intelligence forces.

Throughout the Cold War, both the United States and the Soviet Union employed cinema for political purposes, depicting each other in contrasting ways. The Soviet Union usually presented the U.S. as a declining society, while the U.S. portrayed Soviets as ruthless killers.

This influence of cinema as a soft power tool extended beyond borders, as observed in countries like India, where Bollywood played a significant role in geopolitics and cultural exchange. Similarly, China's diverse film industry has been strategically used for soft power objectives, with a strong emphasis on narrative control by the State.

These historical analyses underscore the importance of conducting this research within an Institute of International Relations, as they exemplify how States have effectively used cinema throughout history to promote their cultures, values, narratives, and soft power, both domestically and internationally.

Lastly, I discussed the central theoretical and methodological considerations guiding this dissertation. In particular, I examined Joseph Nye's influential concept of soft power, which he introduced in 1990. Soft power, or the capacity to influence others and achieve desired results through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or payment, remains highly pertinent in the study of culture and power within International Relations, especially when exploring how cinema can be used for political objectives in foreign policy. Acknowledging some criticisms of the soft power concept, particularly its challenges in understanding the conveyed messages and cinema's influence on audiences, I further explored the concept of strategic narratives.

The notion of strategic narratives delves deeper into the soft power debate by investigating how countries strategically choose narratives to foster consensus and shared understandings, ultimately influencing the behavior of actors in international relations. This

concept is closely aligned with the poststructuralist framework utilized in this dissertation, and it also resonates with Chinese perspectives, particularly Qin Yaqing's relational theory, which highlights the significance of culture as shared background knowledge within a community.

The selection of poststructuralist perspectives for this dissertation was justified by their emphasis on fluid boundaries between disciplines, their recognition of the importance of visuality and cinema, their relevance to language and narratives, and their alignment with Chinese perspectives, particularly Qin Yaqing's relational theory.

Additionally, the incorporation of the concept of the creative economy in this research allows for an exploration of the interplay between cinema, soft power, and strategic narratives within the context of economic considerations. This aspect holds great significance, given China's position as the world's largest film market, granting it enhanced agency and leverage, especially in its interactions with Hollywood and the United States.

The theoretical discussion presented in Chapter 1 highlighted that this dissertation's analysis is grounded in current debates within international affairs. It seeks to make contributions to this discourse by offering insights, not only into the intricate relationship between pop culture, global politics, and the utilization of cinema in international affairs but also into China's soft power and strategic narratives and how they impact the country's foreign policy.

In each of the following chapters of this dissertation, I conducted a detailed analysis of one film. Chapter 2 explored Hollywood films tailored for both Chinese audiences and the Chinese government, using *Mulan* (2020) as a prominent example, shedding light on Hollywood's reliance on the Chinese market. Chapter 3 delved into Sino-American co-productions, with an analysis of the film *The Great Wall* (2016), representing a significant instance of Chinese cinema engaging with Hollywood. Chapter 4 concentrated on Chinese blockbusters, specifically examining *Wolf Warrior 2* (2017), one of China's most-watched movies in history, which echoed changes in China's foreign policy and inspired the creation of the term "Wolf Warrior Diplomacy."

In addition to these three films, this dissertation includes references to many other relevant movies connected to China within the main perspectives explored. The total count surpasses 170 films, which help to broaden the scope of the analyses conducted in this research. Furthermore, the expansion and exploration of this film list will be integral to future projects stemming from this study.

Chapter 2 of this dissertation focused on the evolution of Hollywood films tailored to cater to China's market. To understand the current difficulties in the China-Hollywood

relationships, I explored the intricate history of collaboration and rivalry between Hollywood and China, spanning from the Republic era in China (1912-1949), where Hollywood dominated the Chinese market, to the period following the rise of the Communist Party in 1949, which resulted in Hollywood's exclusion from China. Subsequently, in the 1980s, talks began to pave the way for Hollywood's return and its pivotal role in developing and expanding the Chinese market. China's accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001 put even more pressure to open the doors for Hollywood movies in the country.

The relationship between China and Hollywood further intensified during the 2000s, reaching a significant peak in the 2010s, marked by a mutually beneficial "honeymoon" phase. Hollywood sought to strengthen its market presence and profits, while China aimed to overcome perceived cultural disadvantages and enhance its global soft power to promote its strategic narratives and advance foreign policy objectives. However, the dynamics shifted in 2017 with the advent of the Trump administration and the ensuing trade war, which also impacted the film industry. China responded by imposing additional restrictions on Hollywood as it became increasingly conscious of its market dominance.

The challenging political environment fostered the perception that Hollywood was accommodating Chinese interests, limiting China's capacity to effectively disseminate its narratives and harness its soft power potential. Moreover, the COVID-19 outbreak and the enactment of a new U.S. bill restricting Hollywood-Beijing cooperation added further obstacles to China's pursuit of foreign policy goals through cinema.

Using *Mulan* (2020) as an example, this chapter demonstrated how political changes impact films, their box office performance, and their potential as instruments of soft power. Filming began in 2015 during a period of friendly China-Hollywood relations but the movie was released in 2020 amidst heightened tensions between the U.S. and China. This shift in the political climate made China less receptive to Hollywood productions, while the U.S. government and audiences grew more critical of changes made to films to cater to the Chinese market, adding complexity to the China-Hollywood relationship.

The film highlighted the importance of cultural authenticity, calling for greater involvement of Chinese actors, consultants, writers, and directors, as well as thorough research to meet the increasingly demanding Chinese market. The matter of diversity and representation also emerged as crucial, as *Mulan* faced challenges in representing Asians both in Hollywood and China, shedding light on the limitations of American conversations on representation in a global context.

Furthermore, *Mulan* exemplifies the potential challenges in China-Hollywood

dynamics, particularly in regard to promoting Chinese narratives and strengthening Chinese soft power through cinema. The movie's impact on Chinese narratives and soft power has proven to be intricate, with criticisms emerging simultaneously regarding the lack of authentic Chinese stories in the film and the alignment of some of its narratives with the Chinese government's preferences.

For instance, the Chinese audience highlighted numerous inconsistencies within the film, ranging from historical inaccuracies to alterations in Mulan's character. At the same time, several analysts pointed out that the adjusted storyline of the film aligns with the narratives endorsed both by the Chinese government and blockbusters. These narratives include the reverence of Han Chinese civilization as a sagacious leader perpetually threatened by external forces, the celebration of the achievements of Chinese women, the worldwide depiction of Chinese locales, and the promotion of the Confucian value of filial piety as an indispensable virtue.

This presents a delicate balance between the two arguments proposed in this dissertation: as China's influence grows, it gains the ability to shape the narratives produced and enhance its soft power but simultaneously faces greater resistance to its efforts. *Mulan* highlights the complexities within the relationship between China and Hollywood, offering insights into the forthcoming challenges. The balancing act portrayed in the movie illustrates the intricacy of China's endeavors to shape narratives and expand its soft power while encountering opposition due to its rising influence.

Chapter 3 examined China-U.S. co-productions. I initially debated various co-production models, both international and specific to China. The aim was to investigate how the chosen format impacts China's ability to influence film narratives, thus enhancing its capacity to effectively communicate strategic messages. Additionally, the chapter analyzed the motivations behind countries engaging in co-productions, highlighting how China's efforts align with other nations using this collaborative approach to strengthen domestic markets and expand their global reach. The historical evolution of co-productions in China was also explored, showcasing earlier collaborations mainly with Hong Kong and Taiwan, while emphasizing Hollywood's significant role as China's primary co-production partner in recent times.

The ever-changing dynamics of China-Hollywood co-productions were also discussed, depicting shifts from cooperative and enthusiastic periods to moments of antagonism and frustration. Initially, these collaborations mainly involved "faux-productions" or "fake co-productions," where Hollywood utilized Chinese labor, actors, and locations to appeal to Chinese audiences. However, this scenario began to evolve with China's entry into the World



Trade Organization (WTO), its growing strength and influence in the film market, and increased investments in Hollywood. As a result, China's involvement in the creative process of filmmaking expanded, enabling the country to effectively tell its own stories in co-productions.

*The Great Wall* (2016) represents a significant milestone in the China-Hollywood co-production journey, being recognized as the first authentic collaboration where both sides contributed resources, talent, and creative expertise to shape the narrative. However, its release coincided with a shifting landscape, witnessing a slowdown and frustration in China-U.S. collaborations in the subsequent years. This transition can be attributed to various factors, including Donald Trump's presidency in the United States, marked by aggressive rhetoric towards China, internal changes within China, such as a refocus away from Hollywood towards the Belt and Road Initiative, and the Chinese government's altered approach towards entrepreneurs investing in Hollywood, coupled with a tax scandal within the Chinese film industry. All these elements have collectively contributed to the intricate dynamics of the situation.

Despite facing public and critical disappointment, partly due to the changing political climate and challenges in crafting a captivating story appealing to both Chinese and international audiences, *The Great Wall* prompted the exploration of other co-production possibilities. Films with less political sensitivity, such as action films like *The Meg* (2018), and animations like *Kung Fu Panda 3* (2016), *Abominable* (2019), and *Over the Moon* (2020), emerged as successful examples, igniting discussions in the industry.

In my analysis of *The Great Wall*, I explored the film's utilization of various genres, such as historical, monster, martial arts, and science fiction. China has actively ventured into different genres that have achieved international recognition, engaging in a cultural dialogue and addressing concerns of cultural representation and authenticity. This integration of diverse genres and their respective successes has been notably observed in certain China-Hollywood co-productions (e.g., *The Meg* as a science fiction and action film) and particularly in Chinese films with global appeal, as I highlighted in Chapter 4.

The film *The Great Wall* offers valuable insights into using cinema as a tool for China's soft power. Akin to the experiences observed in *Mulan*, shifts in the political landscape impact film production and its implications on soft power. The movie's production began during a period of close collaboration between China and Hollywood, with significant Chinese investments in Hollywood to tap into the burgeoning Chinese film market for increased profits. However, its release coincided with a more confrontational approach from the United States towards China, leading to criticisms of pandering to the Chinese government.

Beyond the evolving political environment, *The Great Wall* exemplifies the challenges of using films as instruments of soft power. Critics argue that the movie attempted to cater to too many audiences without targeting a specific group. While acclaimed Chinese director Zhang Yimou integrated elements of Chinese culture and history into the cinematography, blending them with perceptions and stereotypes about China alongside alien monsters from Chinese mythology, this fusion may have made the film less appealing to both domestic and foreign audiences.

Nevertheless, numerous connections can be established between the themes of the films and China's strategic narratives. One such connection relates to the critique of unchecked greed and consumption, symbolized by the Tao Tie monsters, and the concept of ecological civilization. The idea of moderate use of technology (symbolized by the black powder in the movie) can be associated with peaceful development. The portrayal of collaborative efforts between China and foreign counterparts to confront mutual challenges and safeguard humanity (represented by the cooperation between the Chinese army and foreign mercenaries against the Tao Tie in the movie) can be associated with the concept of Community of Common Destiny and to the principle of Win-Win Cooperation. All these narratives resonate with the speeches of Chinese politicians. China's adeptness in utilizing co-productions with Hollywood to propagate these strategic messages sets it apart from other nations employing films for soft power. This achievement reinforces the argument that as China grows stronger, its influence over the narratives produced increases, further enhancing its soft power.

In the final chapter, I investigated the realm of Chinese global blockbusters, embarking on an exploration of Chinese cinema's complex relationship with the international community and the Chinese government. This examination illuminated the profound interplay between global cinema and domestic politics, which significantly shaped the narratives produced and exported by China.

I pointed out that, in its infancy in China, cinema played a crucial role in reflecting and shaping debates surrounding Chinese identity, preserving traditional culture during the fall of the Qing dynasty, and participating in discussions between the Chinese Communist Party and the Chinese Nationalist Party. It also served as a means of resistance during Japan's invasion and contributed to national development in the post-war period.

However, under the governance of the Chinese Communist Party, cinema came under State control, functioning as a tool for propagating the CCP's ideology. The Cultural Revolution brought resistance and a decline in cinema's progress. After the passing of Mao Zedong, the Reform and Opening Up era led to a cinematic revival, giving rise to the acclaimed Fifth

Generation of Chinese filmmakers, who faced censorship within China but achieved international recognition.

The transformative factors influencing the Fifth-Generation filmmakers also paved the way for the emergence of the Sixth Generation, characterized by distinctive dynamics in their relationship with the past, the Chinese government, and the international sphere. Their works depicted a transforming China, with a focus on urbanization, reform, and opening. The Tiananmen Square incident deeply impacted their artistic endeavors, while global cinema played a significant role in shaping the future of Chinese cinema through travel experiences, exposure to international films, and international acclaim.

In recent times, Sixth-Generation filmmakers encountered challenges in navigating government control and censorship. Some formerly independent film directors embraced the logic of the party-state, seeking official permission for film production and distribution, while others distanced themselves from the market and political pressures, showcasing the diverse perspectives within the Chinese film industry and its evolving nature.

I emphasized that, throughout the history of Chinese cinema, with the exception of the Cultural Revolution period when studios were nationalized and films came under strict State control, the government's engagement with cinema was primarily passive. Its focus was on regulating and censoring filmmakers and their works to influence the narratives presented both within China and on the international stage. However, a notable transformation took place from the 1980s onwards, as the government shifted its approach and actively encouraged its direct participation in producing Chinese stories, particularly through main melody films.

The chapter also underscored that the evolution of these main melody films is evident, transitioning from didactic storytelling to blockbuster productions, drawing inspiration from acclaimed Hong Kong directors and Hollywood expertise. Notably, there has been a recent surge in patriotic sentiment in China, contributing to the prominence of main melody films. Some celebrities and directors aligned themselves with this patriotic wave and the Chinese government's agenda, lending strong support to these productions.

It is clear from the definition of main melody films that the military subject fits very well with the fundamental components of these movies. I emphasized that the United States also provides many instances and patterns for how military films can be used to inspire national pride and motivate the populace. I debated the development of military-themed movies' technical aspects. Renowned Chinese and Hong Kong filmmakers like Chen Kaige, who directed *The Battle at Lake Changjin*, were among those featured in recent main melody films. In addition, I examined how *The Battle at Lake Changjin* was covered by the Brazilian media

by contrasting two articles: one that was directly translated from the *BBC* and focused on the movie's role as a propaganda tool and the restrictions on free speech in China, and the other that took a more nuanced approach by taking into account the highly ideological nature of both Hollywood and Chinese films. This comparison offers a wider perspective on historical events and helps build a more complete worldview by illuminating the possibilities that result from contrasting various cinemas. Nevertheless, even if these main melody movies are becoming more and more popular in China, they still have a long way to go before becoming worldwide hits.

Additionally, a new trend has emerged with science fiction-themed main melody films, positioning China as a leading force in global science fiction film production. Movies such as *The Wandering Earth* and *The Wandering Earth II* play a significant role in disseminating Chinese strategic narratives, incorporating themes of collective values, sacrifices for the greater good, the importance of scientific development, and the significance of international cooperation. In doing so, they present a compelling vision of a future with Chinese characteristics.

Finally, I analyzed *Wolf Warrior 2* (2017), a movie that exemplifies China's assertive foreign policy and global engagement, showcasing the country's ambition for a stronger international presence. Set in Africa, the film reflects China's evolving relations with African countries, highlighting technical cooperation, scientific collaboration, and healthcare initiatives as part of China's diversified engagement, with the Belt and Road Initiative playing a significant role in the backdrop. Nevertheless, *Wolf Warrior 2* faced criticism for perpetuating racist stereotypes in its portrayal of Africans.

A critical lesson from *Wolf Warrior 2* lies in the potential of integrating society and the State in filmmaking. Unlike state-owned studio productions, this film was created by a private studio, with the filmmaker recognizing the audience's desire for a fresh perspective on China. The film depicted China as assertive, globally engaged, caring for its citizens, and contributing to global peace. This alignment of societal aspirations with State narratives likely contributed to the film's success, showcasing the power of cinema in expressing shared values.

The film also illustrates the influence of State-led initiatives on the Chinese film industry. Main melody films underwent significant reforms to counter the rise of Hollywood films and challenges in the domestic market. Collaboration with filmmakers from Hong Kong enhanced the appeal of main melody films to broader audiences, reducing the reliance on mandatory State-sponsored screenings. These measures demonstrate the State's ability to shape the industry's direction both commercially and ideologically through strategic narratives.

However, the limited appeal of *Wolf Warrior 2* to international audiences offers valuable lessons. Excessive patriotism and jingoism might have contributed to its limited success abroad. Striking a delicate balance between narratives that promote national pride and resonate with global audiences is crucial in utilizing cinema as an instrument of China's soft power. The film's association with Hollywood productions like *Rambo* and *Top Gun*, which were successful internationally despite their pro-war views, suggests the importance of finding a nuanced approach to promote new perceptions while captivating international viewers.

Genre films, particularly action, and sci-fi, have proven effective in disseminating Chinese narratives to audiences less familiar with Chinese culture and history. Embracing shared background knowledge can further enhance soft power efforts, especially among China's neighboring countries and Belt and Road Initiative partners.

Moreover, addressing racist representations is critical for China's soft power strategy. *Wolf Warrior 2* received justified criticism for its problematic portrayal of Africans, emphasizing the importance of avoiding stereotypes and misrepresentations. Inclusivity and respectful representation of diverse cultures and identities are vital to ensure global audiences embrace Chinese films and narratives.

In conclusion, *Wolf Warrior 2* serves as an experiment that combines private enterprise, cooperation with Hollywood, and main-melody storytelling, potentially becoming a model for disseminating Chinese strategic narratives and enhancing soft power. Despite limited global success, Chinese films continue to be a potent tool in expressing and promoting China's strategic narratives to the world. Thus, in this strategy also prevails the argument that China's strengthening position allows it to wield greater influence in shaping strategic narratives through cinema, and the incorporation of international talent further strengthens its soft power efforts.

Therefore, it is crucial to revisit the primary objective of this dissertation: comprehending the correlation between China's growing global influence and its utilization of films as soft power tools to disseminate strategic narratives. As we have observed, in the case of the first strategy – leveraging China's influence to promote its soft power through Hollywood films, which are increasingly reliant on Chinese investment and the Chinese market – a balance exists between the argument and the counterargument. In other words, China's expanding prominence, while enhancing its capacity to disseminate its narratives, even in Hollywood films like *Mulan*, also engenders greater resistance to China, diminishing the effectiveness of its soft power through cinema.

Regarding the other strategies – China-U.S. co-productions and Chinese blockbuster

films – there is a clear predominance of the argument that as China grows stronger, its ability to shape the strategic narratives in films increases, thus elevating its soft power and contributing to the realization of Chinese foreign policy goals. Consequently, China’s proficiency in “telling China’s stories well” on the Silver Screen will become progressively noteworthy.

As I prepare to conclude this dissertation, I come across a fascinating article written by Miaofang Guan, Fabrício H Chagas-Bastos, and Marislei Nishijima titled “Winning Hearts and Minds: Soft Power, Cinema, and Public Perceptions of the United States and China in Brazil” (2023). The authors explored the relationship between soft power projection and public opinion, specifically investigating how cinema, as a soft power resource, can influence people’s positive perceptions about a country. To compare the soft power sources and projections of the United States and China, they conducted an online survey with 908 participants in Brazil. The findings indicate that exposure to soft power through films can shape people’s positive perceptions of countries. However, some dimensions of soft power appear to be more challenging to activate than others, such as patriotic films’ association with admiration for U.S. military power. The study also discovered that soft power activation may be context-dependent, with greater knowledge of a country’s soft power resources in a particular context leading to increased soft power projection and activation (Guan, Chagas-Bastos, and Nishijima 2023).

I include the article by Miaofang Guan, Fabrício H Chagas-Bastos, and Marislei Nishijima (2023) in this conclusion for several reasons. Firstly, to demonstrate the continued relevance and current interest in the topic, as academic productions and analyses from diverse perspectives are constantly being conducted. Additionally, the authors address a question I encountered numerous times while developing this project: How can one demonstrate that films and soft power instruments, in general, can influence changes in public opinion? This question raises doubts about the possibility of validating soft power instruments. As I discussed in the introduction and Chapter 1 of this dissertation, my research is rooted in poststructuralism, which challenges concepts like causality and linearity of actions. Therefore, proving that a specific action causes a particular outcome is not the central goal of this analysis. Nonetheless, it is intriguing to note that the authors’ study using focus groups aligns with many arguments presented in this dissertation, particularly the idea that exposure to soft power through films can shape people’s positive perceptions of countries and that soft power activation may depend on the context and knowledge of a country’s soft power resources. The empirical validation of the arguments presented in this thesis is compelling.

Their research also emphasizes the importance of observing opinions on the success or failure of Chinese films beyond the United States and Europe. Conducting their study in Brazil,

a significant Global South actor, reinforces the notion that soft power and images play a central role in shaping people's worldviews. This idea aligns with key theories presented here, such as Qin Yaqing's relational theory, which underscores the importance of culture as shared background knowledge within a community. Throughout this dissertation, I sought to demonstrate that these considerations are part of China's efforts to effectively narrate its stories.

This dissertation presents several significant contributions and original insights. Firstly, it takes a novel approach by integrating cinema, soft power, and strategic narratives, going beyond traditional confrontational power dynamics in International Relations. Drawing from Media and Film Studies, it widens the scope of analysis, providing a more comprehensive understanding of culture's role in shaping International Relations. Unlike previous research in communication and cinema, this work not only identifies film contents but also analyzes how China's relations with the world, particularly the U.S., are portrayed in these films. This analysis is a notable contribution to International Relations, shedding light on how China aims to be perceived globally, the strategic narratives it promotes, and its use of soft power to achieve its objectives.

Additionally, this research holds implications for Chinese foreign policy. By examining the production, promotion, and reception of Chinese films abroad, the dissertation provides valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities for Chinese foreign policy. It can inform policy decisions by identifying which aspects of Chinese culture and narratives resonate with diverse international audiences and how to leverage soft power to achieve foreign policy goals.

Moreover, coming from a Brazilian perspective, this dissertation offers a unique viewpoint on China-U.S. relations, two of Brazil's most significant partners. By highlighting the role of visual images in shaping international events and public perception, this work demonstrates how the cinematic dynamics between China and the U.S. can influence how Brazilians view these countries and the world. This perspective adds a crucial dimension to the study of China-U.S. relations and provides fresh insights into their impact on countries beyond their immediate involvement.

Lastly, I conclude with a fundamental point addressed throughout this dissertation: the potential of culture to build bridges between peoples, making a valuable contribution to the field of International Relations. By transcending traditional notions of power and national security, it offers a more nuanced comprehension of how cultural exchanges can foster mutual understanding and cooperation between countries. In this regard, this research engages with the extensive literature on the importance of culture in International Relations, which can promote mutual understanding, bridge differences, and open new avenues of communication, thus

having the potential to transform societies.

This approach also broadens the scope of International Relations by incorporating new cultures and worldviews into this Eurocentric discipline. Buzan and Acharya (2021) argue that Western history and political theory were considered synonymous with world history and theory in the discipline. As a consequence, Western concepts such as anarchy and the balance of power were assumed to be universal, contributing to the excessive focus on conflict in International Relations. However, engaging in dialogue with other cultures and worldviews can make International Relations more comprehensive, encompassing diverse perspectives and historical forms of statehood and international order-building.

One of the many possible theories is Qin Yaqing's relational theory, which emphasizes the significance of cultural elements in analyzing global events. Unlike Western rationalism, which prioritizes individual self-interest, Chinese society's prominent concept is relationality. Qin Yaqing (2018) incorporates the dialectical conceptions of Chinese *zhongyong* (yin-yang), highlighting harmony between opposing forces. These forces are interconnected, creating a coevolutionary harmony, in contrast to the Hegelian dialectic prevalent in Western thought, which perceives a conflict between opposing poles.

Thus, incorporating diverse cultures and histories into the discipline, whether they are Chinese, Brazilian, or otherwise, enables us to demonstrate the existence of diverse perspectives in understanding the world and International Relations, thereby fostering the development of a more inclusive and harmonious discipline and global community.



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## FILMS MENTIONED IN THE DISSERTATION

- 1) Broken Blossoms (D. W. Griffith, 1919)
- 2) Shadow (Tom Forman, 1922)
- 3) The Toll of the Sea (Chester M. Franklin, 1922)
- 4) Robin Hood (Allan Dwan, 1922)
- 5) Battleship Potemkin (Sergei Eisenstein, 1925)
- 6) The Mysterious Dr. Fu Manchu (Rowland V. Lee, 1929)
- 7) The Return of Dr. Fu Manchu (Rowland V. Lee, 1930)
- 8) The Bitter Tea of General Yen (Frank Capra, 1933)
- 9) The Cat's-Paw (Sam Tayler, 1934)
- 10) The Good Earth (Sidney Franklin, 1937)
- 11) China Strikes Back (Harry Dunham, Irving Lerner, 1937)
- 12) Alexander Nevsky (Sergei Eisenstein, 1925)
- 13) Shanghai Express (Josef von Sternberg, 1941)
- 14) The Shanghai Gesture (1941)
- 15) Saludos Amigos (Norman Ferguson, Jack Kinney, Wilfred Jackson, Hamilton Luske, Bill Roberts, 1942)
- 16) Ravaged Earth (Mark L Moody, 1942)
- 17) The Battle of China (Frank Capra, Anatole Litvak, 1944)
- 18) Thirty Seconds over Tokyo (Mervyn LeRoy, 1944)
- 19) Dragon Seed (Jack Conway, Harold S. Bucquet, 1944)
- 20) Ivan the Terrible, Part I (Sergei Eisenstein, 1944)
- 21) Objective, Burma! (Raoul Walsh, 1945)
- 22) A Song to Remember (Charles Vidor, 1945)
- 23) Salt of the Earth (Michael Wilson, 1954)
- 24) Bloody Alley (William Wellman, 1955)
- 25) The Inn of the Sixth Happiness (Mark Robson, 1958)
- 26) The Chinese Kite (Roger Pigaut, 1958)
- 27) Ivan the Terrible, Part II (Sergei Eisenstein, 1958)
- 28) The Mountain Road (Daniel Mann, 1960)
- 29) The Manchurian Candidate (John Frankenheimer, 1962)
- 30) 55 Days at Peking (Nicholas Ray, 1963)
- 31) The Sand Pebbles (Robert Wise, 1966)
- 32) Kung Fu series (Jerry Thorpe, 1972-75)
- 33) Rambo: First Blood (Ted Kotcheff, 1982)
- 34) The Shaolin Temple (Hsin-Yen Chang, 1982)
- 35) Burning the Imperial Palace (Han Hsiang Li, 1983)
- 36) Reign Behind a Curtain (Han Hsiang Li, 1983)
- 37) One and Eight (Zhang Junzhao, 1983)
- 38) The Boys from Fengkuei (Hou Hsiao-Hsien, 1983)
- 39) Yellow Earth (Chen Kaige, 1984)
- 40) Red Dawn (John Milius, 1984)
- 41) Top Gun (Tony Scott, 1986)
- 42) Red Sorghum (Zhang Yimou, 1987)
- 43) The Last Emperor (Bernardo Bertolucci, 1987)
- 44) Empire of the Sun (Steven Spielberg, 1987)
- 45) The King of Sulu and the Emperor of China (Lili Chou, Eddie Romero, Lang Xiao, 1987)

- 46) Tommy Tricker and the Stamp Traveller (Michael Rubbo, 1988)
- 47) The Silk Road (Junya Satō, 1988)
- 48) The Kunlun Column (Guang Hao, Mukui Jing, 1988)
- 49) Baise Uprising (Jialin Chen, 1989)
- 50) The Birth of New China (Qiankuan Li, Guiyun Xiao, 1989)
- 51) The Abyss (James Cameron, 1989)
- 52) Bumming in Beijing (Wu Wenguang, 1990)
- 53) Mama (Zhang Yuan, 1990)
- 54) Ju Dou (Zhang Yimou, Yang Fengliang, 1990)
- 55) Bethune: The Making of a Hero (Phillip Borsos, 1990)
- 56) Mandala (Im Kwon-taek, 1991)
- 57) Yang Guifei (Jialin Chen, 1992)
- 58) The Tragic Tale of Grassland (Hui Tung-Kwan, 1992)
- 59) King of Beggars (Gordon Chan, 1992)
- 60) The Tai Chi Master (Woo-Ping Yue, 1993)
- 61) Flirting Scholar (Lee Lik-Chi, 1993)
- 62) The Fugitive (Andrew Davis, 1993)
- 63) Beijing Bastards (Zhang Yuan, 1993)
- 64) The Days (Wang Xiaoshuai, 1993)
- 65) True Lies (James Cameron, 1994)
- 66) Forrest Gump (Robert Zemeckis, 1994)
- 67) The Lion King (Rob Minkoff, Roger Allers, 1994)
- 68) Speed (Jan de Bont, 1994)
- 69) The Square (Zhang Yuan, 1994)
- 70) On the Beat (Ying Ning, 1995)
- 71) Tough Beauty and the Sloppy Slop (Alan Chung San Chui, Bun Yuen, 1995)
- 72) Xiao Wu (Jia Zhangke, 1997)
- 73) Red Corner (Jon Avnet, 1997)
- 74) Kundun (Martin Scorsese, 1997)
- 75) Seven Years in Tibet (Jean-Jacques Annaud, 1997)
- 76) Titanic (James Cameron, 1997)
- 77) Keep Cool (Zhang Yimou, 1997)
- 78) Frozen (Wang Xiaoshuai, 1997)
- 79) Armageddon (Michael Bay, 1998)
- 80) Deep Impact (Mimi Leder, 1998)
- 81) Mulan (Tony Bancroft, Barry Cook, 1998)
- 82) A Time to Remember (Ye Daying, 1998)
- 83) Not One Less (Zhang Yimou, 1998)
- 84) The Road Home (Zhang Yimou, 1999)
- 85) Fight Club (David Fincher, 1999)
- 86) Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon (Ang Lee, 2000)
- 87) Platform (Jia Zhangke, 2000)
- 88) Shaolin Soccer (Stephen Chow, 2001)
- 89) Lagaan (Ashutosh Gowariker, 2001)
- 90) Hero (Zhang Yimou, 2002)
- 91) House of Flying Daggers (Zhang Yimou, 2004)
- 92) Kung Fu Hustle (Stephen Chow, 2004)
- 93) Mission: Impossible III (J. J. Abrams, 2006)
- 94) Fearless (Ronny Yu, 2006)
- 95) Curse of the Golden Flower (Zhang Yimou, 2006)

- 96) Summer Palace (Lou Ye, 2006)
- 97) Assembly (Feng Xiaogang, 2007)
- 98) Lust, Caution (Ang Lee, 2007)
- 99) Kung Fu Panda (Mark Osborne, John Stevenson, 2008)
- 100) Red Cliff (John Woo, 2008)
- 101) Avatar (James Cameron, 2009)
- 102) 2012 (Roland Emmerich, 2009)
- 103) Spring Fever (Lou Ye, 2009)
- 104) The Founding of a Republic (Huang Jianxin, Han Sanping, 2009)
- 105) The Karate Kid (Harald Zwart, 2010)
- 106) Confucius (Hu Mei, 2010)
- 107) Alice in Wonderland (Tim Burton, 2010)
- 108) The Founding of a Party (Han Sanping, Huang Jianxin, 2011)
- 109) Beginning of the Great Revival (Sanping Han, Jianxin Huang, 2011)
- 110) Red Dawn (Dan Bradley, 2012)
- 111) Looper (Rian Johnson, 2012)
- 112) Skyfall (Sam Mendes, 2012)
- 113) Iron Man 3 (Shane Black, 2013)
- 114) Captain Phillips (Paul Greengrass, 2013)
- 115) Gravity (Alfonso Cuarón, 2013)
- 116) Pacific Rim (Guillermo del Toro, 2013)
- 117) Journey to the West (Stephen Chow, Derek Kwok, 2013)
- 118) Transformers: Age of Extinction (Michael Bay, 2014)
- 119) RoboCop (José Padilha, 2014)
- 120) Maleficent (Robert Stromberg, 2014)
- 121) Interstellar (Christopher Nolan, 2014)
- 122) Captain America: The Winter Soldier (Anthony Russo, 2014)
- 123) PK (Rajkumar Hirani, 2014)
- 124) The Martian (Ridley Scott, 2015)
- 125) Mission: Impossible – Rogue Nation (Christopher McQuarrie, 2015)
- 126) Pixels (Chris Columbus, 2015)
- 127) Monster Hunt (Raman Hui, 2015)
- 128) Wolf Totem (Jean-Jacques Annaud, 2015)
- 129) Cinderella (Kenneth Branagh, 2015)
- 130) Gone with the Bullets (Jiang Wen, 2015)
- 131) Monk Comes Down the Mountain (Chen Kaige, 2015)
- 132) Wolf Warrior (Wu Jing, 2015)
- 133) Operation Mekong (Dante Lam, 2016)
- 134) La La Land (Damien Chazelle, 2016)
- 135) Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk (Ang Lee, 2016)
- 136) Warcraft (Duncan Jones, 2016)
- 137) Doctor Strange (Scott Derrickson, 2016)
- 138) Arrival (Denis Villeneuve, 2016)
- 139) The Jungle Book (Jon Favreau, 2016)
- 140) Rogue One: A Star Wars Story (Gareth Edwards, 2016)
- 141) Dangal (Nitesh Tiwari, 2016)
- 142) Kong: Skull Island (Jordan Vogt-Roberts, 2017)
- 143) Wolf Warrior 2 (Wu Jing, 2017)
- 144) The Founding of an Army (Andrew Lau, 2017)
- 145) Beauty and the Beast (Bill Condon, 2017)

- 146) Dying to Survive (Wen Muye, 2018)
- 147) Rampage (Brad Peyton, 2018)
- 148) The Meg (Jon Turteltaub, 2018)
- 149) Venom (Ruben Fleischer, 2018)
- 150) Aquaman (James Wan, 2018)
- 151) Amazing China (Tie Wei, 2018)
- 152) Operation Red Sea (Dante Lam, 2018)
- 153) Captain Marvel (Anna Boden, Nia DaCosta, Ryan Fleck, 2019)
- 154) Shazam! (David F. Sandberg, 2019)
- 155) Avengers: Endgame (Anthony Russo, Joe Russo, 2019)
- 156) Spider Man: Far from Home (Jon Watts, 2019)
- 157) Dark Phoenix (Simon Kinberg, 2019)
- 158) Frozen 2 (Jennifer Lee, Chris Buck, 2019)
- 159) Dumbo (Tim Burton, 2019)
- 160) Abominable (Jill Culton, 2019)
- 161) Fast and Furious: Hobbs and Shaw (David Leitch, 2019)
- 162) The Wandering Earth (Frant Gwo, 2019)
- 163) The Last Wish (Tian Yusheng, 2019)
- 164) The Eight Hundred (Guan Hu, 2020)
- 165) Tenet (Christopher Nolan, 2020)
- 166) Mulan (Niki Caro, 2020)
- 167) Hi, Mom (Jia Ling, 2021)
- 168) Spider-Man: No Way Home (Jon Watts, 2021)
- 169) Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings (Destin Cretton, 2021)
- 170) Eternals (Chloé Zhao, 2021)
- 171) Lightyear (Angus MacLane, 2022)
- 172) Fantastic Beasts: The Secrets of Dumbledore (David Yates, 2022)
- 173) One Second (Zhang Yimou, 2022)
- 174) Barbie (Greta Gerwig, 2023) – nine-dash line
- 175) The Wandering Earth II (Frant Gwo, 2023)
- 176) Born to Fly (Xiaoshi Liu, 2023)