

## The Chinese film market and the *Wolf Warrior 2* phenomenon

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The Chinese film market has undergone exponential growth since 2010 and, as Sangjoon Lee informs us in the Introduction to this dossier, this has effectively transformed the entire Asia-Pacific region into the largest global film market. One single film that may be thought of as instrumental in this dramatic growth is the action film *Zhanlang 2/Wolf Warrior 2*, a *Rambo*-style, macho, action-adventure film directed by and starring Wu Jing (also known as Jacky Wu). Wu's career started in the mid 1990s, with appearances in Hong Kong-made films as a martial arts specialist. It was not until 2015, however, that he really became a household name in the mainland Chinese film market, with the release of the patriotic action opus *Wolf Warrior*. The sequel of that saga has now propelled Wu into cinematic superstardom, due to its even bigger success at the domestic box office over the summer of 2017. *Wolf Warrior 2* has accordingly been dubbed by critics a 'phenomenon-grade' movie (*xianxiang ji dianying*), defined as the way in which a film makes a lasting impact in both market and social contexts in terms of its story and content. In this essay I comment first on the film's market impact and later on its content, and in the process try to show that both are undeniably linked, although not without some fundamental contradictions. 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. Whatever we may think of the film, *Wolf Warrior 2* will most likely go down in film history as the game-changer

in the Chinese film industry's inexorable path towards becoming the largest film market in the world. It can also be considered 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 tries to expand and spread its wings throughout the world, commensurate with China's own status as the world's largest economy in PPP (purchasing power parity) terms (or the second-largest economy in nominal dollar terms).

*Wolf Warrior 2* grossed ¥5.6 billion (or well over US\$800 million), a new record in the Chinese film market and even in the world market of the top-grossing films of all time, where it ranks fifty-six and is the only Chinese film on the list.<sup>1</sup> Other statistics include its record-setting gross of ¥97 million in just four hours of its release, and the facts that within twenty-four hours it had already grossed ¥300 million and in six days had scored ¥600 million (it is also estimated that Wu Jing, who had invested ¥80 million of his own money into the production, earned more than ¥1 billion within a week of the film's release). This snowballing effect of the film's box-office performance turned everybody's attention not so much to the film itself (although it certainly merited critical consideration) as to the film market in the vast mainland of China. This is a market that seems now to have cast off its period of uncertain development around the turn of the century, when the market was largely stagnant and total box-office revenue in 2003 was just ¥1 billion. The significance of *Wolf Warrior 2* and its success may be glimpsed in the fact that its gross takings surpass the entire box office of 2008 (¥4.3 billion) and nearly equal that of 2009 (¥6.2 billion).<sup>2</sup>

The film market in China has reached this point after undergoing a long period of tentative and unreliable growth. Since the 1980s the film industry has been through a protracted, arduous process of reform initiated by the government. The aim was to make the industry more commercial and entrepreneurial, functioning and responding to market needs and demands. The domestic industry suffered a phase of industrial and market decline in the 1990s, having essentially lost the support of the home audience, before regaining strength in the new millennium. Because films are cultural products, the reforms were always more tentative than those in other sectors of the economy, the government being keen to preserve their control over the production and distribution system for ideological reasons. Private production and distribution companies became more prominent only in the early years of the 2000s, but were still compelled to work under constraints, with the state exerting a guiding hand in the production of so-called 'main-melody' films, the definition of which is inconsistent, subject to time and circumstance, but may be simply defined here as films extolling the virtues of the state, the military and the Communist Party of China.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See 'All Time Box Office', *Box Office Mojo*, <<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/alltime/world/>> accessed 20 March 2019.

<sup>2</sup> See Cao Junbing, 'Zhongguo zhu xuanlü dianying leixinghua de youyi tansuo yu qishi' (The genrefication of Chinese main-melody films and its beneficial development and revelation), *Yishu baijia* (Hundred Schools of Arts), vol. 5, no. 158 (2017), p. 22.

<sup>3</sup> According to Wendy Su, the phrase came into usage in 1987 after it was spoken by an official in the Film Bureau and adopted by the government to produce state-sponsored films to convey 'the official rhetoric of Marxism-Leninism-Maoism, as well as socialism, patriotism, and collectivism'. Attendance at such film screenings was mandatory. See Wendy Su, *China's Encounter with Global Hollywood: Cultural Policy and the Film Industry 1994–2013* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2016), pp. 20–21.

China's film market, as measured by aggregate box-office receipts, reached a breakneck growth pattern in the six to seven years following 2010. Looking back, film historians and economists in China might refer to these years as being the film industry's real breakthrough into market-driven growth after about thirty years of reforms and readjustment. The drive towards making commercial hits within the confines of Chinese mainstream ideology reached its peak with the success of *Wolf Warrior 2*. In 2010 the Chinese film market had already attained a new high, with revenue at ¥10 billion. Growth thereafter remained steadily trending upwards, undoubtedly boosted by the feverish rate of building new multiplexes and the rise in the number of screens (China now has the most film screens in the world). In 2015 growth reached a record 48.7 per cent, stunning observers who went on to speculate that China would soon overtake the USA to become the world's largest single film market.

In 2016, however, the market suddenly dipped, and commentators were busily proclaiming the end of a cycle of tremendous growth – the market was still growing, though at the comparatively paltry rate of 3.7 per cent. The slowdown appeared to mirror China's low growth in the economy overall, as people seemed to be opting for less expensive alternatives to the cinema for their entertainment. Much commentary focused on the bubble that was created in the film sector, the unreliability of the box-office statistics, inflated and distorted by subsidies in ticket sales provided by online platforms. But the downturn was more likely the result of audiences staying away because of poor films. Consumers had become 'more selective, rational and mature in their movie choices'.<sup>4</sup>

The government took note and seized on the downturn to promulgate a new law – the Film Industry Promotion Law – in November 2016, promising more investment in the film industry, a reduction in taxation, and further reform for the market by targeting fraud and the false reporting of ticket sales data. This law came into operation in March 2017 and paved the way for the next upturn in the market, which occurred in the summer of that year with the spectacular success of *Wolf Warrior 2*. It brought about a renewed spike (up to 13.45 per cent) and optimism in the market.<sup>5</sup> Before this unexpected success, it had been anticipated that the market would remain in a slump; indeed, box-office revenue was well below the total figure of 2016. *Wolf Warrior 2*, then, singlehandedly brought the market bouncing back to another cycle of growth. It reinvigorated the film industry, returning confidence to investors (hence its importance as a higher-grade phenomenon) and, most crucially, putting China back on its seemingly unstoppable march towards domination of the world's film market.

New records were broken in February 2018 over the Spring Festival holiday period, with the monthly box-office sales hitting ¥10.14 billion (US\$1.6 billion; the previous record was US\$1.3 billion, set by the North American market in July 2011). A new world record was also set for the weekend box office from 16 to 18 February (¥3.23 billion, or US\$508 million).<sup>6</sup> The projection is that by 2020 China's annual box-office sales

<sup>4</sup> Li Xuanmin, 'Enthusiasm for film cut short', *Global Times*, 18 October 2016, <<http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1012125.shtml>> accessed 20 March 2019.

<sup>5</sup> See Xu Fan, 'Blockbuster year for China's film industry', *China Daily*, 4 January 2018, <<http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201801/04/WS5a4d6a84a31008cf16da4f4e.html>> accessed 20 March 2019.

<sup>6</sup> 'Records broken as film industry law turns one', *Global Times*, 4 March 2018, <<http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1091642.shtml>> accessed 20 March 2019.

7 'China to maintain growth in entertainment, media: report', *China Daily*, 14 June 2016, <[http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/business/2016-06/14/content\\_25705348.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/business/2016-06/14/content_25705348.htm)> accessed 20 March 2019.

8 See Haizhou Wang and Ming-Yeh T. Rawnsley, 'Hero: rewriting the Chinese martial arts film genre', in Gary D. Rawnsley and Ming-Yeh T. Rawnsley (eds), *Global Chinese Cinema: The Culture and Politics of Hero* (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 90–105.

9 See Sean O'Connor and Nicholas Armstrong, 'Directed by Hollywood, edited by China: how China's censorship and influence affect films worldwide', *US-China Economic and Security Review Commission*, 28 October 2015, <<https://www.uscc.gov/Research/directed-hollywood-edited-china-how-china-s-censorship-and-influence-affect-films-worldwide>> accessed 20 March 2019.

10 See Edward Wong, 'Chinese purchases of US companies have some in Congress raising eyebrows', *The New York Times*, 30 September 2016, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/01/world/asia/china-us-foreign-acquisition-dalian-wanda.html>> accessed 20 March 2019.

will reach ¥100 billion (US\$16 billion at current exchange rates).<sup>7</sup> This evaluation may be too optimistic for some critics, but the Chinese film market undoubtedly still has an enormous untapped capacity, given its large population, rapid urbanization and growing middle class.

Nonetheless, doubts hanging over the market reflect China's macro-economic problems (the slowdown of the economy, its massive debt, the property bubble, and so on) as well as concerns about whether the domestic industry can produce the high-quality blockbusters needed to pull in the crowds. Fundamentally, China is finding out about the ways of the market, and learning how to manage its complexities, as it goes along. The rapid expansion of the film market over the last dozen years or so means that its enormity is a new and startling phenomenon. Even in 2002, when a blockbuster production such as Zhang Yimou's *Yǐngxióng/ Hero* (made on a budget roughly that of *Wolf Warrior 2*) scored an unprecedented hit at the box office, the Chinese film market was still considered to be too insignificant to sustain such success. Wang and Rawnsley have identified that *Hero*, despite its box-office achievements, could not break even in its domestic market, and that its production would always have needed to factor in success in overseas and particularly western markets.<sup>8</sup> The triumph of *Wolf Warrior 2* has entirely changed this dynamic, since it signals, finally, that the rise of the domestic market is entirely self-sustaining for domestic blockbusters as well as big enough to accommodate the overseas ambitions of foreign films.

China's domestic power over its own market may not seem much of an issue from an international perspective, but it certainly carries international ramifications. It is particularly striking that it can now shape the way films are made by Hollywood, which has long eyed China for its own ambitions of world domination. Hollywood films released in China fall under the state apparatus, with producers removing scenes deemed offensive or inappropriate by Chinese censors, or adjusting their stories to account for Chinese tastes (this was sufficiently worrying for the US government that they issued a report on the matter).<sup>9</sup> Hollywood has also undertaken co-productions as a further strategy to secure a more 'domestic' access, employing Chinese stars in roles more substantial than the tokenistic cameos found in blockbusters such as *X-Men: Days of Future Past* (Bryan Singer, 2014) and *Rogue One* (Gareth Edwards, 2016), and invested in production companies and theatres through joint ventures. Hollywood's entry into the Chinese market may have been driven by its own soft-power agenda, but the power of the Chinese market has caused a reverse flow of investment. Chinese companies, now flushed with excess wealth, have expanded right into the US film capital, acquiring cinemas, production houses and film technology companies, and causing consternation among US politicians.<sup>10</sup> A financial report observed that in 2016 alone (as the domestic market descended into a slump) 'Chinese outbound acquisitions in the sector grew a whopping 1,582% [...] with the USD 9.9 billion of acquisitions dwarfing the total

11 See 'Hooray for Hollywood', *FinanceAsia*, March/April 2017, p. 8.

12 See Celine Ge, 'Is ruined Dick Clark deal the beginning of the end of China's Hollywood buying binge?', *South China Morning Post*, 17 March 2017, <<http://www.scmp.com/business/companies/article/2079935/could-abrupt-end-wang-jianlin-s-us1bn-dick-clark-deal-mark-halt>> accessed 20 March 2019.

13 Su, *China's Encounter with Global Hollywood*, p. 6.

14 Ibid., p. 42.

15 See Wang Yujie, 'You "Zhanlang 2" tan guochan dianying shixian xin tupo' (Wolf Warrior 2's manifestation of a new breakthrough in national film production), *Sanwen baijia*, July 2017, p. 13.

amount raised in all previous years'.<sup>11</sup> The Chinese government, however, began to clamp down on such foreign acquisitions in early 2017, and the major buyer, Dalian Wanda, has been forced to abandon a takeover of Dick Clark Productions, while other media conglomerates have also abandoned deals relating to Voltage Pictures, Millennium Films and Paramount.<sup>12</sup>

Wendy Su has made the point that the Chinese state 'determines its own policy about when, where, and how to open up to global capital and market forces', and that it also decides on 'how to maintain state domination through state-owned media groups'.<sup>13</sup> In this case it is obvious that the Chinese state also exercises a great degree of control over privately owned media groups. In the interest of balance, however, it must be said that the market forces in the West are also vulnerable to being swayed by their own governments, usually on the pretext of national security, and are proving not so amenable to having their companies bought over by Chinese interests. China has historically welcomed foreign investment into the film market, particularly from Hollywood, as a deliberate ploy to lift its game. 'The Chinese government's evolving policy has resulted in a striking facelift for the domestic film industry', writes Su, referring to the reforms that allow imports in order to stimulate the stagnant domestic market as well as domestic production.

Chinese film professionals have not only emulated Hollywood's big-budget, high-tech model but also embraced Hollywood's distribution-exhibition system. Consequently, a strong market-oriented film industry has developed from production to distribution, and box office revenue has become the sole measure of a film's success.<sup>14</sup>

Su's statements are right on the mark when we consider the success of *Wolf Warrior 2*. Its 'phenomenon' status is down to its successful emulation of all aspects of the Hollywood paradigm, even the militaristic action-adventure formula that works through the tendency of the main-melody film. Its extraordinary box-office run marks the advent of a more mature stage in China's embrace of Hollywood's distribution-exhibition system (for the first time, a Chinese film has proved to be massively successful at the box office by following the Hollywood formula), but this must be put in perspective. The first thing that would seem obvious about the success of *Wolf Warrior 2* is that it is primarily a Chinese phenomenon, its box-office accomplishments not being replicated elsewhere in its overseas distribution. Clearly the emulation of Hollywood still has some way to go if the Chinese are also hoping to reproduce Hollywood's global reach, their films penetrating every corner of the globe and achieving commercial successes in foreign markets. *Wolf Warrior 2*'s global standing is minimal, and its foreign grosses make up only 0.13 per cent of its total earnings.<sup>15</sup>

One of the reasons advanced for its failure in the global market is that the rest of the world is not ready for a Chinese hero from mainland

China, and perhaps the West is the least ready. This is not to say that the West has never accepted a Chinese hero in the past; the popularity of Bruce Lee in the 1970s set a precedent that Jacky Wu might have followed. There are, however, important differences between Lee and Wu, perhaps chief among them the fact that Lee already had a minor Hollywood career before he became a big star in Hong Kong, while Wu basically remains an unknown quantity in the West. It would nevertheless be true to say that Lee and his kung fu mode of heroism remains the dominant paradigm upon which Chinese martial arts actors like Wu will always draw – and to a certain extent his film is a kind of remake of Lee’s 1972 *The Way of the Dragon*. The sentiment of Chinese patriotism or nationalism that Wu displays is another crucial difference, with Lee’s nationalism being far more abstract – a point that I have emphasized in previous writings. Chinese nationalism in the cinema is generally seen as off-putting for western audiences, although double standards are undoubtedly often at play here, inasmuch as western films are themselves often nationalistic or patriotic. Films from outside the West are historically considered problematic in terms of cultural acceptance by western audiences, and the political factors at work in *Wolf Warrior 2* may prove a particular barrier, despite the film’s emulation of Hollywood conventions. The film is certainly political in its forthright depiction of China’s geopolitical ambitions and growing military capabilities, and also in its identity as a main-melody action adventure. As mentioned earlier, the idea of the main melody is to tell China’s story, to propagate what the Chinese see as their own mainstream values, as determined by the party–state and the history of the People’s Republic (main-melody films are sometimes defined as ‘mainstream’ films by Chinese critics). Hence the mainstream values seen in *Wolf Warrior 2* are selfless heroism, love of country, loyalty to friends and service to the people.

The plot of *Wolf Warrior 2* mirrors the geopolitical dimension of China’s rise, and both its military and economic power. The film is set in a fictitious country in Africa where its hero Leng Feng (Wu Jing), a cashiered soldier from PLA special forces (a company of so-called ‘Wolf Warriors’), now operates in a private capacity. Leng Feng exerts his macho heroism by doing battle with western mercenaries and, at the same time, saving innocent Africans who are victims of a civil war. He is also waging a private vendetta against one of the mercenaries who killed his girlfriend (in the first film). Leng Feng, while acting on his own (a sign of individualism in a Chinese film hero, considered to be a new tendency in Chinese cinema), gradually wins the support of a motley group of characters, including a female doctor who is working on a vaccine against a deadly African disease, and the Chinese owners of a factory employing African workers. The hero leads his small group of survivors to a garrison in the hope of making it to the coast, where a Chinese warship is waiting to ship Chinese citizens and African allies to safety (the film is thought to be based on the massive evacuation of

16 See Chris Buckley, 'In China, an action hero beats box office records (and arrogant westerners)', *The New York Times*, 16 August 2017, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/16/world/asia/china-wolf-warrior-2-film.html>> accessed 20 March 2019.

17 See Bian Chengtao, 'Dianying "Zhanlang" de leixing tupo ji qi jingshen tixian' (*Wolf Warrior's* genre breakthrough and its spiritual manifestation', *Huanqiu shichang xinxi daobao* (Global Market Information Guide), no. 22 (2017), p. 102.

Chinese citizens during the Libyan crisis in 2011). But the mercenaries catch up with them and a final battle takes place. The navy fires missiles into the compound as Leng Feng is engaged in fierce combat with the American leader of the mercenaries, Big Daddy (Frank Grillo).

The militaristic theme of the film, although a direct emulation of Hollywood action and war films, differs from this model in the way that Chinese heroism is attuned to more selfless revolutionary ideas based on socialist political ideology as well as traditional Chinese communitarian beliefs. 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', according to the Chinese critic Yin Hong, quoted in *The New York Times* review of the film.<sup>16</sup> So once more we have the concept of 'Chinese Hollywood' as a practical application in Chinese cinema itself, and appearing genuinely Chinese – a breakthrough in the portrayal of Chinese heroes as well as in the public acceptance of this hero and the whole genre of the military film, which had been in the doldrums for some time. In China the military film (*junli dianying*) has traditionally concentrated on the period of the revolutionary struggle, the civil war, and the anti-Japanese war, and although practically synonymous with the war film, the term refers specifically to military protagonists, their lives and events. It is very rarely set in contemporary times, reflecting current affairs. Moreover, the genre is ineradicably linked to the main-melody film and thus has the propensity to be staid and clichéd, as well as dogmatic. As a result, the genre hardly makes a splash at the box office, being regarded as outside the normal operations of commercial cinema.<sup>17</sup>

An interesting comparison here is with *Jianjun daye/The Founding of an Army*, a state-commissioned project to commemorate the ninetieth anniversary of the People's Liberation Army, which was released at the same time as *Wolf Warrior 2*. Unlike the latter it was a notable flop, and one might speculate on why this was so. One possible reason is that *The Founding of an Army* lacks an individualistic yet selfless superhero and is hopelessly mired in the stale conventions of Party heroism, even as the film tries to modernize itself through emulating Hollywood's big-budget, high-tech model as reproduced through the Hong Kong experience (the director was Andrew Lau, late of the Hong Kong industry and better known for his *Infernal Affairs* trilogy). In other words, the old habits of the main-melody war film were neither overcome nor transcended; nothing much had changed. *Wolf Warrior 2's* success might not have displeased the Chinese authorities but it may have caught them by surprise (the film, after all, was not a state-commissioned project). They might now ponder on *Wolf Warrior 2's* formula of success, a formula concocted by a privately-funded production. The following is an assessment from the Chinese scholar, Xu Yuanyuan:

That *Wolf Warrior 2* was well received by the viewing masses is because the protagonist accords with their aesthetic expectations, and

18 Xu Yuanyuan, 'Zhanlang 2: Guochan junshii tici dianying de xin tupu' (Wolf Warrior 2: the new breakthrough of national army films), *Xinwen yanjiu daokan* (Journal of News Research), vol. 8, no. 18 (2017), p. 172.

he resonates emotionally with them. Leng Feng is not a stereotypical hero; he is made of flesh and blood. He is both an iron-fisted hero and an introspective, even gentle adult child. In his mission to save others, he seeks personal revenge but also shoulders the burden of the collective struggle [...] *Wolf Warrior 2* changes the traditional didactic ideological style into a formula that easily brings about the acceptance of mainstream values by the younger set. Its success proves that the main-melody film has a wide room to develop in. So long as a correct creative method can be found, the main-melody film can realize its artistic, commercial and mainstream values, benefiting all.<sup>18</sup>

From the appraisal above it may be seen that *Wolf Warrior 2* is not the usual main-melody opus, and that its remoulding of the hero and its updated premises of action (setting the film in Africa, for example, to demonstrate China's more assertive stance in geopolitics) recast the pattern of the genre. It remains to be seen how transformational it will be. It is clear from the simultaneous release of *The Founding of an Army* and *Wolf Warrior 2* that the industry is still experimenting with models, and that the transformation of the main melody is a work in progress. Though its commercial and critical success might give *Wolf Warrior 2* more respectability as a new model, one that has apparently changed the existing framework, there is still something tentative about it. Perhaps its standards are still evolving, and it is hard to pin down which elements might endure. The character of Leng Feng may be a stable and consistent component going into the future (its path towards a franchise is already assured), and as a new heroic prototype he will likely be influential. His macho posturing and the flexing of his naked torso in an early scene sum up his novelty (he provides a refreshing and daring sign of individualism, if not egotism, in Chinese cinema), but even so, Leng Feng emerging as a new type of hero is, in my view, an outcome that depends on various exigencies, be they of the market or of the state.

The new prototype embodied in Leng Feng (a name suggestive of Lei Feng, a PLA legend of the 1960s) is a sign of how the whole tendency of the main melody has become very malleable, with a high variability factor at work. This can be seen in the comparison between *The Founding of an Army* and *Wolf Warrior 2*, and between *Wolf Warrior 2* and its prequel. Leng Feng was first seen as the protagonist of *Zhanlang/Wolf Warrior*, released in 2015, which had only modest box-office success compared with its sequel. Its relevance to this discussion is that it establishes the character of Leng Feng and his links with the military (he is a sharp-shooter, imprisoned for disobeying orders and then reinstated in a new special forces detachment, the Wolf Warriors, led by a female commander who falls in love with him). Apart from the hero himself, *Wolf Warrior 2* has almost no connection with the plot or characters of the first film (the death of Leng Feng's girlfriend, for example, is peremptorily dealt with, its purpose being only to establish a revenge motive). The film would seem to function under its own narrative steam,



a generic tendency of sequels, except that in this case we have a Chinese experiment in a franchise that interlinks a modern superhero, acting independently, with the Chinese state. Another manifestation of the phenomenon of *Wolf Warrior 2* is thus seen in the development of Leng Feng as both an independent heroic protagonist and a hero of the state.

The hero's military origins and his function for the state are already clear themes in the first film, but in the second he is cashiered from the army for attacking a construction boss whose crew is demolishing the house of a deceased army comrade, an interesting episode which alludes to the numerous such cases in real life that have resulted in rioting. Thus Leng Feng can now be seen as an independent-minded hero with rebellious instincts, one who has been shown to be on the side of the people, but who is nevertheless loyally and patriotically connected to the Chinese military and the state. This makes the franchise (a third film is forthcoming) a strong example of how the state essentially shows its hand in the cinema, but also how it allows politically sensitive material to be featured (the house being demolished belongs to a PLA soldier rather than a common citizen, which makes the resistance more acceptable). In similar vein, the African setting is key (the first film was set in China): it seems far-flung and unexpected, another sign of how the sequel functions independently, until one considers that China in the real world has very strong links with that continent, and that it exerts power and influence through economic relations and the presence of military forces through UN peace-keeping missions (China has also established a naval base in Djibouti in North Africa). The film is notionally a private-enterprise production, which without doubt makes it qualitatively different from the likes of *The Founding of an Army*, where all the heroic characters are Party members or acting on behalf of the Party.

The African location denotes another important difference, not just by being an unusual setting for a Chinese film but by showing private Chinese individuals doing business in, or aiding the development of, a foreign country. The unorthodox nature of Leng Feng is also evident in his attitudes towards the Africans: he has an African godson, and he readily agrees to help other Africans by offering them his (and therefore China's) protection. Thus the reconfiguration of a Hollywood-style Chinese hero converges with the modern Chinese state's aspirations for world leadership; the film displays the rise of China as an increasingly powerful state that is nevertheless still a developing country, seeking solidarity with other developing nations. The African setting undeniably plays an important role in the phenomenon of *Wolf Warrior 2*, touching on Chinese geopolitical strategy and its policy of development – the 'One Belt, One Road' initiative, for example – which offers aid, construction, trading opportunities and political friendship to a strategic array of undeveloped and developing countries in Southeast Asia, South Asia, Central Asia, the Middle East and Africa. China's involvement in these countries is not merely economic but, in the geopolitical sense, strategic. Leng Feng is the muscular symbol of Chinese involvement. He translates

the rhetoric of 'One Belt One Road' into cinematic action and projects how the Chinese may be accepted by others. The film ends in a flag-waving moment that marks a difference to similar moments in films of other nations: Leng Feng fixes the Chinese flag in his hand and holds it upright as his convoy passes through rebel-held territory. 'It's the Chinese', the rebels cry, 'hold your fire!'

The *Wolf Warrior 2* phenomenon is important for its momentous onslaught on the market and for its transformation of the main-melody tendency in Chinese cinema. It offers some novel conceptual themes in Chinese heroism: the self-assertiveness of the hero with his display of a muscular body, counterposed with the selfless devotion to duty and the offering of friendship and assistance to the Africans. Jacky Wu personifies both the individualistic body and the selfless martial hero in ways that have not really been seen in Chinese-language cinema since the time of Bruce Lee. The film's transformative role in reconfiguring the main-melody film testifies to the overwhelming influence of the state on Chinese cinema. The conception and construction of the hero and the narrative invokes and reveals the main melody, but in this film the main melody becomes more a tune of Hollywood than of August First (the film studio founded by the PLA). The purely Chinese phenomenon of the film's box-office success already secures its position as one of top-grossing films of all time. The question now is whether the Chinese will transform their cinematic products into truly global phenomena, or whether the domestic market alone will suffice to sate the ambitions of Chinese filmmakers and the Chinese state.