

## **Santa Claus in China and Wu xia in Finland: Translocal reception of transnational cinema in Finnish and Chinese film cultures**

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### **Abstract**

This article interrogates the Finnish and Chinese reception of *Jade Warrior* (Jadesoturi, 2006) and *A Christmas Story* (Joulutarina, 2007) to understand the ways audiences mobilize transnational cultural products in different cultural contexts. Our analysis of audience reception works from two bases. First, we investigate how transnational circulation of cultural products can lead to different modes of audience engagement beyond Hollywood-dictated models of audience reception. Secondly, we argue that the cultural work of audiences in different contexts generates meanings which challenge the reductionist uses of transnational cinema as Hollywood's other, especially in the audiences' sets of expectations about frequently used designators such as popular culture and commercialism. By examining the actual deployment and implications of transnational cinema in culturally-specific online communities (which are linguistically if not geographically inclusive contexts), we see how audiences utilize cultural products in complex and sometimes contesting ways, which range from vindicating their personal politics to criticizing social problems, from critiquing normative conceptions of national cinema to celebrating cultural diversity.

**Keywords:** Transnational cinema; translocalism; reception studies; Finnish cinema; Chinese film cultures, Global Hollywood; globalization; European film; genre; online reception

### **Introduction**

The unlikely melding of Finnish and Chinese mythology largely works a treat in *Jade Warrior*, a cross-cultural martial-arts<sup>1</sup> epic that makes a virtue of its twin settings and, even more importantly, is steered by a Finn director, Antti-Jussi Annala, who really knows his Sino chops. Romantic-realistic fantasy has already

sold widely and performed well in a handful of markets. Curio item should do OK with careful handling - *Variety*<sup>2</sup>

*Variety's* review of the Finnish-Chinese co-production *Jade Warrior* underlines many of the paradoxes and complexities of transnational cinema. For example, transnational networks between different cultures (Finland, China, and, of course, the US) emerge as virtues, where cross-culturalism is an ideal which allows one to be fluent in the cultures of others. Yet, adherence to certain expected structures (in this case, national stereotypes and genre) emerge as vital tools of navigation for these types of productions. Finally, this sort of cultural merger allows a transnational film such as *Jade Warrior* to make an impact in the global markets. While the US-based reception, especially in trade magazines such as *Variety*, understandably underlines the commercial potential of the film, how did audiences in Finland and China receive this amalgamation of kung fu and Finnish mythology? Can we see differing claims of ownership of the film's cultural content? Would audiences attempt to integrate the film's complex transnational meanings to their nationally-specific viewing contexts? Or would they reject its cross-cultural amalgamation as a diluted form of cultural commercialism? Perhaps, the different audiences mobilize these films in unexpected and even contradictory ways, reflecting the complex patterns that transnational cultural interaction takes?

### **Reception studies in a transnational framework**

These are some of the questions this article aims to answer, questions which have wide-ranging implications for studies of transnational cinema. Many contemporary commentators on transnational cinema emphasize the need to interrogate Hollywood's hegemonic position in normative conceptions of 'global' cinema culture.<sup>3</sup> This concern has its roots in the protectionist rhetoric of national cinema, suggesting that conceptualizing Hollywood's global influence only in terms of cultural-economic domination ignores the complex modes of agency and active participation that local agents (producers, audiences etc.) bring to this cultural exchange. Indeed, much of the normative discourse of Global Hollywood, or of world cinema, according to Bhaskar Sarkar, endorses a perspective where 'all endeavours and exchanges are seen either to consolidate Hollywood's hegemony, leading to the centralization of global media and the homogenization of cultures, or to offer resistance, marking the partial triumph, real or imagined, of the local over the global. In either case, culture is being crucially defined in relation to a hegemonic order'.<sup>4</sup>

The concept of the transnational seems to currently occupy the role previously assigned to the category of world cinema, effectively characterizing films in languages other than English and from contexts other than the US. Sarkar has criticized such conceptualizations of transnational cinema, which according to him, are not only inadequate in capturing the intricacies and complex ways in which non-Hollywood cinemas operate, but also problematically subsume various film cultures under Hollywood hegemony. In other words,

if we only focus on 'transnational' concerns, we equate different film cultures (which are still unavoidably *national* film cultures) to the other of Hollywood. Therefore, he suggests that we need to move beyond the 'globalism' of Hollywood cinema by focusing on 'translocal' concerns.

Translocalism, for him, emerges when we explore audiences such as the wealthy middle classes in Los Angeles, who use Hong Kong kung fu films for their own identity and community-building purposes, while the distribution of the Indian film *Awara* (1951) amongst urban communities in Nanjing China allows local residents to construct ideological affinities and emotional connections in ways that bypass Hollywood's centripetal forces. These in his view are examples of translocal networks where Hollywood's hegemonic power has little influence.

But what does Sarkar mean by translocal? Firstly, translocal in Sarkar's discussion has neither been thoroughly explored in theory nor sufficiently explained through case studies. Not only does he never truly distinguish how his translocal networks are in any way different from transnational networks, but the 'translocal' case of the enduring popularity of *Awara* in the city of Nanjing (intended as 'local') also leaves many issues such as the specific identity and background of the local 'fans' vague. What is the age demographic of the audiences, their class, and any other specificity besides their nominal Chineseness? What about contextual differences between when *Awara* was widely exhibited in China and the current more globalised cinematic culture? Is it possible (or desirable) to divest the cultural competency of contemporary Chinese audiences from the influx of foreign, often American film culture? Even if we accept that audience affinity between Hong Kong and Los Angeles and Kolkata and Nanjing constitutes a local or subnational (as Sarkar puts it) film culture, this rhetorical move seems to us nothing more than a diversion. While Hollywood hegemony seems undermined in the case of *Awara's* popular culture success, Sarkar's mobilization of 'translocal' functions more as a conscious tool for evading Hollywood hegemony rather than any sort of empowerment of local viewing communities. Sarkar is of course correct in asserting that simplistic conceptualizations of the 'transnational' function as a short-hand term to categorize non-Hollywood cinemas as the 'other' of Hollywood.

But simply attempting to displace it with 'translocal' is not sufficient enough to call for a need to rethink the use of transnationalism in audience studies for two main reasons. Firstly, Sarkar does not explain thoroughly what makes these communities local rather than national. Secondly, simply favouring bipolar translocal connections between audiences ignores the realities of the globalised marketplace, where audiences are likely to be as familiar with Hollywood fare as their own domestic cinemas. Thus, instead of successfully undermining the hegemony of Hollywood, this line of rhetoric once more establishes it as the norm by which other cinemas are measured. After all, if we consciously try to evade Hollywood, do we not inadvertently centralize Hollywood?

Yet Sarkar's emphasis on more attentive and comprehensive (historical, social, etc.) approaches to individual cinematic cultures and critical discussion of Euro-American centricism are very useful and provide a way to effectively steer transnational cinema studies in a more critical direction. To achieve this critical stance, certain realities of the market centring on the dualism between Hollywood and domestic film cultures need to be confronted head-on. To us, it seems more productive to acknowledge Hollywood's global influence and situate it alongside domestic and other imported forms of popular culture. Rather than evading the transnational, we confront it head on by starting out from a national, culturally specific basis (Finnish cinema) and exploring how cultural elements transform and take on alternative dimensions through cross-border flow.

By conducting this reception study, we neither intend to constrain our analysis within the conventional parameters of 'transnational cinema studies' (non-mainstream cinema of marginality, border-crossing, multiculturalism, displacement etc.),<sup>5</sup> nor do we conceptualize our case studies as entirely different from other, particularly Hollywood cinemas that would effectively 'pigeonhole these transnational networks simply as Hollywood's others, thereby limiting their significance'.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, *A Christmas Story* and *Jade Warrior* exoticize Finland, while they flirt with the mainstream as, for example, much of the imagery of *Jade Warrior* is indebted to productions like *Lord of the Rings* (2001-2003) and Zhang Yimou's *Hero* (Ying xiong, 2002). These films are considered part of popular culture in their domestic contexts, which makes them viable competition for the Hollywood products that still dominate much of the Finnish markets and increasingly the Chinese markets. Hence, we prefer to acknowledge Sarkar's focus on local/translocal audiences as a practical and specific approach to discuss the theory and practical applications of the transnational, which is in itself too broad, inclusive and abstract. In other words, we do not intend to do away with the transnational as a useful conceptual tool for exploring popular cultural exchange, or take translocalism as a 'better' parallel theory as is arguably the case with Sarkar's work.

Working from these theoretical concerns, our project is two-fold: to explore some of the ways in which aspects of Finnish and Chinese cultures intertwine through the dissemination of cinematic products, and how these sorts of collaborations allow audiences to mobilize cultural products for different ideological/artistic purposes. We explore the reception of the only two Finnish films released commercially in China, *Jade Warrior* and *A Christmas Story*. *Jade Warrior* is a Finnish-Chinese coproduction, which combines elements from the Finnish epic *Kalevala* (a collection of traditional poetry), and wu xia, a Chinese genre of martial arts literature and cinema. The film is focused on Kai, a blacksmith in modern Finland, who reforms a mythical machine named Sampo, which connects him to his former life as martial arts master Sintai in ancient China. Sintai's mission was to eradicate a demon that threatened the world, for which he would be rewarded with immortality. Instead of completing his task, he fell for Pinyu (an incarnation of Kai's girlfriend in contemporary

Finland). Distracted from the importance of his mission, Sintai only held the demon captive in the Sampo and committed suicide, longing for another chance to unite with Pinyu in future life. The storyline of the past unfolds through Kai's flashbacks as he again confronts his doomed fate. The social responsibility and self-sacrificing heroic chivalry of wu xia meets the individual dedication and fallible heroism of *Kalevala* in a transnational combination of well-known elements from both cultural contexts.

In comparison to the explicit transnationalism of *Jade Warrior*, *A Christmas Story* provides a more culturally-rooted case. The film presents a Finnish perspective on the origins of Santa Claus, recounting how Nikolas is orphaned in mid-19th century in Lapland, and subsequently moved to a new family every Christmas. To express his gratitude, Nikolas crafts presents out of wood and secretly leaves them on the doorsteps of the families. Nikolas is later sent to live with carpenter Iisakki, but he keeps presenting his gifts to the children of his ex-foster families. Using his inherited fortune from Iisakki, he expands his operations to more villages, eventually forming the basis for the legend of Santa Claus. This retelling of the Father Christmas legend for modern audiences exemplifies many of the concerns of this article. On one hand, the film is clearly a part of heritage cinema (albeit as a fantasy iteration of the genre). It utilizes traditional thematic material and indigenous cultural customs as it attempts to tell the nation something of its past in ways that evoke the typical conservative, protectionist rhetoric of national cinema discourse. Simultaneously, the construction of the film relies on Finnish self-exoticism and un-ironic plays on conventional stereotypes, conveyed through the aesthetic conventions of Hollywood blockbusters (widescreen photography, cgi effects, celeste-infused orchestral score, montages). The film thus draws on a wide body of conventions in expanding its potential audiences in both domestic and international markets.

These two texts present very different perspectives on culture and cultures, whether local, national or transnational, but as they have both received substantial releases in Finland and China, they enable us to build a substantially wide analytical framework for analyzing transnational cultural exchange. From here, we can start inspecting the ways Finnish and Chinese audiences respond to cultural products in ways that correlates closely with Sarkar's translocalism.

### **Popular culture and heterogeneous audiences**

To construct a sufficiently complex picture of the audience reception of transnational cinema, we have to take popular culture as a shifting idea, constantly reformulated by changing audience tastes and global flows of cultural production. For example, normative understandings of commercial cinema moulded after the Hollywood paradigm, cannot be simplistically or unproblematically applied to the mainland Chinese cinema, nor to the popular cinema of Finland. While the film cultures of both nations are certainly seeing increased genre production and star vehicles alongside the more usual forms of art cinema

(the typical paradigm in which the Hollywood/national cinema relationship is viewed), this is not to imply that the respective film industries are not increasingly 'commercial' in themselves. Chinese cinema, for example, has seen conscious development of consumer-oriented cultural products by a few monopolistic media corporations and private capital is now the major source of investment in the film industry,<sup>7</sup> with 'entertainment' films comprising 75 per cent of the total of films produced during the last decade.<sup>8</sup> Not only can we see advertising tie-ins with popular films, but also comedians, fashion models, signers, reality TV 'stars', talk show hosts, and music video directors are increasingly becoming the producers, directors, screenwriters, and actors of theatrically-released films.<sup>9</sup>

Part of our focus on popular dimensions is to direct discussion away from elitist, top-down conceptualizations of cultural affinity – something which is prevalent in Sarkar's discussion of the Indian *Awara* reception in China.<sup>10</sup> He suggests a politicized sense of socialist affinity as a cause for this film's wide release in China, yet can this truly account for the film's lingering popularity with the insufficiently identified Chinese audiences? While certain ideological aspects of the narrative (such as the protagonist's dramatic speeches about social responsibility) can be understood as socialist propaganda, Chinese audiences' embracement of the film is also likely to do with *Awara's* narrative resemblance with popular characters and stories in Chinese literature. In addition to its optimistic narrative qualities, the success of the text before, during and after the Cultural Revolution can be partially attributed to the lack of other similar imported popular media products. Even if we were to acknowledge the importance of socialist affinity at that particular historical context, in today's context, if an Indian film was commercially exhibited in China, would we ascribe it to politicized affinity? Furthermore, if we only pay attention to political top-down conceptualizations of affinity, we ignore what is actually being viewed, and to what ends, by those frequenting the cinemas. Instead of focusing on politicized depictions, it is more appropriate to approach this conundrum from as close to 'grassroots' level as possible, though not just ignoring the structuring implications political-economic considerations perform.

The case is similar in Finland with many commentators bemoaning the situation at the multiplexes where Hollywood productions and 'irreverent' comedies take up a substantial share of the screens. It is thus important that we pay attention to the ways terms like 'commercial' and 'popular' are used in specific contexts, as it is often the case that they may have substantially different connotations than they may do in normative discussions of Hollywood or world cinema. This is the point of conducting more specific cultural/cinematic context-based analysis of cultural exchange – the formation of new understandings of the ways the heterogeneous perspectives of Finnish and Chinese audiences transform the cultural status of films, and the complexities cultural producers may face due to the unexpected diversity of potential readings.

Instead of recycling arguments of cultural imperialism and economic domination and their effects on global audience tastes, we explore alternative channels of cultural communication which often operate outside of the Hollywood-prescribed paradigms. This forms the basis for transnational cultural networks which, in our understanding, indicate ways for producers and, crucially, audiences to connect with each other and increase their familiarity with each other's cultural formations. The potential of this reorientation lies in understanding cultural exchange in a framework that acknowledges the increasingly complex ways in which globalization's multi-directional connectivity operates by not necessarily building themselves around the presumed centre of Hollywood or by feeling the need to justify their difference from its 'universalized' sensibilities. Discarding the presumption of the hegemony of the centre and prioritizing diverse vernacular traditions, practices and cultural resources can allow for more varied and substantial results in cinematic research.

### **Methodology**

Our studies of Finnish and Chinese audiences focus on transnational considerations yet we emphasize the ways audiences combine elements from domestic, Hollywood and other forms of film culture in their readings. These are audiences who have set expectations of the texts they view, but their readings may not fit in comfortably with any pre-designated notion of (trans)national spectatorship (such as simplistic favouritism for local/Hollywood products). We explore the online critical reception of these two films on discussion websites dealing with general topics and ones devoted to film culture. The main qualification for including these sites is their popularity with domestic users. This study is divided into discussion of professional critics' interpretations of the film, published in online film magazines (Finnish) and newspapers (Chinese) (called *critics* from here-in). These are then contrasted with comments from a range of online forums, some of which are film specific communities, whom we call *fans* due to their heavy investment in film culture. Last, we focus on comments from general discussion websites, whom we call *users* as they tend to be more prone to anonymity or at least less likely to focus on building a reputation than the film critics. These are often incidental users who do not have established user names and thus very little investment in any sense of reputation or community building.

For critical reception in Finland, we sampled user comments from two general discussion websites (115 user comments in total) and we also cover the critical discussion of these films on five film-specific websites [comprised of both longer fan review articles (19 comments) and message board comments (14 users)]. We also provide critical reviews from three popular film 'magazine' websites (film-o-holic.com, filmifin.com, filmgoer.fi). The Chinese reception (67 comments of *Jade Warrior* and 100 comments of *A Christmas Story* in total) are drawn from one general user discussion website *Baidu* (99 user samples), three film fan communities *Mtime*, *Douban*, and *Xunlei* (62 fan comments), two online news

papers *The Beijing News* and *Nanhu Evening News* and three critic blogs (6 longer critic reviews in total).<sup>11</sup>

The online discussions devoted to the reception of these films, from film fan sites to message board communities, showcases many different tactics of audience interpretation, emphasize the complex ways users appropriate and approach texts in a forum where anonymity and simplicity are often favoured. Rather than focusing on netiquette considerations in user participation, we focus predominantly on considerations of cultural travel and the production of heterogeneous meanings. By teasing out the ways users mobilize cultural elements differently, we can come to a more complex understanding of transnational cinematic practices, including impact on consumers. While we still focus on interpretative frameworks that are culturally-specific, our work aims to construct a non-essentialist mode of analysis which emphasizes the complexity of individual interpretations and their impact on the cultural constitution of the product, coming to understand some of the complex patterns in which different audiences engage with notions of popular culture, commercialism, national cinema and cultural ownership.

### **Finnish reception of *A Christmas Story***

*A Christmas Story* was one of the largest commercial and critical successes of 2007 in Finland. Most of the critics in the online film magazines commended the film for its aesthetic and narrative qualities, and its ability to re-envision the well-known tale without resorting to too much repetition of established conventions of Christmas films. In their eyes, the film was especially successful for its merging of commercial qualities with its traditional 'national' theme. While the large-scale financial backing from various commercial enterprises such as Peugeot and Finnair (present as logos in the opening titles) seemingly contradicts its thematic focus on the more non-commercial aspects of Christmas, the film, according to these critics, achieves a good balance between commercialism and artistic content.<sup>12</sup> In the words of one critic, 'The score and sound design of the film support its Christmas narrative and snowy landscapes well. The cinematography is visually impressive. Ultimately, *Joulutarina* is a beautiful Finnish Christmas fairytale. It manages to create the atmosphere of Christmas and even moves the spectator to tears'.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the film was conceptualized as a way to rethink the morality of Christmas beyond its contemporary connotations, as 'a call to arms to the American shopping mall Santa Claus'.<sup>14</sup> Many of the critics agreed: 'The basis for the script has been commercial maximization of the time of the year, but its authentically Finnish vision distinguishes itself from previous American examples with its honesty'.<sup>15</sup>

For the established critics from three film magazine sites, *A Christmas Story* was largely successful when compared to other domestic cinema and competition from Hollywood. Crucial here is that these critics approached the film as part of popular culture, to be analyzed and discussed in relation to its industrial/cultural status. Yet, the comments from

film fans differ substantially. It is not difficult to find very critical perspectives on Finnish cinema amongst many of the film specific message board communities, which lambast film producers for their lack of innovation and their inability to communicate with audiences. This was especially evident in the comments made at the film fan site *leffatykki.fi*, where commentators suggested that ‘the film is a thoughtless and stupid commercial – but because it looks good, the Finns are proud. The clichéd score fits the film like a fist in the eye, and the pop song fulfils the aurally weak package’.<sup>16</sup> For others, its commercialist intentions are clear (especially the red coat invented by Coca Cola), but this does not detract from the final product, which ‘succeeds in being a warm and beautiful film and still simultaneously a commercial product’.<sup>17</sup> Many of these fans nevertheless drew attention to problems they associated with Finnish cinema, evident in comments from other entertainment websites: ‘The screenplay is a collection of scenes without a point and acting is occasionally so bad that it makes the audience blush’.<sup>18</sup> The fans’ investment is thus heavily reliant on their negative impressions of Finnish cinema. They clearly are in favour of imported (often Hollywood) products and find domestic popular cinema largely embarrassing.

These debates were continued on a range of non-specific message boards, though now the discussion steers away from the cinematic qualities of the film. For the users on the discussion site *Suomi24.fi*, the film was a disappointment as it did not meet their expectations of a children-oriented Christmas film: it was considered ‘too sad’<sup>19</sup> or as lacking in Christmas spirit with its absence of ‘Christmas carols and gift-making’.<sup>20</sup> For some, the film’s ‘maturity’ was a positive quality amidst the confines of children’s cinema, discussing difficult and thought-provoking themes such as death, while providing ‘picture-card like scenery, beautiful music, and an altruistic joy of giving made the film suitable for all audiences’.<sup>21</sup> Here, the value of the film lies in its ability to provide positive values and not in its contribution to domestic industrial/cultural politics.

For many of these users, commercialism emerges as one of the major flaws of the film, as something that contradicts its inherent message, especially the casting of pop idol Antti Tuisku in a small role as ‘there must be talented youths in the theatres of Finland and these kinds of Christmas films are precisely the films to employ young actors’.<sup>22</sup> Different perspectives thus emerge from this cursory overview of online criticism. For critics, the film is successful as a part of domestic cinema, as it contributes new perspectives to domestic cinema. But for film fans, this newness is very clearly equated with Hollywoodization as they tend to find problems with *A Christmas Story’s* reliance on cinematic clichés, whereas users on non-film specific forums express disappointment with its handling of its theme and its divergence from the conventions of children’s cinema.

Ironically, for all of the audience groups, any sign of commercialism was to be condemned as this takes the film too close to generic superficial entertainment. Simultaneously, many of

the critics and the fans draw positive attention to its internationalizing potential. The film garnered substantial success at international festivals, which led to its acquisition by Miramax and ultimately redubbing the film with John Turturro voicing the lead role. What started out as a production emphasizing traditionality and rejecting the pervasive influence of commercialism (at least in its director's perspective) was adapted to the mainstream markets. The marketing's conscious use of exoticism and traditionalism with moralistic, anti-commercialist overtones, and its eventual repackaging as a Disney-distributed commercial film, testify to its complex position as a part of small nation film production. While the exoticness of traditionalism provides the film with its cultural capital, which allows it to travel globally, the film is also reliant on its commercialist sheen to break out of the art house 'ghetto'. It is this contradiction in the film's ideological-ethical structure that led many of the Finnish viewers to see it as a symptom of the wider commercialization of the cultural industrialization. Simultaneously, this commercialism was heralded in some circles as a potential way to overcome precisely the same problems. Many of these concerns are evident in the Finnish reception of *Jade Warrior*, to which we now turn.

### ***Jade Warrior***

The Finnish reception of *Jade Warrior* amongst internet critics and online communities is more complex than that of *A Christmas Story*, especially in the critics' views on its Chineseness (or rather, the relative absence of in-depth discussion of it). Whereas the Finnishness of *A Christmas Story* is very explicitly highlighted in the text, the national qualities of *Jade Warrior* function on a multitude of levels. On one hand, its Finnishness is made explicit by its contrast to Chineseness – already the use of language indicates this. But any sense of comfortable nationness is also challenged by the ways the film combines these ideas. While it uses cultural iconography from both contexts, they are used in ways that occasionally seem to question their origins as part of the respective national cultures. For example, the use of Finnish kantele in ancient China, and kung fu in ancient Finland challenges the historical origins of these emblems in their respective national cultures. The film makes it clear from the beginning that it is a combination of cultures and should be viewed as such by audiences.

In many of the film magazine reviews for *Jade Warrior*, it was seen as 'an anomaly in Finnish cinema. Even when watching the film, the combination of *Kalevala* and Chinese myths does not feel real'.<sup>23</sup> The critic for film-o-holic.com discusses the film's genre predecessors, indicating its substantial debt to the wu xia films of Zhang Yimou, and evoking more negative conceptions of Finnish emulations of other popular national cinemas. But he also draws attention to its transnational production methods which combine resources from Finland with China and the ways its marketing in expanding its potential audiences outside Finland.

Message board users in non-film specific communities approached the film predominantly from similar perspectives, contrasting it against 'traditional' Finnish cinema: 'The only thing I did not like was the female voiceover, which belongs in traditional Finnish films and not productions of this kind'.<sup>24</sup> But for many, Finnishness comprised the main attraction of the film: 'Normally I would not watch this, but as it is Finnish, and seems like the makers are at least trying, I will give it a go'.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, for many, the film functions as a source of national pride – even Finns can do 'international-standard' fare.<sup>26</sup> Occasionally, the tone was extremely celebratory, especially in terms of the cultural capital the film provides: 'I can tell foreigners that this is Finnish cinema'.<sup>27</sup> Others were more critical, equating it with existing trends in genre cinema,<sup>28</sup> and discussing, for example, whether the effects of the film were invented by *The Matrix* or in China.<sup>29</sup> Many of these comments discuss its commercial potential, suggesting that it occupies a curious middle-ground between the Hollywood-inflected mainstream and alternative forms of commercial cinema.<sup>30</sup> But ultimately, opinions can be divided along the following spectrum: it was considered as a somewhat innovative attempt, 'but ultimately a low budget b-film',<sup>31</sup> or despite its many flaws, 'the film is great when compared to the rest of Finnish cinema'.<sup>32</sup> Interestingly, *A Christmas Story* had not generated this kind of passionate debate amongst the general users. It seems that the more genre friendly content of *Jade Warrior* resulted in individual users seeking to claim a more specific stake in the cultural implications of the film. Indeed, many of the comments here echo the reception of *A Christmas Story* amongst film fans. Finnish cinema is seen as severely lacking in quality so bringing in conventions from an unexpected genre can enliven it. Whereas *A Christmas Story*'s internationalism was seen as closely resembling Hollywood superficiality, *Jade Warrior* distinguishes itself from this with its evocations of Chinese cinema. It seems for these users, the mere hint of the exoticness of Chinese culture was enough.

Whereas film fans had found much lacking in Finnish cinema and *A Christmas Story*'s commercialist emulations, they were not very impressed with *Jade Warrior*'s superficial Chineseness. They elaborate on the failures of this 'Finnish wu xia': 'Seriousness is a part of wu xia, but not in this manner as even the kung fu battles are copied from better artists. The film is remarkable as a Finnish product, but weak as a film'.<sup>33</sup> This distinctly negative conceptualization of Finnish cinema emerges in most writers' views: '*Jade Warrior*'s narrative structure is almost revolutionary as Finnish spectators are not used to having to use their brains in watching films produced in their country and language'.<sup>34</sup> For many of the fans, the chances for cross-cultural exploration are largely missed by abiding by stereotypical conventions as 'the only thing representing China are chopsticks, and Finland the kantele (a traditional musical instrument)'.<sup>35</sup> For these commentators, the point of the film lies in its internationalizing potential: 'Whether it is a good or a bad film is ultimately irrelevant, because this is a giant leap for Finnish cinema towards the international world. It renews the genre structure of our national cinema'.<sup>36</sup> Alternatively, Finnishness provides an excuse to appreciate the film more than if it was a 'mere' imported genre production: 'As

this type of film has not been attempted before in Finland, this qualifies as a relatively successful production'.<sup>37</sup> For fans, the film fails as a genre product but succeeds in its cultural-political mission. Whereas *A Christmas Story's* internationalism was of the undesired kind being too closely associated with American forms of culture, *Jade Warrior's* association with Chinese culture is seen in positive terms. Thus, we see the emergence of distinct approaches to different forms of popular culture, with Chineseness holding more value for these fans than American culture.

The Finnish reception of *Jade Warrior* thus expands on the rejection of commercialism frequently seen as part of the criticism of *A Christmas Story*. While these films can be considered as part of popular cinema due to their wide releases and relative box office success, their reception, especially in the non-film-centric communities, indicates substantial disagreement on what makes a good domestic film. For many of the official critics, it is good enough that these films at least try to bring something new. But for users of the message board communities and especially fans, these efforts are mere copies from other national cinemas and serve very little purpose beyond highlighting the many artistic and infrastructural problems of the domestic industry. More importantly for our purposes, these individual perspectives build a largely different perception of Finnish cinema from its more official, policy-related designations, evident in policy documents by The Finnish Film Foundation, which still operates as a gatekeeper for domestic film production. The Foundation's perspectives are more akin to the critics' views in the need to expand the boundaries of the national cinema.<sup>38</sup> Simultaneously, the fan and user comments exemplify the large extent to which Finnish spectators are attuned to transnational flows of film culture, and familiar with forms of expression which may not be all about Hollywood influence. Indeed, the difference from conventional popular cinema (Hollywood/Finnish emulations of Hollywood) is precisely what allows *Jade Warrior* to stand apart for many. Thus, we can see the emergence of complex transnational reception culture which is not only to do with rejection/assimilation of the norms established by the US imports to the domestic markets. Instead, critics, fans and users take their own perceptions of national cinema and envision complex ways in which transnational flows can weaken or strengthen it. To take this examination further, we will now explore the ways these films were received amongst Chinese netizens, and the ways their perspectives extend the cultural lives and impact of these films.

### **Chinese reception**

While the Chinese reception of *Jade Warrior* and *A Christmas Story* demonstrates similarly distinct audience conceptions of popular culture in a transnational framework, there are substantial key differences between the different reception contexts. First, we found only two critiques of *Jade warrior* and none of *A Christmas story* in the mainstream media. This partially results from the difference between film critic systems between the countries as only a few 'official' film critics exist in China. Furthermore, in comparison to the distinctive

viewing patterns amongst Finnish audience groups, the group difference between Chinese 'fans' and 'users' is less distinct as committed popular film fan culture is still emerging in China. Yet, such differences do not barricade us from exploring how Mandarin-speaking individuals who identify with mainland Chinese cinema as their domestic film culture, receive globalized/transnational cultural products, especially ones from a less familiar European culture. From such a perspective, films are no longer considered texts with inscribed dominant meanings, but instead they are global cultural product appropriated by a range of heterogeneous perspectives for different cultural-political means. Our exploration of Chinese perspectives on these Finnish films exemplifies Higson's<sup>39</sup> suggestion that there is no certainty that specific groups of audiences will receive films that travel across national borders in similar ways, as the meanings audiences read into a film are heavily dependent on a range of variables (ie. national, cultural, personal) which influence the ways audiences view the film. The Chinese reception of *Jade Warrior*, either as a global 'Western' form of culture, or as a less familiar and more exotic form of Finnish culture, explains some of the discursive and unpredictable ways audiences in mainland-based virtual communities use such texts.

### **Identifying Chinese audiences**

Who exactly are the Chinese audiences we discuss? To answer this question, we must start out from exploring wider patterns in Chinese film culture. On the one hand, Chinese films still remain highly national in content, and the diversity of imported films which are theatrically exhibited is limited because of institutional controls.<sup>40</sup> On the other hand, alternative forms of transnational practice, such as increasing cross-border production initiatives and (illegal) online distribution,<sup>41</sup> can diversify the types of films the audiences engage with and extend the range of taste cultures. We cannot presuppose that these Chinese audiences share certain 'national' characteristics, nor should we use this term to indicate that we conceptualise them in terms of a pure or stable form of national identity, fully formed and fixed in place. Yet, the individuals who contribute to the reception patterns we analyse do share certain contextual features we are not able to ignore, such as their desire to debate the status of mainland Chinese cinema and their clear awareness of its history and current situation.

Within the wider context of mainland Chinese cinema, there has been a persistent separation of locally-produced and foreign films since post WWII, most commonly seen in the distinction between state-sponsored socialist propaganda on one side, and art cinema with international prestige on the other.<sup>42</sup> Different conceptions of a 'good film' persist because of these historical patterns: on one hand, a complete narrative that represents noble values is considered to be the desired function of a propagandist film. On the other hand, artistic forms of Chinese cinema usually engage audiences with their experimental and symbolic depictions of the struggles of ordinary people.<sup>43</sup> In the 1990s, the increasing availability of foreign films started transforming audience tastes (especially in 'good

cinema'),<sup>44</sup> but the industrialisation of mainland cinema right after its accessions to the World Trade Organisation in 2002 has led to a boom of domestic Hollywood-formula blockbusters.<sup>45</sup> Big budget films such as Zhang Yimou's *Hero* (Ying Xiong, 2002), *House of Flying Dragners* (Shi Mian Mai Fu, 2004), Chen Kaige's *The Promise* (Wu Ji, 2006), and Feng Xiaogang's *The Banquet* (Ye Yan, 2006) are promoted by drawing on Hollywoodized tendencies of narrative transparency, visual spectacle, heritage content, and, if not necessarily dilution of cultural specificity, then at least a mediated version of this specificity. Such alteration is largely a result of the widely-believed assumption that mainland audiences have become accustomed to and prefer Hollywood modes of film production.

Indeed, the reception of the above-mentioned blockbusters contests assumptions about the Hollywoodized tastes of Chinese audience.<sup>46</sup> While Chinese audiences have praised the stunning audio-visual effects of *Hero*, for example, many noted that the spectacular style failed to combine with a dynamic and impactful story. As in many other national contexts, how films are often viewed in cinemas differs considerably from the critics' perspectives: despite widespread media criticism and negative responses from audiences walking out of the theatres, the public still flocked to see whether the film was merely 'expensive, slick garbage',<sup>47</sup> or if it was successful in delivering its indigenous answer to large-scale Hollywood spectacle. Meanwhile, many comedies such as Feng Xiaogang's *If You are the One* (Fei Cheng Wu Rao, 2008) and Ning Hao's *Crazy Racer* (Feng Kuang De Sai Che, 2009) were warmly embraced by audiences. Their themes centred on social change in contemporary Chinese life, constructing more locally-relevant films that move away from Hollywood models. Yet, many Hollywood films continue to populate domestic multiplexes and box office charts. Consequently, it seems that any sense of an isolated Chinese film spectatorship tradition is being gradually replaced by the dramatic yet fleeting stimulations of entertainment, or more immediate local considerations that have little to do with the type of ideological or artistic functions of earlier eras of cinema. Contemporary Chinese audiences are best considered as a heterogeneous complexity, neither characterizable as a mass subscribing to dominant ideology and holding a collective preference for some stereotyped impression of Chinese martial arts cinema, nor purely subjugated to endorsing Hollywood conventionality.

### ***Jade Warrior***

As marketing practices of domestic mainland Chinese cinema increasingly align with global standards, so the publicity for *Jade Warrior* promoted it as a spectacular blockbuster that combines elements of mystery, legend, and kung fu. It was compared to *The Lord of the Rings* (2001-2003) trilogy especially in terms of its North European appeal, and while it did not gain the popularity of Jackson's epic, it was met with impassioned reviews in conventional media, on-line forums and blogs. After being enticed by blanket publicity, some audiences' expectations for a blockbuster ended up in disappointment, citing the lack of visual spectacle, its ambiguous genre and theme, unsophisticated kung fu, marginalized

image of China, and overwhelming mythical symbolism. Some even suggested the film amounts to a 'Euro-Chinese' pudding, where multiple western and Chinese ideas and symbols are used in a manner that dilutes most forms of cultural specificity. *Jade Warrior* was compared by some to Chen Kaige's *The Promise (Wu Ji, 2005)*, which received disastrous domestic reviews. *The Promise* also made allusions to Western epic legends and was projected as an epic and romantic kung fu blockbuster, but turned out to be a huge disappointment for its lack of substance, over-exaggerated visual spectacle, abstract dialogue and so on. Chen was seen to have produced a failed and distorted appropriation of Western high culture, which was not only a betrayal of the entertainment features of commercial films, but also a huge waste of money considering its budget.

According to users from the general *Baidu* forum, if *Jade Warrior* had been produced by a domestic group, it would have been criticised as much as *The Promise*. Instead, critics from *The Beijing News* and fans from online film communities both comment on *Jade Warrior* with a more moderate critical term - a 'chicken rib' - a vernacular idiom that refers to things that are neither completely enjoyable nor utterly disposable.<sup>48</sup> While many users and fans discussed the unsatisfying kung fu and martial arts, they also expressed significant tolerance because 'this was after all a European director'.<sup>49</sup> While *Jade Warrior* has a strong Finnish basis, the marketing ignored this aspect of its production history, and not surprisingly, the signifiers of Finnishness are rarely discussed in its reviews. Even though one fan from the popular online film community *Mtime* constructs an impassioned interpretation of the film's symbolism from a predominantly Nordic perspective – iron symbolises the power of happiness in Finnish culture, and the fly crawling on the face of an old woman references Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal (1957)* – most audience members' ability to read the film's Finnish cultural specificity remains limited. Instead, for many of these commentators, *Jade Warrior* was an unexpected surprise, which refreshes the confines of domestic cinema with its 'European' qualities.<sup>50</sup> For them, the film was a European film, significantly different from Hollywood commercial entertainment and the disappointing domestic films.<sup>51</sup> This European-ness, or rather foreignness, extends to audience perceptions on genre, heroism, individualism and social morality.

*Jade Warrior* was promoted as a combination of kung fu and the historical epic, but its intentional combination of genres was largely contested. Wu (2006) from *Nanhu Evening News* criticized it for the insufficient quantity and quality of its kung fu/martial arts scenes: 'despite the professional posing in the film's promotional material and its symbolic uses of bamboo forests, the 'banal' depiction of fighting, characterised by superficial physical movements and the incompatible over-exaggerated effects, are hilarious'.<sup>52</sup> But for many users of *baidu*, the non-mainstream aesthetics of the 'dance-like physical movements',<sup>53</sup> and its emphasis on fantasy and romantic melodrama allowed the film to transcend the kung fu genre. The film's devotion to 'emotionally painful', 'restrained' and 'struggling' themes was found touching, especially for those who proclaimed themselves as 'having had

enough kung fu'.<sup>54</sup>

Many of the reviews struggling with *Jade Warrior's* genre designation share similarities with those for Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) and Zhang Yimou's *House of Flying Daggers* (2004), which also modify/challenge the martial arts genre. Berry and Farquhar argue that kung fu films with overt connotations of cultural traditionalism are more popular among regional Chinese audiences, while films which present a mythic version of China with a modern twist usually do not work well with these audiences. In their words, 'the Chinese, who seem to guard their film genres as jealously as they guard their cuisine, are not interested [in reformulations].'<sup>55</sup> For example, mainland audiences expressed disenchantment over *House of Flying Daggers* being bereft of Chinese cultural flavour and wu xia spirit.<sup>56</sup> In particular, its focus on romance, which to some extent subverts the genre, did not receive similar adoration as *Jade Warrior* – reviews perceived it to lack genuineness, humanity and imagination.<sup>57</sup> Some audience complained that 'since *House* is a kung fu film, you cannot just make it according to your own sensibility; you have to adjust for mainland Chinese audiences'.<sup>58</sup> Hence, in comparison to the above examples, it seems curious that *Jade Warrior's* abstract and ultimately ambiguous love story, which also accounts for a large portion of the narrative, was considered so highly, whereas those of the other two did not receive much acceptance. Do such contradictions attest to the previously emerged Europhilia argument or was the film never actually considered a part of authentic wu xia due to its Western origins? Do we see this transnational text used as a vessel for debating contrasts between Western ideological perspectives on societal responsibility and endorsement of collectivism, social obedience and self-sacrifice often seen as quintessentially and problematically Chinese, something which was clearly not deemed possible with Zhang and Chen's films?

Many users focused on the protagonist Sintai's decision to avoid his duty as an army general and experience normal life by eloping with his beloved Pinyu. Even though the film never allows him to fulfil his individualistic aspirations, this transient, arguably 'Western' ideological twist on heroism became a controversial issue. Six users out of 32 were outraged by the protagonist's dual acts of rebellion and submission: 'Sintai is too unacceptably impulsive, he is nothing like the hero we have in mind, who sacrifices his own stakes for the collective, and not vice versa'.<sup>59</sup> Indeed, for some, 'Pinyu should be the hero, because she sacrifices for the collective good'.<sup>60</sup> Such reaction to the film's ideological emphasis on heroism and social responsibility indicates that the individualistic tendencies in the film are inappropriate to a minority of the audience. Yet, for most users who contributed to the discussion of the film's heroism, the protagonist's romantic inclinations were a positive aspect as they allowed the film to distinguish itself from most Chinese martial arts films since 'Sintai's conflict sets it apart from all the typical Hollywood clichés'. This allowed it to avoid 'being meaningless' largely due to its focus on 'realistic' individuals, a particular topic of discontentment with audiences of both *Hero* and *House of Flying Daggers*.<sup>61</sup> For them,

not only did *Jade Warrior* manage to tell 'a tremendously humane story' about fear and desperation, but it also provided 'believable character development'. Indeed, to be a 'lonely, insecure man with a painful desire to love and be loved' makes him a real human with whom 'normal people like us' can identify.

The main narrative of *Jade Warrior* can also be considered as reinforcing the idea of social responsibility. Although Sintai aims to forsake all he knows in pursuit of his beloved, the film's individualism is very transient as it never allows its hero to permanently gain the love for which he strives. While Chinese traditions endorse heroic self-sacrifice, and heroism in *Jade Warrior* is equated with the sadness of a man doomed to be a hero in infinite loneliness, its ideological trajectory is not that different from many of the films against which it was favourably compared. After all, if Sintai was allowed to escape with Pinyu, would such absolute reinforcement of individualism still gain the favor of those audiences who approve of the subversion of traditionalism? Or would such a narrative concession destroy the aura of 'otherness' the film seems to have amassed in China, making it another copy of Hollywoodized conventionality? Indeed, the audiences did not choose to take up the ideological connotations of strengthening traditional ideology. Instead, they chose to critique the film for lacking this sort of ideology or, alternatively, commend it for subverting the traditionalist connotations of most domestic examples of wu xia. For these audiences, it seems the potential of the text lies precisely in its openness, in its refusal to commit to a single ideological or even artistic-industrial strategy, something for which it was heavily critiqued in Finland. Indeed, for many audience members, the appeal of the film seems to reside in its ability to generate negotiation on what is meant by Chineseness as the audience groups that we focus on approached its ideological connotations based on plurality, either in affirmation (views critiquing an individualistic warrior and its inconsistency with conventional martial arts films), negotiation (those favouring his pursuit of personal life), and even subversion (the possibility of shattering traditional trajectories). These contesting perspectives invite us to be careful with any assertions that conventions of the martial arts genre such as idealistic heroism still prevail among wider Chinese audiences.

In addition to genre and thematic concerns, many aspects of *Jade Warrior's* representation of China received largely positive notices, with critics commending its mixture of Finnish and Chinese mythology, and appreciation of the Mandarin spoken by the Finnish actors. Only a few critics commented on the following issues: 1) The role China plays in the film is highly disposable – for example, Pinyu is more of a Chinese symbol than a fully-fledged protagonist; 2) The ancient Chinese elder phrases his dialogue with typical Western discourse such as 'God', which, according to the users, are 'inappropriate' and 'astonishing',<sup>62</sup> as well as minor instances of overlooking archaeological facts of Chinese culture such as the mistaken dating of the ancient Chinese seal script to over 4000 years ago (it has been used for less than 3000 years). Other aspects, such as the use of stereotyped and simplistic simulacral impressions of China – the image of the ancient village comes to

mind – received no attention. Such ignorance is not limited to *Jade Warrior's* exoticisation of China. Most media representations of the mythical, uncivilised China (both domestic and foreign) rarely draw attention or critique from Chinese audiences or even the State Administration of Radio Film and Television of China (the official body in charge of all matters related to media production and distribution). This may be partially explained by the constant representation of ancient China as a mythical, less civilized image in domestic media culture, including novels and many current TV series. Mainland audiences have grown used to such images, considering them merely as a form of artistic creation. Furthermore, as these audiences are living within China every day, they may not expect a voyeuristic or 'realistic' impression of China from films with explicitly fantastical genre roots. Therefore, they may, consciously or otherwise, divorce *Jade Warrior's* 'China' from their conceptions of the real China, which can explain the lack of discussion of the negative connotations such images may have as they enter into global circulation.

The complex ways in which different sections of the Chinese audiences took up the notion of individualism attests to Arjun Appadurai's suggestion that 'neither images nor viewers fit into circuits or audiences that easily bond within local, national, or regional space'.<sup>63</sup> With these immense transnational flows of culture come instances which allow individuals the opportunity to identify with ideas and cultural models from other national contexts and create an identity for themselves from the multitude of cultural options presented to them. While critics discussed the representation of Chinese culture, they largely ignored 'foreign' cultural elements, or they conceptualised Finnish cultural elements as exotica. But simultaneously, audiences' Europhilic tendencies provide the film with a positive reputation which allowed it to act as a tool of critique of other similar wu xia products. Yet, the reception of the film should not be understood as indicating the 'better' ideological stances of western products, or the need to democratise China or any other such ideological goal to which imported media is simplistically often connected. Rather than vindicating a collective sense of national identity or even easily categorizable forms of distinct online audience groups, the reception of *Jade Warrior* indicates the complexity of individual audience perceptions. These contingent perspectives contest any assertion of homogeneous 'national' audience tastes and preferences simply for traditional martial arts, nationalism etc. They indicate the different ideological uses to which films are subjugated in their transnational circulation as, for some, the film indicates ways to better domestic popular cinema, for others, a way to challenge traditional conventions.

### ***A Christmas Story***

In contrast to *Jade Warrior*, which for many Chinese reviews exhibited a particular 'European style', few of the Chinese spectators interpreted *A Christmas Story* as a specifically European film. Instead, it was largely considered a simple and plain story, different from most foreign films exhibited on mainland screens. Such interpretations of the film's quality are evident in all the reviews, even though the comments and opinions vary

considerably. Negative reviews of the film expressed their immense disappointment and the feeling of being deceived by the Chinese publicity of the film, which projected an impression of an exotic fantasy 'da pian' (blockbuster). The Chinese version of the film's poster, trailer and other media promotion courted sensationalism with lines such as 'it will provide you an accessible way to view the private life of Santa', a notion that dramatically contrasted against the 'plain' and 'realistic' qualities many of the Chinese spectators discovered in the film. For them, expectations of an entertaining visual feast remained completely unmet, leading to descriptions such as 'too realistic', and 'a pale story without any dramatic development'.<sup>64</sup> One of them even suggested the film was merely a realistic biography of Santa that should be filed under documentary film,<sup>65</sup> while others critiqued it for being too sad and ruining the 'delightful atmosphere' of Christmas.<sup>66</sup>

Yet, eighty comments out of total 100 surveyed among all audience members perceived this film as a touching, heart-warming and morally educational film that stood against commercial blockbusters. The most oft-discussed factor was the protagonist's devotion to gratitude and love towards others and his noble personality was perceived as a potential role model. The 'plain' but 'touching' representation of such ideas without recourse to romanticized depictions was considered as extraordinary and profound: 'while the film may be lacking in conventional blockbuster trappings, its expression of humanity makes it a classic film that everyone should watch'.<sup>67</sup> In all, 37 of the comments highlighted the 'touching' effect of the film,<sup>68</sup> with many of them suggesting that they were severely moved by it: 'I couldn't help weeping when watching it'; 'This is the film which makes me cry the most'. Several suggested all parents should have their child watch this film, commenting that 'A *Christmas Story* is the best Christmas film ever'.<sup>69</sup> For them, it even functioned as a culturally-instructional text: 'if this is what Christmas is all about, it must be the most heart-warming of festivals'.<sup>70</sup>

For many of the fans and users, the film's philanthropic message contrasted with the current social reality of China, which was described as 'morally ugly and dirty' and 'focused on struggles for money and social power'.<sup>71</sup> Their 'faith in innocence and devotion to others has been destroyed',<sup>72</sup> and the film 'is exactly what our problematic and morally bankrupt society lacks'.<sup>73</sup> The film effectively provides 'the most valuable impression of the ways one can live' and they 'really hope our people can aspire to the same level of innocence as the protagonist'.<sup>74</sup> The criticism of the film as a 'realistic' text contrasted in its favour against the dramatic narrative style of Chinese cinema, as the lack of 'handsome' and 'beautiful' actors for one, contributed to its non-conventional attractiveness. Several comments from both users and fans considered *A Christmas Story* free of the prevailing commercial 'ugliness': 'the film is nothing like those profit-centred commercial ones, it is thoroughly unadorned, sincere and touching'.<sup>75</sup> For many of these audience members, it reminded them of the metaphor of a lotus,<sup>76</sup> which in Chinese literature symbolizes the persistence of innocence and purity without being assimilated by its filthy surroundings.<sup>77</sup> The natural and 'primitive'

qualities of the protagonist allowed him to be identifiable as an ordinary person, like any of 'us'. For other fans, *A Christmas Story* was much better than a blockbuster, because it was less commercial, and thus less superficial in its techniques, but more genuine and nutritional in moral and artistic substance.<sup>78</sup>

*A Christmas Story* cannot, of course, be completely disassociated from deliberate commercial ploys. For many fans, the film was a fairy tale, as they drew attention to the combination of the innocence of the characters and the exotic snowy landscape, which was identified by some fans audiences with Disney animation. The visuality of the landscape was frequently discussed, even in the negative user reviews, as they drew attention to the snow, the blue sky and the stars, the lakes and forests and the snow covered cottage: "Every scene is as beautiful as a painting, a place of fairy tales".<sup>79</sup> In addition, the soundtrack and the costumes were also appreciated for their exotic qualities.<sup>80</sup> Some users considered these visual qualities as Finnish or extended it to a 'North European style' of beauty, with several mentions of Finland as their next destination of travel. This was enhanced by a major Chinese site collaborating with the Finnish national tourism institution to provide audiences the chance to travel to Finland and experience the film's setting.<sup>81</sup>

Yet, these readings of its Finnishness remain minority views. First, in comparison to *Jade Warrior*, it seems less culturally specific, 'less European', at least from a Chinese perspective, as Western nations share the image of Santa and Christmas with corporate products of Disney and Coca Cola (despite Finland's marketing of itself as the authentic land of Christmas). The film is also situated in an isolated village in Lapland, and therefore does not require much knowledge of the social conditions in Finland. Second, the narrative is a rather basic coming-of-age tale, potentially intended for franchising purposes, interspersed with ample comedic interludes, often considered a means for Hollywood to enlarge its audiences. Yet, Chinese audiences do not discuss these qualities, as for them, appreciation of the film is mainly to do with its exotic qualities. Such exotica are not so much about its 'European' quality, rather, it is a consequence of audiences comparing these images with their different indigenous social realities. They may not question the ideological fallacies of the film's content, but interpret such images as something only possible in the non-indigenous context. For them, the film reflects their disappointment with their current society and their struggles establishing and maintaining their individual identities. *A Christmas Story* was thus mobilized as an ideologically progressive text, both as non-commercialist art, and as a way to believe in something more positive.

Whereas in the Finnish context *Jade Warrior* and *A Christmas Story* were criticized for their commercialism and perceived to be cinematically lacking, the Chinese audience members studied here took them up in entirely different ways. For many of the Finnish users, the potential of both films is about expanding the framework of transnational Finnish cinema. And while both films have certainly received ample international distribution, their actual

utilization by audiences is another matter – for example, the Chinese audience members use them to criticize commercial Chinese mainstream cinema or the contemporary social conditions. Rather than (mis)reading meanings embedded in the framework of Hollywood-inflected or national popular culture, it seems they prefer to use the texts for reflecting and acting on their own social contexts. If the perspectives of these Chinese audiences, and the uses to which they put these texts, are any indication, the makers of the films were extremely successful in expanding the framework of Finnish cinema, just not in the way they intended. Instead of successfully importing Finnish culture, the films' circulation makes them cultural products largely divested of the cultural meanings they may have had for the Finnish producers.

### **Conclusion: on the locality of transnational audiences**

In exploring how exotic cultural elements are adapted by audiences in different contexts of transnational circulation, Higson emphasises three different forms of encounter.<sup>82</sup> One is an anxious concern about the effects of cultural imperialism, a concern that the local culture will be infected, or even destroyed by the foreign invader. A contrary response is that the introduction of exotic elements may well have a liberating or democratizing effect on the local culture, expanding its cultural repertoire. A third possibility is that the foreign commodity will not be treated as exotic by the local audience, but will be interpreted according to an 'indigenous' frame of reference; that is, it will be metaphorically translated into a local idiom. The reception of *Jade Warrior* and *A Christmas Story* in their Finnish and Chinese contexts illuminates the complex ways in which locally-specific texts enter into global circulation and are subsequently mobilized for different purposes by transnational audiences.

Our study has examined the implications of transnational reception from two main perspectives. Firstly, online communities are often considered decentralised or even denationalised. The reception of our examples of transnational cinema demonstrates that far from building some sort of universal or denationalised perspective, online reception is still bound by nation-specific linguistic and cultural designations. Yet, this does not imply that the reception communities are only interested in nationally-specific concerns. As these audiences engage the texts, reception analysts should not fastidiously and stubbornly operate on the level of nations. As we have demonstrated, many of the audiences read these films outside of their nationally-specific origins, or they interpret them in ways that challenge any simplistic maintenance of national culture. Simultaneously, these audiences are well aware of the substantial role Hollywood's economic and cultural power plays in shaping audience tastes on a global scale. To unravel some of these complex patterns of reception, our article interrogates the implications of the concept of the transnational, which still largely operates as a synonym for world cinema with all its connotations of marginalization and liminality in the global marketplace, despite the progressive efforts of authors such as Higbee and Lim.<sup>83</sup> The problems here are to do with reinforcing Hollywood's

hegemonic position and relegating domestically-popular films such as *Jade Warrior* and *A Christmas Story* to the margins. To challenge such limiting conceptualizations of transnational cinema, both Finnish and the Chinese reception has indicated complex patterns in which concepts like the mainstream, commercialism, populism, and even realism are understood and used for different cultural-political purposes. For example, many of the audience members do not see mainstream or commercialism as something to do with the ability to mimic normative conceptions of the Global Hollywood. If anything, audiences identify multiple conceptualizations of popular culture, which shift and transform according to the context of reception.

To avoid the reductionist othering associated with the term transnational cinema, these audience readings may initially be best considered in a translocal framework. This 'localism' is to do with the ways these audiences communicate and share their popular cultures in ways that combine national popular cultures, while acknowledging the inevitable presence of the predominance of Hollywood cinema and Anglo-American vernacularism. Rather than futilely fledge against this dominance, the film producers and their audiences create cultural forms that are popular in their domestic concepts and provide viable alternatives to Hollywood cinema. A 'local' exploration of audiences who respond to these two transnational films in domestic languages within distinct socially and culturally defined spheres of interaction allows us to discuss the ways meanings are generated in interconnections that are not only shaped by Hollywood concerns but by mutual affinities and exoticism. Thus, the translocal indicates analysis of transnational audiences in a framework which acknowledges the national specificity of these audiences, while it also takes into account the significant influence of Hollywood on any national film culture.

Emphasis on local considerations also emphasises that audiences do not necessarily read the films only on the basis of nationhood. Indeed, it challenges any suggestion that the reading publics of nations are somehow uniform and interpret the texts in clearly specified Finnish/Chinese ways, as a homogeneous mass sharing ideological/aesthetic preferences and levels of artistic/cultural competence. A translocal approach to audience studies emphasises that the audiences combine a range of expectations and different levels of cultural competency with alternative forms of popular culture. While online audiences are not necessarily local in the conventional sense of the term, our focus on culturally specific, if not geographically located contexts of communal interaction, which are often bound by shared interests such as film fandom or desire to communicate with likeminded individuals (especially on various domestic societal issues). But by respecting the need for cultural specificity, we move away from a Eurocentric approach to academic discourse and focus on how films are read by culturally-located audiences. Furthermore, by focusing on Mandarin and Finnish reviews, we address the concern whether transnational film studies can be truly transnational if it only speaks in English and engages with English-language scholarship (of course, the article is written in English, reflecting these unavoidable structuring forces).

Thus, the emphasis on the translocal instead of the transnational is a way of acknowledging that there is more at stake here than simple exchange between two nations in the shadow of Hollywood. The translocal thus becomes a synonym for a type of cultural exchange that avoids reductionist conceptualisations of the transnational in film studies. It is able to do this because it acknowledges the different audience perspectives as part of a global form of cultural exchange. Here, the 'map' of cultural exchange certainly includes Hollywood, but it does not divide the world merely to Hollywood and its others.

As we have seen, individuals acting as anonymous or identifiable parts of online communities read films in heterogeneous ways and utilize the texts for multiple purposes, from vindicating their personal politics to criticizing social problems, from interrogating the moral qualities of the texts to appreciating certain types of cultural production. While many of the reviews by critics do relate to 'national' concerns in one way or another, we detect very few instances of Higson's protectionist category. Instead, the more emancipating connotations of the second category, and the user orientation of the third emerge as the key indicators for preferring an emphatically culturally-specific approach to studying the reception of transnational cinema. Thus, we are not only extending Higson's<sup>84</sup> argument for a more critical national cinema, but also examining the actual deployment and implications of such transnational cultural products in different receiving contexts.

While both case study audiences exhibit distinct preferences for certain, if abstract, modes of cultural production (the 'international' in the Finnish case, North European in the Chinese), these should not be interpreted as some sort of recourse to Hollywood hegemony or Eurocentric tendencies. Instead, audiences mobilize texts in multiple ways in the public sphere, ways which may to some extent be dictated by preconceptions or the marketing of the films. Yet, rarely do such preconceptions actually limit the range of cultural interpretations of a given text as we can often detect conscious subversion/negotiation of such enforced patterns. As texts take on new meanings through the translocal perspectives of 'global' audiences, these contesting perspectives emerge as key contributors to the constantly shifting paradigms of transnational cultural production.

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### **Notes**

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<sup>1</sup> Martial arts as a film genre is directly translated from the Chinese 'wu xia' - a significant genre of popular culture in Chinese literature, TV serious and cinema since 1920s. The films conventionally endorse self-sacrifice, social responsibility, obedience and patriarchy and

follow sword-wielding wandering chivalrous fighters who seek justice for the underprivileged. The global use of the martial arts genre has currently subsumed 'kung fu' films. The kung fu genre was popularized in Hong Kong and initially introduced to Western viewers with the popularity of Bruce Lee. It highlights characters' physical combat without weapons and is less clearly defined in ideology than the wu xia (though assertive nationalism is highlighted in films such as the *Once upon a time in China* series). Contemporary wu xia extends to comedy, fantasy, and even melodrama, and its internationalization exemplifies cinematic globalization and the dominance of the market in Chinese film culture (Davis, Emilie & Yeh, Darrell, 2008, *East Asian Screen Industries*, London: British Film Institute, p, 167).

<sup>2</sup> Elley Derek, 'Jade Warrior', *Variety*, 22 February 2007.

<sup>3</sup> See the introductions to *Transnational Cinemas*, vol. 1 (1) 2010 or Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden: *Transnational Cinema: Film Reader*, London: BFI, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Sarkar, Bhaskar, 'Tracking "global media" in the outposts of globalization', in Natasa Durovicová and Kathleen Newman (eds), *World Cinemas, Transnational Perspectives*, London: Routledge, 2010, p. 39.

<sup>5</sup> The terms transnational has often been evoked in relation to diasporic or marginal filmmakers (see Naficy, Hamid: *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). Alternatively, transnational occupies the role previously held by concepts such as world cinema or third cinema (for elaboration on these issues, see Guneratne, A. & Dissanayake, W (eds.) *Rethinking Third Cinema*, London & New York: Routledge, 2003.)

<sup>6</sup> Baskar, 2010, 39.

<sup>7</sup> Dai Le 'Make change in Chinese cinema from embracement of low-budget films', *Southern Metropolis News*, (2010) URL: [http://ent.nfdaily.cn/content/2010-03/27/content\\_10521448\\_2.htm](http://ent.nfdaily.cn/content/2010-03/27/content_10521448_2.htm) (visited 20.11.2010).

<sup>8</sup> Kong, Shuyu, 'Genre film, media corporations and the commercialization of the Chinese film industry: the case of 'New Year Comedies' in Olivia Khoo & Sean Metzger (eds) *Futures of Chinese Cinema, Technologies and Temporalities in Chinese Screen Cultures*, Bristol: Intellect, 2009, p. 149.

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