

“Man-as-Nation”: Representations of Masculinity and Nationalism in Wu Jing’s *Wolf Warrior II*

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Abstract

Through an in-depth analysis of gender representation in the box office record-breaking Chinese movie *Wolf Warrior II*, this study interrogates how the male body is used as a site for the projection of Chinese national power. Furthermore, it illustrates a revival of patriotic pride in China through a contemporary reading of cross-genre action-military films. Developing Shuqin Cui’s notion of “woman-as-nation,” which understands on-screen female victimization in Chinese films as signifying the past suffering of the nation, this study proposes the new concept of “man-as-nation” to explain how the masculine virtues of male protagonists in Chinese films signify the nation’s rejuvenation and strength. Framing male virtue into the paradigms of *wu* (武), as martial valor, and *wen* (文), as cultural attainment, this article argues that masculinity has come to symbolize China’s enhanced comprehensive power and to embody its ideological orientation in both global and domestic domains.

Keywords

masculinity, Chinese film, nationalism, patriotic pride, man-as-nation, *wen*, *wu*

Introduction

In 2017, the explosive commercial success of *Wolf Warrior II* (2017, 战狼 II, dir. Wu Jing), a cross-genre action-military film that has been called a “phenomenon-grade” movie (Teo, 2019), attracted a wave of public attention to nationalistic portrayals in Chinese cinema. The movie’s release coincided with the 90th anniversary of the founding of the People’s Liberation Army in China. A sequel to 2015’s *Wolf Warrior*, *Wolf Warrior II* tells the story of Leng Feng, an ex-service Chinese soldier, who undertakes a solo mission to rescue Chinese medics and workers from local African rebels and a vicious mercenary army. Highly acclaimed for its patriotic story, special effects, action sequences, and cast performances, the film broke numerous box office records and achieved a gross US\$870 million worldwide. It became the 73rd highest-grossing film of all time according to the “Top Lifetime Grosses”¹ list and was one of the only two non-Hollywood produced films (alongside *Ne Zha*²) to ever appear on the list. It was also selected as the Chinese entry for Best Foreign Language Film at the 90th Academy Awards (2018).

Male heroes fighting the Japanese or the Nationalists was a widespread narrative in pre-1949 and Mao-era Chinese film, and has reappeared in contemporary TV dramas as a part of a propagandistic media discourse (Hu, 2003; Song, 2010; Ward, 2004; Zhou, 2016). However, in the new

millennium, the military genre has appeared infrequently on the big screen. *Wolf Warrior II*’s director and producer Wu Jing stated in a press conference in Guangzhou that “patriotism has been hidden away inside the audience for a long time and this sentiment needs to be released through a film and a role” (cited in Zuo, 2017). The role he refers to is the heroic male soldier. As Stephen Teo (2019) suggested,

The prime contradiction lies in the film’s subtle depiction of its hero as individualistic and militaristic in the Hollywood style, and also as a kind of “third-world” socialist chivalric archetype battling ferocious mercenaries in an African state in a fashion redolent of Maoist propaganda from the 1960s. (p. 322)

In recent years, it can be observed that China’s national image seems to be going through a process of masculinization through the action-military genre. Typical examples include the commercial successes of *Operation Mekong* (2016) and *Operation Red Sea* (2018), in which brawny and skillful Chinese special troops defeat their enemies and save Chinese citizens from foreign war zones. The dramatic commercial

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success of *Wolf Warrior II* (2017) has motivated China's film-makers to further engage with the action-military genre by employing similar themes. Although some films continued *Wolf Warrior II*'s commercial success (*Operation Red Sea* gained US\$579.33 million box office worldwide³), while others failed to (e.g., *Sky Hunter*, 2017), this genre has since become significant and lucrative in the Chinese cinema industry. Thus, as ice breaker and as successor, *Wolf Warrior II* has been considered as a crucial model for Chinese cinema's integration of its own form of heroic genre cinema with the more established conventions of Hollywood cinema as the Chinese industry expands to the globe.

Wolf Warrior II's revitalization of the military film genre through its integration of martial arts and special effects makes it a strong case through which to investigate the cinematic representation of active masculinity in relation to nationalism. This study aims to consider both the social and the political levels of the film's resonance, suggesting that Chinese audiences' embracing of this film can be partly attributed to its representation of the Chinese male as a powerful masculine subject that is inseparable from the accomplishments of contemporary China in the areas of national regeneration and international influence. This implicit narrative signification reflects and caters to the rise of patriotic feeling in China. An in-depth narrative analysis of gender representation in *Wolf Warrior II* will reveal how the male body is used as a site for the projection of national power, and how patriotism is revived through a contemporary signification of the nation in cross-genre action-military films. Developing Shuqin Cui's (2003) notion of "woman-as-nation," which understands on-screen female victimization in Chinese films as signifying the motherland and the past sufferings of the nation, this study proposes the new concept of the "man-as-nation" to shed light on the ways in which the masculine virtues of the genre's male protagonists signify the Chinese nation's rejuvenation and strength.

The article first reviews the scholarly literature on nationalism in contemporary China, as well as the dynamics between nationalism and film representation, providing a contextual background for the analysis. It then introduces the conceptual framework of "man-as-nation." A narrative analysis within this conceptual framework is then pursued in the second half of the article. In this analysis, the narrative connection between masculinity and nationalism is examined with reference to the virtues of male figures in *Wolf Warrior II*, which are explicated with assistance from Kam Louie and Louise Edwards's (1994) analysis of *wu* (武) as martial valor and *wen* (文) as cultural attainment. The study suggests that the masculine virtues represented in this film are transformed into affirmative, proud, and spirited nationalist sentiment in the Chinese cinematic discourse.

Nationalism in Contemporary China

Nationalism is a widely debated concept in literature from international relations (IR), sociology, and history. It can be

generally understood as a common identity that creates both cohesion within society and support for the state (Woods & Dickson, 2017). Since the 1980s and 1990s, scholarship on nationalism has advanced theoretically and empirically, with the publication of many still-influential works, including John A. Armstrong's *Nations Before Nationalism*, Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, and Michael Billing's *Banal Nationalism* (Anderson, 1983; Armstrong, 1982; Billing, 1995). As personal nationalistic identity is complex and involves many different aspects of an individual's feelings, values, and thoughts regarding their country, several studies have recognized the disparate aspects of this phenomenon and subdivided nationalism into a range of specific beliefs. For instance, Rick Kosterman and Seymour Feshbach (1989) delineate two primary strands of nationalist sentiment: feelings of attachment to one's country, and feelings of superiority or dominance over other nations. They label these sets of beliefs "patriotism" and "nationalism," respectively, and show that each set of beliefs holds distinct views on international affairs. Robert T. Schatz et al. (1999, pp. 151–174) draw a different contrast, emphasizing the difference between "blind patriotism," which refers to uncritical loyalty to the state, and "constructive nationalism," which allows for dissent.

Nationalism has been viewed as the inevitable result of modernization—a corollary of the transformation from traditional to modern societies—and as such is considered a nearly universal phenomenon that can be observed in most nation-states. Therefore, in the Chinese context, it is usually suggested that the concept of "nationalism" did not really exist in China until the early 20th century. James P. Harrison has pointed out that the traditional Chinese self-image has generally been defined as "culturalism," based on historical heritage and acceptance of shared values—not as nationalism, which is based on the modern concept of the nation-state (Harrison, 1969). Culturalism shapes Chinese relations with the rest of the world through a China-centric universalism that envisages a hierarchical world system with China at its center. However, although the concept of nationalism was never strongly rooted in ancient Chinese thought, national heroes and icons have been worshiped throughout Chinese history. For example, Qu Yuan (c.340–278 BC) and General Yuefei (1103–1142) were depicted as patriots and defenders of the state (Andre, 2011).

Since the 1990s, nationalism in the Chinese context has usually been investigated through the vigilant endeavor of foreign observers. Especially since President Xi Jinping came to power in 2012, the U.S. media has closely connected the rise of nationalism in China to China's supposed xenophobia, "assertiveness in foreign affairs" and "anti-Japanese/US sentiments" (Unger, 2016; Zhao, 2016). These traits can be said to illuminate the distinctive inner core of contemporary China's nationalism—a feeling of victimization associated with the national memory of the "century of humiliation" (百年国耻), which refers to Western domination and Japanese invasion between 1840 and 1945. This historical

legacy and collective memory has given China's nationalism some reactive and conflictive features. For example, Sow-keat Tok has suggested that China's nationalism is shame-inspired while also evoking a theme of saving the country (救国) (Tok, 2013).

Nationalism has professedly been "rediscovered" by the Chinese central government as a tool to solve its crisis of legitimacy and to strengthen national cohesion in the wake of Communist ideology's collapse since the late 1980s. In addition to describing Chinese nationalism in terms of its reactive qualities, some studies have claimed that the Chinese state intentionally promotes xenophobic and anti-Japanese sentiments to divert people's attention away from underlying domestic issues, including the widening income gap, environmental problems, and systemic corruption (Downs & Saunders, 1999; Kawashima, 2015; Lye & Wu, 2013). However, others disagree and argue that the Chinese state has suppressed nationalism, rather than promoted it, because of its political risks (Tang & Darr, 2012; Wan, 2012). This view contends that when the public considers the government too weak to protect its people and sovereignty, public indignation toward foreign states may turn into discontent toward the Chinese authorities, potentially leading to a revolution. Nationalism can create support for the state, but can also weaken state authority if the government appears too willing to compromise with foreign countries; despite its potential to backfire, popular nationalism has thrived in Chinese society since the 1990s.

While many China-observers view Chinese nationalism as a negative development, scholars and writers from mainland China take a different stance, evolving increasingly positive understandings of nationalist sentiment in present-day China (He, 2018; Jia, 2005). For instance, Zhimin Chen (2003) suggests that, unlike the previous underconfident nationalism driven by victimization, contemporary China's positive nationalism is confident both in China's position in international strategic settings and in China's eventual attainment of greatness. Chen (2003) argues that Chinese nationalism should be considered "affirmative nationalism," which is not assertive, aggressive, uncontrolled, or disruptive, but rather pro-state and pro-CCP (Chinese Communist Party), with an emphasis on international reconciliation and cooperation. Qingguo Jia also avoids framing it as confrontational, claiming that compared with the superficial perception of "rising Chinese nationalism," a more balanced view is that while the Chinese are in some ways more nationalistic than they were in the past (taking greater pride in China's achievements), they are less so in other ways (for instance, in the past many Chinese believed that it was inappropriate to import foreign consumer goods and China should be self-reliant, but now people are less concerned about this; Jia, 2005).

Outside of the negative, victim-driven understandings and the positive, affirmative understandings of Chinese nationalism, a few studies have started to examine the delicate

transformations and differentiations that have occurred within Chinese nationalistic sentiments. Of significance is Jackson S. Wood and Bruce J. Dickson's work, which concerns the "pride of national achievement" (Woods & Dickson, 2017, p. 171). Wood and Dickson distinguish two different types of nationalism in contemporary China: the first involves pride in one's country, and the second involves acceptance of conflict-oriented state narratives regarding foreign affairs. In line with these two types, the authors also identify two distinct groups who they see as marked by respective feelings of nationalist pride and resentment. They suggest that the first group is influenced by positive materialist life experiences, whereas the perspective of the second group is solely related to its members' political orientation (Woods & Dickson, 2017).

The present study empirically tests Wood and Dickson's classification of Chinese nationalist themes in the context of a purported rise in patriotic pride in contemporary Chinese society. **Although it has been a commonly held consensus that the mass media has played a vital role in cultivating a collective ideology and in sustaining and defining nationalism, the majority of previous studies on media-nationalism relations have focused their research on news production, which may be viewed as more closely associated with politics. This study instead locates its research foci within cultural production—specifically film—and, through its examination of *Wolf Warrior II*, hopes to comment on the wider phenomenon of nationalism in mainland China.**

The Interdependent Dynamics of Nationalism, Masculinity, and Film

The dynamic relations between film and nationalism have been studied since the early 20th century. Releases by the Nazi propaganda master Joseph Goebbels, and the Soviet state-sponsored uses of cinema are typical examples of the power of film in shaping mass opinion and propagating intense nationalism, fascism, totalitarianism, and dictatorial rules. As Alan Larson Williams (2002) has argued, cinema can function as a weapon of "cultural nationalism [through] promoting national values in the face of other, putatively inferior national values" (p. 6), as well as by keeping specific national characters in circulation. Furthermore, popular national cinema is very sensitive and responsive to changing social climates, beliefs, and contexts (Burch & Sellier, 2013). Such films could be viewed as a combination of top-down, state-supported nationalism and bottom-up, popular nationalism. On one hand, as part of an international politics of culture, governments support films they deem worthy and withhold support from those they deem unworthy; on the other hand, the films themselves reflect values and behaviors that prevail in a particular society.

Suisheng Zhao suggests that Chinese nationalism as a whole has been driven mostly by two opposing forces: the incumbent state elites from the top down (state nationalism),

and the populist societal forces from the bottom up (popular nationalism; Burch & Sellier, 2013). China's state nationalism is officially expressed as "loving the state," or patriotism, which is love and support of China as indistinguishable from the state; popular nationalists share with the government the dream of making China a strong and powerful country in this complicated and competitive post-Cold War era. As an example of this combination of top-down and bottom-up nationalism, *Wolf Warrior II*'s success demonstrates both the Chinese state's will to promote nationalist pride and sentiment, and the public's acceptance of this credendum. In its production and distribution, *Wolf Warrior II* was strongly supported by the Chinese government—especially by the military, which allowed numerous advanced weapons to be presented in the film. Its commercial success exemplifies the popular acceptance of a discourse of nationalist pride. Therefore, the following analysis seeks to understand how the theme of nationalist pride is embodied in *Wolf Warrior II* as a mixed effect, integrating top-down, state-sponsored nationalism, with bottom-up, popular nationalism.

This article examines nationalist pride through the lens of *Wolf Warrior II*'s cinematic representation of masculinity. Existing scholarship regarding masculinity in film in the international context includes several key books that engage in critical reconsiderations of gender and masculinity on-screen in response to the increased visibility of the male body in American and British culture: Kaja Silverman's (1992) *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*, Yvonne Tasker's (2012) *Spectacular Bodies*, Susan Jeffords's (1989, 1994) *The Remasculinization of America* and *Hard Bodies*, Brian Baker's (2006) *Masculinity in Fiction and Film*, and the anthology *Screening the Male* edited by Steve Cohan and Ina Rae Hark (1993). Among these, *Spectacular Bodies* and *Hard Bodies* have particular focus on the power relations between masculinity and nationalism. Both concentrate on the correspondence between public and popular images of Ronald Reagan and action-adventure Hollywood films, and both provide solid analyses of the hypermasculine protagonist Rambo in the Hollywood blockbuster *First Blood* (1982) and its sequel. Herein, Rambo is a Reaganite icon who triumphs over his nation's foreign and domestic enemies.

In addition, the correlation between masculinity and nationalism in films has been researched in the contexts of India, Mexico, Korea, and Japan. Discourses of nationalism, masculinity, and religion have intersected in the Indian subcontinent, where films typically follow hegemonic patterns that reinforce Hindu nationalism (Murty, 2009). In Mexico, where hypermasculine machismo has become a defining characteristic of national identity, cinema has provided an especially effective staging ground for the construction of a gendered and sexualized Mexican male (de la Mora, 2006). In the Asian context, Kyung Hyun Kim argues that the brutality and violence ubiquitous in South Korean films is symptomatic of Korea's ongoing quest for modernity and postauthoritarian identity since the 1980s (Kim, 2004).

Isolde Standish has examined the "tragic hero" narrative as a figurative structure of Japanese films in which the events of World War II and defeat are interpreted, providing spectators with an avenue of exculpation from a foreign-imposed sense of guilt (Standish, 2000).

In the Chinese context, an important work on gender and the nation in film is Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar's (2006) *China on Screen*, which draws on three fundamental Confucian codes of premodern legal, moral, and hierarchical obligation—namely, loyalty to the ruler, fidelity to one's parents and ancestors, and brotherhood. The authors argue that these codes persist as mythic symbols of national identity, ideal masculine behaviors, and forms of institutional governance that are variously reconstituted in films. This monograph examines the ways in which men and the nation are represented in relation to issues of social justice and morality in Chinese film, however, women is not the main focus although this point has been touched.

In the Chinese diasporic context, Kung Fu stars have attracted much scholarly attention, particularly in regard to Bruce Lee's participation in nationalistic-themed films (e.g., Bowman, 2010; Chan, 2001; Shu, 2003). Z. Lu et al. (2014) believe that since the late 1960s, martial arts in Chinese films have been endowed with political and cultural significance, symbolizing indigenous virtue and strength and ultimately evolving to represent Chinese nationalism. These films include Bruce Lee's *Fist of Fury* (1972) and *Enter the Dragon* (1973), the biographical film series of Wong Fei-hung (黄飞鸿), Huo Yuanjia (霍元甲), and Ip Man (叶问) starring various famous actors such as Jackie Chan, Jet Li, and Donnie Yen. These films were made in the United States (e.g., Bruce Lee's works) and Hong Kong, but notably not in mainland China. While some films made after 2000 have involved mainland production companies, Hong Kong filmmakers and actors have constituted most of the key roles. These stories depict a male hero, who defeats foreign invaders through prowess in Kung Fu, and can be seen as nationalist counter-narratives to China's various defeats at the hands of foreign imperialist powers at the turn of the 20th century. Nationalistic representation in the Kung Fu genre is quite different from that of the action-military genre in that the male heroes are mostly civilians who stand for the common Chinese people, but not for Chinese officials. In contrast, the male heroes of the action-military genre examined in this article are constructed as official military soldiers who carry out missions authorized by the government: This makes their position representative of the nation, rather than the people. Moreover, compared with traditional Kung Fu films' central theme of erasing the shame imposed by foreigners, the action-military genre initiates a more confident nationalistic representation by largely glorifying China's military power and national image.

Geng Song and Derek Hird's (2013) *Men and Masculinities in Contemporary China* explores the perception of Chinese masculinities in media discourse and people's daily life,

covering various dimensions, including television, lifestyle magazines, cyberspace, workplaces, leisure, and domestic spaces. Regarding a TV serial about revolutionary heroes called *Unsheathing the Sword* (2005), Song and Hird (2013) argue that representations of the Chinese male have become increasingly hybrid in a globalizing China, reflecting social changes that are closely tied to new formations of power. They further argue that nationalist masculinity in Chinese popular culture is associated with the Confucian legacy of accomplishing manhood in political action and personal sacrifice (Song, 2004). Song and Hird (2013) have pointed out diversified Chinese masculinities departing from the *wen-wu* paradigm; however, these differing masculinities are not equally valued because of their various degrees of reception in the Chinese society (Louie, 2012) while traditional gender norms are still invoked in the definition of contemporary Chinese manhood (Song & Hird, 2013). **Although Song and Hird's (2013) work has examined Chinese men and masculinities from multiple perspectives, film analysis is outside their scope of work,** and indeed an in-depth analysis of nationalist masculine representations in Chinese film has not yet been pursued. **This article attempts to fill this gap by proposing the concept of "man-as-nation" to explain the ways in which the virtues of male protagonists come to signify the Chinese nation's rejuvenation and strength.**

From "Woman-as-Nation" to "Man-as-Nation"

Chinese cinema tends to depict male and female soldiers in revolutionary struggles—in civil war and at war with the Japanese—but rarely presents military figures in contemporary times reflecting current affairs. In terms of scholarship primarily originating from literary studies within premodern and modern contexts rather than from media works, the correlation between women and nation is discussed by Tani Barlow in *Theorizing Woman*, in which she argues that "women" (妇女)—a 20th-century neologism—has removed the identities of daughters, wives, and mothers from their subject positions in the patriline, and transformed them into the undifferentiated subjects of the new nation (Barlow, 1991). Barlow then reiterated and explicated this topic in her anthologies *Body, Subject and Power in China* (Zito & Barlow, 1993) and *Gender Politics in Modern China* (Barlow, 1993), in the latter of which Yue Meng (1994) points out that the female image has been used in socialist fictions to signify either a certain class or sociopolitical group, or the authority of the Communist Party itself.

The present study chooses to apply Shuqin Cui's (2003) notion of "woman-as-nation" because it is mainly drawn from analysis of film, making it a constructive theoretical framework for discussion of the blockbuster *Wolf Warrior II*. The metaphor of the "woman-as-nation" refers to a figure suffering from foreign invasion or the civil division that follows a nation's external or internal conflicts. Women's

humiliation therefore symbolizes the Chinese nation's repression by imperialist forces. The nation is feminized as the motherland through the image of the female body as occupiable land. Female victimization also becomes an allegory for foreign invasion of the nation in new wave Chinese film. For instance, in Zhang Yimou's *Red Sorghum* (1988), the depiction of the Japanese military's violence against the female protagonist leads to the male characters' resistance, which signifies the nation's defense against the imperial invader. More recently, Zhang's *The Flowers of War* (2012) further reifies and feminizes the devastation of the nation through forceful aggression by means of the image-construction of female victimization.

Although the victimized image of woman-as-nation is not the only format that such representations take, it remains mainstream in contemporary Chinese cinema, whereas the delineation of a heroized woman-as-nation (in which women, as political cadres or national heroines, were presented in the guise of "holding up half the sky") was preferred in decades-old socialist films. The signification of woman-as-nation appeared in Chinese cinema as early as the 1930s, when women tended to be represented as a visual sign of the new social order, evolving from a "ghost of old society" to a "master of the new state" with the redemption of the socialist system (S. H. Lu, 1997). In this context, women were regarded as socialist collective symbols, and as such, their individual traits were required to be erased (Y. Chen, 2008; Dai, 2002). A classic female warrior is Hua Mulan,⁴ who represents a form of feminism that is constrained by an overarching preoccupation with the connection between the state and its subjects/citizens. Mulan's cross-dressing predominantly functions to amplify the significance of her devotion to her father and country, as the bold transgression of gender norms places her in physical and moral danger (Edwards, 2010). **Nevertheless, both Mulan and socialist heroines are depicted as fighting for the nation, but not fighting as the nation. For that, we need to move to "man-as-nation."**

In the Chinese context, although the nation has long been presented in female form as the motherland, we have recently witnessed a burgeoning emphasis on presenting hypermasculine heroes as the national image in cinema. Hypermasculinity in the action-military genre, as in *Wolf Warrior II*, can be seen as a new signification: the heroized *man-as-nation* in Chinese-language cinema. This signification is tied to a growing Chinese discourse of national self-pride and patriotism that exhibits the country's increasing hard power (comprehensive national strength and voice in a changing world) versus soft power (sensation, empathy, sense of responsibility, and humanitarianism).

The film analysis presented in this article draws on Louie and Edwards's (1994) ground-breaking paradigm in Chinese gender studies, which theorizes Chinese masculinity as comprising both martial valor (*wu*: 武) and cultural attainment (*wen*: 文). The Western stereotype of masculinity for men's

self-image is constructed as tough, courageous, and decisive. In addition, proclivity toward violence, preference for physical action rather than oral expression, and sophistication in sexual relations are regarded as reflecting an adventurous masculine spirit (Herek, 1987). **In contrast to the Western image of the macho man, which is that of physical strength and unerring silence, the Chinese macho hero counterbalances cerebral and brawny characteristics, with the cerebral model often seen as superior. *Wen* attributes the genteel and refined qualities of the hero to the literary and aesthetic pursuits of classical scholars, whereas *wu* refers to physical strength and military prowess (Louie, 2002).** *Wolf Warrior II*'s leading male character, Leng Feng, displays the combined traits of both Western and Chinese paradigms, which shows a tendency for Chinese commercial cinema to draw on the characteristics of the Hollywood-style macho hero. In Teo's words, "the selfless Chinese hero Leng Feng is therefore a Chinese variation on the western individualistic hero, 'a hybrid of Hollywood-style superhero with Chinese-style patriotism'" (Teo, 2019, p. 328). A strong claim from the Western context is that modernization is leading men to become feminized by becoming softer, more complacent, and cowardly, meaning that men now need to be "rescued" from becoming feminine (Forth, 2008). In the Chinese context, however, early modernizers already encouraged a masculine robustness that involves a significant shift away from *wen* dominance (Louie, 2014). In general terms, Chinese values prioritize the mind in the ideal masculine image more than Western values do, and it is considered best to have both *wen* and *wu* (Louie, 2002).

Through analysis of *Wolf Warrior II*, this study's key questions are the following: How does the male protagonist act as a visual and discursive sign in creating the image of the Chinese nation-state? How does Chinese cinema revive masculinity as a narrative site for representing China's national and international power? How does the "man-as-nation" address nationalism and/or patriotism in contemporary China? In this study, we particularly focus on the leading male role of Leng not only because this character dominates the narrative but also because he is offered an authoritative identity—a former military soldier—and carries out missions authorized by the Chinese government. In this way, analyzing his image helps us to extend our discussion beyond the gender discourse of Chinese masculinity into a broader context of political communication, unveiling a transformative representation of China's national image and its international impact.

China as a Strong State: *Wu* as Martial Valor

Wolf Warrior II's male protagonist, Leng, is shown as having both *wen* and *wu* virtues, along with Western masculine features. In the following section, I analyze *wu* (martial valor) on two levels: **individual—referring to Leng's physical**

strength and sophisticated fighting skills, and national—signifying China's strong naval force.

As a commercial action movie, *Wolf Warrior II* primarily focuses on Leng's *wu*—his physical strength and martial capacity (e.g., his skill at fighting and his deft operation of advanced weapons). His formulaic masculinity is a narrative apparatus that concretizes China's state strength through a depiction of individual heroism. After the release of Sylvester Stallone's *First Blood*, the *Guardian* commented that "[w]hen the White House was impotent with rage, patriotic Americans could watch the muscle of Rambo destroy the Vietnamese and Russian armies; he won in the cinema the war the United States lost on the ground" (Tasker, 2012, p. 119). If Rambo is viewed as cinematically correcting the United States's national humiliation from its defeat in Vietnam, Leng can be seen as cinematically realizing China's fêted rise to power, despite the reality that China's international engagements are not always smooth, nor successful, often involving challenges and controversy.

In contrast to Bruce Lee's formal Chinese martial arts, Jackie Chan's acrobatic and playful movements, and Chou Yun-fat's romantic and balletic gunplay (Louie, 2002), director Wu deploys Leng in tremendous scenes of one-on-one and hand-to-hand combat, with fast cutting and multiple transitions between full, medium, and close-up shots that vividly display the brutality and virtuosity of male wrestling in a quasi-Hollywood style. Three such scenes of internationalized machismo stand out in the film. The first two depict Leng's close combat with mercenary soldiers. In both fights, Leng is shown in leeward, in the first because of a physical power imbalance (38:33), and in the second because of dizziness caused by disease infection (01:07:48). In the final scene of the climactic battle between Leng and mercenary leader Big Daddy, the director consistently applies fast cutting between close-up shots of bodily damage and full shots of spectacular wide-angle body movements (01:47:30). The graphic close-quarter combat effectively delivers a realistic feeling of a violent showdown to the audience.

In one of these scenes, Leng's line, "Once a wolf warrior, always a wolf warrior" (01:09:03), vividly presents his fearlessness despite his inferior condition, a struggling yet brave former soldier with warm blood running through his veins. Borrowing Hollywood's idiomatic model of a soulful solo hero who may be drawn into violence on behalf of others, and who is willing to sacrifice himself to protect others, *Wolf Warrior II* casts individual heroism as a reflection China's unique identity on the world stage. This includes the key elements of appreciating the necessity for violence and suppression, and a willingness to sacrifice oneself for a greater goal or for the nation, without the complete eschewal of emotion (Tasker, 2016). Furthermore, this film has been said to incorporate examples of so-called "toxic masculinity," with the male protagonist solving problems primarily through out-of-control violence (C. Berry, 2018) and

appearing to have taken on the classic Orientalist “white men’s burden” (Xiang, 2018).

A paramount innovation of *Wolf Warrior II* is that it provides an individual hero with an authoritative identity—former military soldier—which at once rationalizes his sophisticated martial techniques and reifies the incontrovertibility of the broader Chinese military troop, thereby visualizing China’s hard power. Susan Jeffords (1989) suggests that in American films, the technologization of the male body is employed to enhance masculine invincibility and stability. Similarly, in *Wolf Warrior II*, Leng’s hypermasculine body is a spectacle enacted through the technologies of performance. All three scenes that depict detailed and brutal tussling actions represent Leng as a skillful macho hero who embodies the Chinese traditional *wu* virtues of strength, dependability, and perseverance; Leng retains a strong responsibility and self-pride in being part of the Chinese military, and he will not let his nation down.

Films that focus on China’s late Qing period often represent masculinity through the image of the “sick man in East Asia,” which symbolizes the weakness and impotence of the Qing government and its subjects. *Wolf Warrior II*’s subsequent cinematic representation of Leng as a robust and responsible leader signifies a self-assured perception that China is rejuvenated both politically and militarily. It is the kernel of Chinese patriotic pride that China is a rising, if not already established, power, with economic growth, enduring political stability, and increasing global influence operating in parallel with strengthened military capability. The victimization narrative usually adopts a backward look that reiterates the trauma and humiliation the nation suffered in the past, whereas the proud patriot narrative approves of China’s contemporary achievements and has confidence toward its future performance in domestic and international affairs.

The most explicit embodiment of China’s comprehensive power in *Wolf Warrior II* is its portrayal of China’s strong naval force. A modernized navy has been a continual pursuit for the Chinese largely due to the bitter collective memory of foreign powers’ invasions of China in modern history. However, China has been self-restrained in expressing its military ambitions or capabilities in cultural productions in the past decades, to dispel international suspicion and criticism (Z. Chen, 2005). Although Chinese action cinema has centered on male heroes with the lawful duty of saving people and hunting out evil, they are usually portrayed as detectives, agents, or undercover police officers; military soldiers have been a scarce presence because of their close relationship with China’s problematic international image. However, China’s decades-long, low-lying posture in relation to military construction has transformed into a more self-assertive attitude since Xi Jinping came to power in 2012. For instance, China’s controversial construction of the submarine base in the South China Sea and the 2017 China–India border standoff illustrate Xi’s proactivity in this realm

(Irvine, 2017; M. Liu, 2015). Reflected in cinematic representations (not only *Wolf Warrior II* but also, for example, *Operation Mekong* and *Operation Red Sea*), there is a new tendency for Chinese cultural production to stress the valor of proactive heroism to celebrate the zenith of China’s visibly enriched military.

As an action-military film, *Wolf Warrior II* depicts martial elements with the explicit technical support of China’s military force. It adopts multidimensional depictions of advanced weapons, including plenty of heavy machine guns, tanks, and missiles, to both increase the buying power of the film and display China’s empowered military capacity. The images of official Chinese naval ships are mainly aerial long shots that survey the advanced naval armament. At the end of the story, when Leng’s team is hopelessly outnumbered, the Chinese navy plays the role of savior, destroying the well-equipped mercenaries through accurately guided missiles and thus rescuing the innocent Chinese people (01:46:05). Visually depicting the broad contours of the Chinese navy and its advanced weapons seeks to encourage national confidence toward China’s ability to protect its people, even in circumstances where crises take place abroad.

Patriotic sentiment regarding China’s influence in Africa reaches its peak in the last act of the movie, where Leng twines China’s national flag on his arm to show his group’s nationality and thus enter an African war zone. Both government troops and rebels hold fire when they see the Chinese flag, allowing Leng and his companion to pass safely (01:54:31). This ending explicitly couples Leng’s individual heroism with that of his strong, respected motherland. It also presents a picture of a Chinese passport on-screen with the statement, “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” (C. Berry, 2018, p. 40). With the passport as a symbol of the Party-State, this direct message means that the Chinese state stands behind those who hold its passport (Wang, 2018). It makes explicit that foreign local governments are fragile and unreliable, especially in dangerous circumstances, whereas Chinese citizens overseas can depend on China’s protection and rescue. In Petrus Liu’s opinion, such displays are the crudest form of nationalist fantasy, with China showing its strength on foreign soil to a domestic and international audience after centuries of humiliation (P. Liu, 2018). Given that “nationalism has typically sprung from masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation and masculinized hope,” militarized masculinity expertly articulates the culture and ideology of hegemonic masculinity and hegemonic nationalism (Enloe, 1999, p. 45). In *Wolf Warrior II*, nationalism is also shown to be the solution for dealing with the potential tensions and differences among Chinese people living overseas (Rofel, 2018), promoting in the film’s audience a sense of security, conformity, and even superiority (Cai, 2018).

China as a Culturally Appealing Nation: Wen as Cultural Attainment

Leng's *wen* (cultural attainment) characterization is represented in his personal charisma, romantic sentiment, strategic tactics, and sense of teamwork and leadership, all of which symbolize Chinese soft power and domestic ease. A vital component of Chinese patriotic pride is that contemporary China is not only strong in hard power, but also open and appealing in the cultural domain—an ideologically liberal country in which the state has loosened its social control so that the individual pursuit of personality development is encouraged. This is a narrative that seeks to mitigate an image of international alienation and cast China as a welcome participant in international society. In *Wolf Warrior II*, Leng, an ex-service special trooper, acts as a Hollywood-style romantic and disobedient hero, breaking the stereotype of Chinese soldiers and officers who are usually portrayed as conservative, hidebound, and suppressed with respect to their personalities. The beginning of the film depicts Leng's rule-breaking action of beating a gangster who bullies his dead soldier mate's grieving family, leading to Leng's own imprisonment (07:22). In this way, the film shows off Leng's bold righteousness, which humanizes his construction as macho hero; he stands for a Chinese society that is no longer repressed, nor characterized by collectivism and centralization, but rather globalized, outward-looking, and liberal, with robust social spheres that share many similarities with the desired and developed Western societies.

Chinese male warriors have traditionally been depicted as having no romantic passion whatsoever and as being motivated by social and national obligations rather than emotions. As Louie (2002) stated, classical scholars with *wen* traits tend to become involved with romance, whereas resisting sexual attraction is seen as a noble virtue for a male warrior with *wu* traits. Because in the Chinese tradition masculinity was associated with the ability to suppress one's sexual desires, sexual containment informs the Chinese male sexual self, in contrast to the urge toward conquest at the core of Western male sexuality (Louie, 2015). For Chinese military soldiers, a firm stereotype has been established regarding their abandonment of individual desire. Although sexualized warriors are not completely absent in Chinese film history, revealing a military hero's sexual life and personal affection directly on-screen is rare.

Leng's *wu* uses these qualities to innovatively demonstrate his humanity. The film includes several flashbacks in which Leng recollects his dead fiancée, Long Xiaoyun (14:56). These scenes explain Leng's coming to Africa, where he searches for Long after she disappeared during a secret mission. Another flashback series adopts a montage approach to depict a romantic scene involving Leng and Rachel, an American doctor. Set in a dark cave illuminated by a dim fire and accompanied by background music, this scene switches between present-moment Rachel holding the

wounded Leng in her arms, and flashbacks of Leng's and Long's sexual life and Leng's past memories (01:16:45). The *mise-en-scène* integrates the implicit and euphemistic depiction of sexuality in Chinese martial arts dramas with the romantic and chivalric style of Hollywood heroic films to demonstrate Leng as an ordinary man with deep feelings, despite being an unstoppable hero.

Besides romance, Leng also features in a humorous scene in which he is half-naked playing beach soccer, showing off his muscular "six-pack" (19:32). As an idiomatic gesture of Hollywood blockbusters, showcasing of the male body invites the audience and other characters' voyeuristic gaze. As Berry has contended, Hollywood stands for more than just an entertainment industry: It also provides a model for commercial mainstream aesthetic standards. These have been appropriated by the Chinese film industry (M. Berry, 2013). Highlighting Leng's masculine hormonal charm, the humanizing and humorous scenes in *Wolf Warrior II* deliver a fusion of Chinese and Western standards. Louie suggests that increasing trends in foreign travel have accelerated the globalization of the Chinese male aesthetic and models of cosmopolitan masculinity, producing a much more sensuously confident masculinity than before (Louie, 2014). It could even be said that Leng's romanticization and sexualization *re-masculinizes* the traditional Chinese action hero's asexual image (see Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan; Yu, 2012) while reflecting the hope that contemporary Chinese society has been culturally integrated into the global community.

More importantly, Leng's cerebral strategies and spirit of teamwork are crucial *wen* virtues that demonstrate the collaboration of individualism and collectivism. As an ex-special soldier, Leng's sophisticated techniques include not only combat skills but also strategies that turn the tide from a disadvantageous position. For instance, facing a surprise attack by the well-equipped mercenary army, Leng uses a high-pressure water torch to strike armed drones down (01:06:31). When the rebels occupy a factory and take the workers hostage, Leng counterattacks with guerrilla warfare by resorting to self-made wooden arrows (01:24:12).

Teamwork and comradeship have been defined as a significant part of military masculinity in the war film (Tasker, 2016). Teamwork can be interpreted as brotherhood, one of the most significant Confucian codes of masculinity, mainly referring to the submission of a young man to an older brother figure. In Chinese films, brotherhood is reinvented in various ways, including a Communist version in which political, emotional, and class bonds are linked to the collective sacrifice of the revolution under the Maoists (C. Berry & Farquhar, 2006). In *Wolf Warrior II*, brotherhood is represented through Leng teaming up with He Jianguo, the veteran, and Zhuo Yifan, the young factory owner, effecting the trio's transformation from strangers to comrades. The major scene representing the trio's brother-like teamwork is the climax, in which they fight desperately against the mercenary army, although they are heavily outnumbered (01:33:16).

Amid crossfire, explosions, heavy weapon assault, and tank fights, the final battle employs consecutive fast cutting of medium to close-up shots, switching between the three men to demonstrate them as a team and as brothers beyond bloodlines. It is worth mentioning that while the tacit cooperation between Leng and He is based on their mutual enlisting experience, Zhuo seems unfriendly to Leng at first. Their brotherhood is forged in the process of fighting against mercenaries, when Leng saves Zhou's life (01:04:54). Thus, we can see that the trio consists of three heroes, including a mature one, a senior one, and a younger one. Regardless of their age gaps and social backgrounds, they eventually come to one shared identity: the Chinese soldier.

As strategic leader and backup force, Leng allegorizes the harmony between individual personality and collective obligation. The trio's brotherhood and teamwork present their *wen* characteristics in the condition of the *wu* battlefield, conforming to the traditional Chinese Confucian code that collective sacrifice works as the bridge to connect individuals for mutual understanding and cooperation. However, the relationship between individualism and collectivism is far from symmetrical in *Wolf Warrior II*. Although Leng has been excluded from the military because of a violation, he re-assumes a soldier's responsibility by risking his life when the nation requires it. As China, from its Confucian norms to Communist orthodoxy, traditionally prioritizes collective interests over individual ones, this ideological mindset continues to prevail in Chinese political culture and in the narratives of mainstream film. An integral propagandistic feature of *Wolf Warrior II* is the cultivation of a sense that an individual should perform his or her duty to a nation as long as and whenever the nation needs him or her. This is the pinnacle of the protagonist's *wen* virtue.

Furthermore, Leng's leadership, as one of the *wen* characteristics, is not only embodied in leading the trio, but also through his evacuating Chinese and African people and promising not to leave anyone behind at the Chinese-built factory (58:21); this highlights China's cultural appeal and symbolizes China's international influence. In China, patriotism is not simply a celebration of national achievement and value but also contains intense longing for the country's past glory and leadership in Asian and even global affairs (Callahan, 2017). Increasing engagement in the African continent has, to some extent, satisfied the patriotic desire to "return" China to a more central position. Currently, the international system remains structurally dominated by the West, but there are regions where China's relative position has improved sufficiently to hint at a new political and economic global order (Alden & Large, 2015). Africa is one of those regions. China expands its reach in Africa and acts as a model of development, a generous partner and an "all-weather" friend of the African continent, through utilizing its hard, soft, and smart power (Leslie, 2018). In *Wolf Warrior II*, the Chinese-built factory creates jobs for the local African community, and the Chinese

government's aid hospital provides medical treatments for African people. This grassroots representation implies that China's leadership in Africa is based on its successful domestic development experiences and kindnesses, which wins hearts and minds in the developing world, unlike Western-style political and economic coercion. Critics have viewed some U.S. action films as speaking for American interventionism; *Wolf Warrior II*'s propagandistic aim is in justifying and legitimizing China's engagements on the African continent. Moreover, as China has built strong connections with Africa in the real world by building economic relations and presenting military forces through UN peace-keeping missions (China has also established a naval base in Djibouti in North Africa), the African setting of *Wolf Warrior II* is undeniably significant in its messages regarding Chinese geopolitical strategy and development policies. Thus, the reconfiguration of a Hollywood-style Chinese hero represents China's aspirations for world leadership (Teo, 2019).

Race and Gender Dynamics in *Wolf Warrior II*

One final and important vector should be noted. The racial discourse in *Wolf Warrior II* constructs "good" versus "bad," and "muscular" versus "unmanly and childish" dichotomies. As the setting of a China-as-hero narrative, Africa is stereotypically represented as ravaged by civil war, political chaos, starvation, and lethal diseases. China enters as a "good foreigner," protecting the Africans and warding off aggression from the European "bad foreigners," thereby performing China's ideology about its new place in the world (P. Liu, 2018). (This point can also be applied to the setting of *Operation Red Sea* in the Middle East, and *Operation Mekong* in Southeast Asia.) Furthermore, as the African characters being saved by Leng are largely women and children (Tundu, Leng's godson; Tundu's mother Nessa; Pasha, the adopted daughter of Chinese medical aid team leader Dr. Chen who is killed by mercenaries), *Wolf Warrior II* constructs Africa as feminized, infantilized, racially subjugated, in a state of permanent emergency, and in need of a muscular, clever Chinese hero (P. Liu, 2018).

The portrayal of the savior Leng with a little African boy is largely similar to a scene in *The Young Indiana Jones Chronicles*⁵ in which Indiana (Corey Carrier), on safari with his parents in East Africa, incites in a young boy breathless admiration for his tough talk and paternalistic benevolence (Mayer, 2002). This franchise demonstrates the upbeat, regressive fantasies of American exceptionalism and the general superiority of Western culture over the developing world. The fantasy collapses the concepts of Indiana Jones, paternalistic value, and the U.S. government into a figurative representative (Jones) of an idealized America (Kendrick, 2014). The "white savior" figuration is also applied by the Tarzan franchise. The original story was created by Edgar

Rice Burroughs in 1912, where the character of legend is a White man swinging through the African jungle in a fever dream of paternalistic imperialism (Beale, 2016). Since then, more than 200 films have featured Burrough's character—a White orphan raised by apes in the African jungle—and Tarzan has appeared in multiple radio and television shows, stage plays, and video games. For generations of predominantly White audiences, Tarzan represents not only adventure and athleticism but also the paternalistic idea of a White man saving Africa (Keegan, 2016). Matthew Hughey (2014) calls Tarzan a “time machine” in his book *The White Savior Film*, where he argues that Tarzan has left a deep paternalistic imprint on many audiences who grew up watching the character's heroics.

While *Wolf Warrior II* breaks with the stereotyped, racial representations of most Western-produced action movies, in which Asian bodies are all but invisible as compared with the White heroes, it creates new race-based differences. On one hand, African subjects are portrayed as in need of protection by the powerful Chinese protagonist. This formula substitutes the White savior with a Chinese soldier in a patriarchal and patronizing attitude toward Africa. On the other hand, the amoral, mercenary Caucasian antagonists are doomed to be defeated and punished by a righteous China. Furthermore, when Leng tells Rachel that the U.S. warship has left Africa, leaving behind a conflict-ridden zone and stranded American citizens (50:20), it explicitly contrasts Chinese humanitarian efforts with the West's purported selfishness and indifference to distant suffering. These racializations reflect, at least partly, an understanding of world politics that can be observed in many postcolonial contexts: simplifying complicated IR down to a Manichaeian-esque “good-versus-evil” opposition, and separating “self” and “other” as well as “enemies” and “friends.”

Conclusion

Featuring a hypermasculine hero with an authoritative identity that combines traditional Chinese martial and cerebral traits with a Hollywood-style persona, *Wolf Warrior II* employs the trope of “man-as-nation” to signify the Chinese nation's rejuvenation and strength through the masculine virtues of *wu*, as martial valor, and *wen*, as cultural attainment. By articulating these two codes of masculine subjectivity, this study suggests that masculine virtues represented in this film are explicitly associated with and implicitly signify affirmative and spirited nationalist sentiments that perceive China as a strong state with enhanced comprehensive power—a globalized nation in the cultural and social domains. Witnessing this re-masculinization of the Chinese male film protagonist alongside the revitalization of China's confident national image, we can see a shift away from China's previously self-restrained political communication toward an extroverted patriotic pride in both domestic and international realms.

Although *Wolf Warrior II* achieved huge box office success in China (US\$854 million), its performance in Western countries is far from spectacular (US\$2.7 million in the United States; US\$0.14 million in the United Kingdom),⁶ with sales believed to have been primarily comprised of expatriate Chinese. The strongly patriotic tone of this film, which made it a runaway hit in mainland China, turns out to keep Western audiences away. Teo believes that the triumph of *Wolf Warrior II* is a Chinese phenomenon, whereas its poor box office accomplishments in overseas distribution are due to the rest of the world is not ready for a Chinese hero from mainland China, with the West perhaps being the least ready (Teo, 2019). From a Western perspective, Jonathan Papish has praised the film's action sequences, but argued that its unsubtle pro-China stance means it will likely never succeed among mainstream Western audiences (cited in Zuo, 2017). Chinese nationalistic cinema is often seen as off-putting for Western audiences; however, double standards are undoubtedly often at play, inasmuch as Western films are themselves often nationalistic or patriotic (Teo, 2019).

As an action-military film, the propagandistic characteristics of *Wolf Warrior II* are explicit, showing clearly the Chinese state's attitudes and stances on domestic governance and international engagement (Teo, 2019). The film frames love for one's nation not only as love for one's people but, more importantly, as citizens' obeying authorities and assuming responsibilities given to them, fully equating the concept of “nation” with “government.” As Tasker (2012) has explained, in the Western context. “a definition of the heroic figure emerges as one who is typically outside, if not actually opposed to, the mainstream” (p. 104). Chinese films tell a different story in terms of how to define a hero—he comes from the mainstream, and moves back into the mainstream.

However, just as *First Blood* is viewed by some critics as serving as a propaganda piece for a Reaganite and hawkish foreign policy, films like *Wolf Warrior II* open up the possibility for cinema to reprise a role in cultural ambassadorship, strategically promoting China's increasing proactivity in the global arena. China's booming economic and cultural participation and influence in film could render Chinese notions of masculinity naturalized and widespread. The Confucian model of *wen-wu* has been heavily promoted as ideal Chinese characterization by political leaders and image-makers. Confucianism is a fascinating example of cultural production in that it has served the interests of those in power while simultaneously nurturing the most enduring hegemonic masculinity in the world (Louie, 2014). Such ideological constructs as *wen-wu* can continue to be shaped, then, as regulative ideals that will perform an oppressive function until the gender and class hierarchies in China are democratized (Louie, 2014). Indeed, these constructions are powerful tools for maintaining social dynamics between people, classes, and nations (Louie, 2014).

In the process of globalization, different types of masculinity are arising in China, such as the metrosexual

white-collar beautiful man, and feminine boys. These have had much exposure and multiplicity of meaning/expression in Chinese, Japanese, and Korean popular culture. But while metrosexuality is a popular modern trope in the West and in the United States in particular, Chinese youth tend to identify more strongly with iconic Japanese and Korean beautiful or feminine men than with China's muscular yet thoughtful *wen-wu* machismo (Louie, 2014). In modernity, the dominant macho masculinity has lost some attention and support, and as such the macho hero of *Wolf Warrior II* can be seen as revival of dated hypermasculinity. This newly adopted trope accurately symbolizes China's diplomatic policy and international communication strategy, although it remains a matter of academic concern as to whether the substitution of White savior with a Chinese soldier implies a shift from White imperialism to fantasies of Chinese exceptionalism.

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Notes

1. Box Office Mojo Website: <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/alltime/world/>.
2. *Ne Zha* (哪吒之魔童降世) is a 2019 Chinese three-dimensional (3D) computer animation fantasy adventure film.
3. Box Office Mojo Website: <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=operationredsea.htm>.
4. Hua Mulan a fictional female figure in a narrative poem *The Song of Mulan* (木兰辞) in the Northern and Southern Dynasties (AD420–589). Mulan joined the army dressing as a man to take his old father's place. She made a great contribution to the war and returned to her hometown restoring her female identity.
5. An American television series that aired on ABC from March 4, 1992, to July 24, 1993, created and developed by George Lucas, narrated by George Hall.
6. Box Office Mojo Website: https://www.boxofficemojo.com/title/tt7131870/?ref=bo_se_r_2.

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