

Problematic Encounters with *Wolf Warrior II*: Antithetic Reception of “China in Africa” Amongst Chinese and African Audiences

Yu Xiang

Shanghai University, CHN

Xiaoxing Zhang

Simon Fraser University, CAN

Jiarong Zhang

Hainan Tropical Ocean University, CHN

Abstract

‘China in Africa’ has become an irresistible topic in any discussion of China, with the former’s growing engagement with the latter. The unprecedented popularity of *Wolf Warrior II* in China, which is set in Africa, is a testament to how official propaganda of national self-confidence can be affirmed by the public in the form of pop culture. The film’s controversial and stereotypical portrayal of Africa and its deliberate imitation of the Hollywood genre are the reasons for its attention among different groups. To date, however, feedback from international audiences, both in terms of common feelings and conflicting opinions, has remained under-researched. In order to provide an exploratory study on how *Wolf Warrior II* is interpreted by Chinese and African audiences in different cultural and social contexts, a comparative analysis of the film’s reception among Chinese and African post-secondary students in different countries was conducted. Ten focus groups were organised, five in mainland China and five in Canada, with a total of thirty-one college students from China and Africa participating. The results showed that Chinese and African audiences have vastly different or even opposing understandings of the ‘China in Africa’ discourse presented in the film. This seems to reflect a problematic but under-addressed aspect of the China-Africa relationship.

Keywords: *Wolf Warrior II*, China in Africa, Audience Reception

Introduction

The tremendous success of *Wolf Warrior II*, released in 2017, has prompted a heated debate about two things. The first is the ultra-nationalist narrative wrapped in a veneer of patriotism that has been popping up on the Chinese big screen in recent years. This has been criticised by many in the Western media as the jingoist propaganda of Xi Jinping Thought (The Economist, 2019). The other is that when this nationalist narrative encounters the equally controversial 'China in Africa' discourse, it generates a discussion about the substantive core of 'China's Rise'. While carrying the memory of a humiliating past, China, which officially sees itself as a third world country that, like Africa, suffered from Western oppression, seems to have reawakened its pride in its economic growth as a counterpart to the hegemonic powers. This mixed sense of identity and contradictory narrative is most evident in *Wolf Warrior II*, which has been accused of imitating Hollywood blockbusters and stereotyping Africa following western prejudices. Ranking the top spot at Chinese box office with 5.68 billion RMB (Mtime, 2018), *Wolf Warrior II* undoubtedly proves that Chinese audiences resonate with the powerful national image of China presented in the film. Though it was rare to see a patriotic movie achieving such enormous popularity in post-reform China since the 1980s, the younger generation of Chinese seem to be the most prominent recipients and producers of this patriotic enthusiasm. Unlike its fervent popularity in the Chinese market, *Wolf Warrior II* was highly disputed overseas for its chauvinistic expressions and its bias against Africa (Raleigh, 2019; Zuo, 2017). It is often assumed that the African audiences have very divergent understandings of the 'China in Africa' narrative deployed in the movie. But how divided the audience reception of the movie is and what factors lead to such unresolved disputes have not been systematically discussed.

This study analyses how the discourse of 'China in Africa' featured in *Wolf Warrior II* is reconstructed by subjects of different national identities through comparing the viewing experiences of Chinese and African audiences. Or in the words of David Morley (2005: 69), it is to explore the process of 'how meaning is generated in communications' by focusing on 'the cultural background of the reader/recipient/viewer, which has to be studied sociologically'. In addition to being influenced by the specific discursive space of the film, the audience, as message receivers and producers of meaning, is to a large extent forged by the discourse in the larger social structure and their identity in determining their interpretation of the film. Both Chinese and African audiences are conditioned by the existing narratives of 'China in Africa' in their own contexts and in their identities as Chinese and Africans. Therefore, in the first two sections, this paper addresses the existing global discourses of 'China in Africa' and discusses how the subjectivities of Chinese and Africans are interpellated within these discourses. The empirical findings of this research, achieved by conducting ten focus groups in China and Canada, support the conjecture that audiences from China and Africa have differential interpretations of films and provide a concrete basis for the reality behind such differences or oppositions. Moreover, the comparative design of the focus groups, with Chinese and African students in China and Chinese and African students in Canada, and their varying interpretations of *Wolf Warrior II* in different societies and cultures add a richer dimension to the study's exploration of subjective interpellation within the macro-social structures. It is expected that this study answers the question of how Chinese and African audiences discursively perceive 'China in Africa' in *Wolf Warrior II* while providing an innovative interpretive perspective on the problematised China-Africa encounters.

The Discursive Complex of 'China in Africa'

Although China has been exerting its influence in Africa since the late 1940s (Wu, 2006), the dramatic representation of the China-Africa relationship in *Wolf Warrior II* is rather recent. The 2010s witnessed a heightened global attention on 'China in Africa' as China's strategic economic cooperation with African countries started to take dazzling effect. Accordingly, the discourse of 'China in Africa' grew richer as new perspectives being continually added to it. For example, Howard W. French, the author of *'China's Second Continent'* (2014), claimed that China attempts to spread its ideology in Africa but failed. The Ghanaian writer Kwame A. Insaadoo (2016: Introduction) also asserts the hegemonic nature of Chinese civilisation towards Africans by quoting a story he once read: 'the (Chinese) emperor wrote ... to wipe out the entire black race'. On the other hand, Yan Hairong and Barry Sautman (2017) have responded to many of the disputed arguments (such as neo-colonialism) saying that the stigmatised reputation of China is the result of ideological divergence between East and West, a vestige of Cold War.

Filled with such myths, assumptions and debates, the global discourses of 'China in Africa' are the inevitable results of China's explosively multifaceted presence in Africa (Corkin et al., 2008; Mariani and Wheeler, 2011). China's large-scale investment in many African countries have been sufficiently illustrated by global scholars (Brautigam, 2011, 2015; Taylor, 2010; Sun, 2014). The problematics of such influence have also been discussed, such as environmental damages and imbalanced power relations (Lee, 2014; Moyo et al., 2012). To Adrian Hadland (2012: 482), China represents a 'modern, post-Westphalian capitalist state' which is exporting an 'imbalance of financial, trade, and power relations between Africa and China'. Similarly, Ching Kwan Lee (2014: 50) observed that 'Chinese state capital is ... every bit as adversarial as global private capital when it comes to labour's demands'. Concerns and suspicions are thus aroused regarding the expansion of China and many other emerging economies in Africa as a new round of scramble (Caulderwood, 2014; Moyo et al., 2012; Wang and Elliot, 2014; Wonacott, 2014). On the other hand, it is also argued that such a nuanced China-Africa relation provides new opportunities for an alternative development pattern that may lift African countries from dependency (Large, 2008; Mawdsley, 2007).

Encountering these controversies, China has made great efforts to better its global image as manifested in state-led promotional projects such as 'China' media go global' and educational cooperation through Confucius Institute and government-funded scholarships (Grassi, 2014; Li and Musiitwa, 2017; Allison, 2013). Despite the fact that 'the Chinese authorities have recognized that officially sponsored news media are less effective in "winning hearts and minds"' (Thussu, 2018: 194), before the global outbreak of Covid-19 in 2020, some studies show that the reputation of China in many African countries is becoming relatively positive due to its indispensable economic impact (Nassanga and Makara, 2016). Although the local consumption of Chinese media in Africa always remains low and is mostly perceived negatively by many young intellectuals, as the studies of Herman Wasserman and Dani Madrid-Morales (2018, 2022) show, China's presence in African societies has been very substantial. In contrast, the presence of Africa in China remains oblivious as 'the Chinese people's impression and perception of Africa during the past ten years remains at an anecdotal level' (Li, 2016: 157). To many Chinese, the current China-Africa relation is the legacy of the socialist era when China offered Africa unconditional aid and assistance (Siu and McGovern, 2017: 341-342). This is also reflected in *Wolf Warrior II* which appears to fall in some of those the most irritating stereotypes about Africa.

The global discourse of 'China in Africa' is largely under the influence of the Western

narratives which give salience to the competitiveness brought by China to the international markets in Africa. The global expansion of China is depicted as intruding and challenging against the order of the West. However, in the local contexts, the image of 'China in Africa' is rather conditioned by different groups of social elites fostering, on behalf of their respective interests, heterogenised perceptions amongst the general public. In other words, it is a complicated process constituted of multitudinous text/subject relations from diverse cultural and political-economic environments. When *Wolf Warrior II* encounters the international audience, their diverse identities have already conditioned their own understandings of the existing 'China in Africa' discourse and decide how they reinterpret or reinforce it during the film-viewing process.

The Pre-Constructed Identities and Perceptions of Chinese and African

As Laclau (1977, quoted in Morley, 2005: 58) puts it, 'what constitutes the unifying principle of an ideological discourse is the "subject" interpellated and thus constituted through this discourse'. Althusser's opinion on the subject positions is that they are determined by the primary structure (Althusser, 1970). In this paper, interpellation refers to a process of (dis)articulating pre-constructed subject positions which are conditioned by the ideological structure of a society. Because of the specificness of a space created by a discourse, such interpellation can be conditional, provisional and even contradictory. The process of interpellation can be various for people of different pre-constructed subject positions. The decoding of texts following the dominant position or 'preferred reading' is not 'the only reading inscribed in the text, and it certainly cannot be the only reading which different readers can make of it' (Morley, 2005: 61). The international audience' reception of *Wolf Warrior II*, as indicated in this research, contributes to the argument on how pre-constructed subject positions can be interpellated and reinforced by the existing discourses. Therefore, it is vital to understand in the first place how Chinese and Africans are positioned in their imaginations of each other.

For most of the Chinese who have never been to Africa, the continent represents an underdeveloped area the survival of which is largely due to China's aids. Africa as a passive recipient becomes an important reference for China's national rejuvenation as a great power comparable to the West. Such discourse was etched into people's minds as far back as the 1960s when China started to expand its diplomatic relations with third world countries by granting them a large amount of aids. In return, African countries' diplomatic support for China in the international community was believed to be a solid backing that China could use to confront Western hegemony. For instance, the official Chinese media portrayed that the endorsement of the African countries greatly facilitated China to re-join the United Nations (PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2014). Entering the late 1970s when China started to embrace the global market, the discourse on its friendship with Africa faded away and was replaced by a more profitable multilateral relation (Wu, 2006: 45). Although 'many Chinese have little interest in understanding Africa ... as this continent is not directly related to their daily life' (Li, 2016: 152), China-Africa relation continues to be a key motif in media representations of China's global supremacy. On the 2018 CCTV Spring Festival Gala, one comedic play 'Share the Same Joy and Happiness' depicting the launching of the Chinese-aided railway from Nairobi to Mombasa sparked fierce discussion on racism and cultural bias

(BBC, 2018). Apart from the obvious issues such as 'Chinese actors in blackface pretending to be Africans' and 'African actors dressed up as monkeys', the overarching theme of the play is similar to that of *Wolf Warrior II*: African people are grateful to China for being their saviour (Shi and Liu, 2020; Castillo, 2018).

In contrast, as observed by Wang and Elliot (2014: 1022), 'there appears to be a great dichotomy in African perceptions about China's presence'. For instance, comparing to Nigeria's positive attitude on China (Silver et al., 2019), the views of North African countries, such as Algeria and Morocco, are much more negative (Afrobarometer, 2017). One radical example of elitist hostility against China is the 2006 presidential campaign of Michael Sata in Zambia. China-Zambia tensions are still unfolding in 2020 as three Chinese nationals were murdered in May (Marsh and Sinyangwe, 2020). Nevertheless, there are countries like Ethiopia embracing the Chinese Model and achieving remarkable economic progress (Cowen, 2018). But, even in Ethiopia, it is widely acknowledged that the role of China is not completely altruistic (Endaylalu, 2018). Although Chinese investments appear to be popular in many countries including Kenya and South Africa, it is only weakly related to the views of China in the local context (Silver et al., 2019). The Chinese fantasy of exchanging aid and money for a positive image seems to be untenable. In 2020, China-Africa relations have experienced an unprecedented diplomatic crisis as a result of the outbreak of Covid-19. The discriminatory treatment of Africans in Guangzhou has significantly weakened China's image in Africa (Guest Blogger for John Campbell, 2020; Pérez, 2020).

In the context of *Wolf Warrior II*, the audiences in China and Africa appear to be starkly divided along distinct racial lines. Previous research on cross-cultural media reception has frequently employed ethnicity and national identity as lenses for influential comparisons (Liebes and Katz, 1993; Gillespie, 2002). However, such approaches have faced criticism for their racial reductionism, which tends to overlook the nuanced intercultural interactions and the diverse intracultural variations (Harindranath, 2005). Acknowledging these critiques, our study aims to understand the varied perceptions surrounding the 'China in Africa' narrative within different African nations. Unlike earlier studies, our focus is on how the film serves as a vehicle for propagating Chinese national identity, framing its narrative around a hierarchy of racial dynamics where the Chinese protagonists are positioned to combat Western adversaries and aid African characters (Xiang and Wang, 2022). This backdrop provides a fertile ground to examine how the hegemonic discourse of *Wolf Warrior II* contributes to the process of reification of all the subtle and fluid identities of the audience from diverse cultural backgrounds and reinforces the potent role of nationalistic self-awareness that overwhelms other alternatives.

Research Design and Methodology

Focus group discussion is deployed as the main research method to find out how audiences with different cultural backgrounds understand the story of *Wolf Warrior II*. The modern use of focus groups in academic research began in the late 1940s and early 1950s, primarily in the fields of sociology and psychology, as researchers sought to collect detailed qualitative data from participants to gain deeper insights into social phenomena and human behaviour. This method was further popularised and refined through the 1960s and 1970s, becoming a staple in social sciences research methodologies. As Morley (1980: 155) emphasised, 'the choice to work with groups rather than individuals was made on the grounds that much individually

based interview research is flawed by a focus on individuals as social atoms divorced from their social context'. It is crucial to investigate the formation of communication based on a relatively natural communicative environment with humans, as 'social being', 'gather[ing] together and discuss[ing] important issues in groups' (Colucci, 2008: 233).

In this research, ten focus groups with five-eight participants each were conducted respectively in Burnaby, Canada (five focus groups) and Hainan, China (five groups) in March and November 2018. Thirty-one post-secondary students¹ with Chinese and African origins from Simon Fraser University and Hainan Tropical Ocean University participated. Hainan Tropical Ocean University, which was chosen for this study, is a local institution ranked 357th in China. Simon Fraser University, on the other hand, ranks 13th in Canada. Thus, Chinese students at Simon Fraser University and Hainan Tropical Ocean University Oceanography can be classified as two different classes as overseas Chinese students are usually financially more advantaged concerning the higher tuition fees. Similarly, the African students studying in Canada and the ones coming to China have different backgrounds and perceptions of China as many African students in China live on scholarships provided by the Chinese government.

The moderators are the researchers of this study who are both Chinese and also faculty members at the respective institutions. They had brief contact but no teacher-student relationship with the participant prior to the focus group interview. While valuable for gathering rich, qualitative insights, the scale of this study's focus group interview makes the findings cannot be easily generalised to the broader population, as it may not accurately represent the diversity of perspectives or experiences. And in a small group setting, maintaining anonymity can be challenging, which might deter participants from sharing openly. Despite the moderators' professional efforts to mitigate the influence of dominant personalities and to embolden participants to share their genuine thoughts through carefully designed processes and strategic guidance, it is important to acknowledge the inherent methodological limitations present in this study.

Nevertheless, the merits of this study's methodology lie in the purpose of comparing and contrasting Chinese students and African students in Canada and China is to find out how different systems of higher education influence the perceptions of international students. In both settings, Chinese and African students were separated into two different focus groups to encourage their intra-group discussion in a more comfortable and familiar environment. Based on the outcomes of the discussion, a final focus group was organised with a mixture of Chinese and African students to exchange opinions. The specific nationalities of African students were not highlighted in the focus groups, mainly because that *Wolf Warrior II* presents a vague overall picture of Africa (fictitious country and port names, fabricated viruses, and wars that have never happened). The different focus groups were identified by codes² made of the abbreviation of the location and the type of participants.

Considering the fact that African students were generally unfamiliar with the content of this movie and to organise the interviews more orderly, the focus groups were designed to

¹ The names of the participants and the nationalities of the African students have been anonymised according to their wishes.

² BA1 (Burnaby, African Students, First Group); BA2 (Burnaby, African Students, Second Group); BC1 (Burnaby, Chinese Students, First Group); BC2 (Burnaby, Chinese Students, Second Group); BM (Burnaby, Mixed Group); HA1 (Hainan, African Students, First Group); HA2 (Hainan, African Students, Second Group); HC1 (Hainan, Chinese Students, First Group); HC2 (Hainan, Chinese Students, Second Group); HM (Hainan, Mixed Group).

firstly introduce the participants the storyline of the movie by showing them the trailer and then the whole movie. Questions were thereafter raised regarding the core messages of a few scenes selected by the researchers. Based on the collected empirical data, the researchers deploy the analytic model of encoding/decoding (Hall, 1973) to dissect the participant discussions and to provide a categorisation of their reception of the media text. The paper then further dissects how the audience's preconstructed social positions, as subjects of the polysemic text, interact with the narrative presented in the film and the broader discourses of 'China in Africa'.

Interpellation of National Identities: Contradicted Opinions between African and Chinese Audiences

Both African students studying in Burnaby, Canada, and those in Hainan, China, were visibly unhappy as they watched *Wolf Warrior II*. In a focus group of African students organised at Simon Fraser University, one female member left the meeting in anger because she was furious with the story. In contrast, the African students in Hainan were calmer and even a few participants were indifferent to the film and the questions. However, the similarity between them was that they all protested the film's portrayal of a backward and run-down Africa. When the African students are asked about their opinions on the scene of the city slums, they made it very clear that this is stereotype and it is only a small part of Africa.

People think we are living in areas like that and we are dying, and we are not happy, but that's not true. It depends on the narrative surrounding the depiction. If you want to depict that as a home, sure it's people's homes. But they are not crying every day. They are happy. (BA1)

... what makes it very disturbing at times is when like there is a movie that is talking about a foreigner going to an African community, and then all they show you is very one-sided part of Africa. (HA1)

For me this is not anywhere close to the cities I know in Africa. (BA2)

Regarding other scenes in the film about war, shootings, and viral outbreaks, African students expressed different understandings. For example, regarding a scene in which an African patient begs the protagonist for food, some of them thought it was stereotypical, while others thought it might be intended to convey an ability for people to empathise with each other.

I guess this is the dominant narrative about Africa: people have disease, people are hungry, they are just looking for food, and they just have to see a person with a lighter skin and they run to her for food. And they are so grateful because they are being given food because they didn't have food. (BA2)

When the foreigners go into Africa, they actually become a part of the people, and some of them may even want to stay there and do missionary work there

because they identify with them and see this is actually what they are going through. So, until you experience what people go through, you don't change your mindsets or whatever. (BA2)

Some of these African audiences mentioned that this stereotype of Africa is not only present in Chinese films, but many American films are used to portraying Africa in this way as well. But they don't believe that these prejudices can be rationalised because of American films and that Chinese films shouldn't learn from them.

It is like the depiction of Africa, shacks, poverty, no industrialization this kind of thing. (Moderator: Have you seen it in other movies?) yeah, Blood Diamond, but the context of blood diamond is very different ... I am not saying these places do not exist. But every time that Africa appears in this kind of movies, it is in this kind of situation. (Another African student: Africa, underdeveloped countries.) (BM)

So, you Chinese. You should not think that because America does it. It's okay. We also don't think it is okay. (HA1)

Respondents found very problematic the superficial portrayal of Africa in the film and the way in which Africa is seen as a whole. African students interpreted this flattened perception as a lack of understanding of the outside world by the Chinese.

Also like they have pirates, virus, rebels and the whole. They have everything you find for every different African country all combined in one. And again, they are about to talk about all African countries in one book. Just one place, and everything is happening in that one place (basically, the country is like a miniature Africa. Yes, just like Somali pirates, people are rebels, so...) of course rebels are in multiple countries. (BA2)

It is like the poverty, hunger, pirates and rebels, packed everything of the whole continent in one place. (HM)

Although the African students from Hainan and Burnaby have some slightly different views on the specific film plot, their pre-constructed status as citizens of African countries makes them feel offended while watching the film and they have a distinctly negative opinion of the movie.

Audience is offended, Africans are offended. Everyone is offended. (BM)

... [the movie] makes my impression about China worse. (BA2)

The film exacerbates the African audience's imagination of a not-so-good China. The same plots show the rise of China in the eyes of Chinese students, while in the eyes of African students they evoke the bad behaviour of the Chinese they witnessed in their own country. Real-life experiences make them question the fictional positive portrayal of China in the film.

...if I am not with some Chinese in the same class, Chinese are not the people I like. The Chinese people are seen in Ghana... they are disrespectful, they don't regard us as people, and the fact that they have that impetus to think of us as non-people and they are in our land. That is the worst of it of all. (BA1)

All the African students interviewed said they had neither heard of nor seen *Wolf Warrior II* before participating in this focus group, while all the Chinese students had mostly seen the movie in the cinema. In contrast to the African students' dislike of the movie, many Chinese students thought very positive of *Wolf Warrior II*.

It's a big step forward for China to make movies about individual heroism. (HC1)

My feelings for my country never change. China being stronger is a fact. China protecting its people is also a fact. Our military army is a reliable support for us. This movie just reflects those facts. (BC2)

There is a clear difference between the Chinese students' perceptions of the film in Canada and China. Chinese respondents in Canada were more likely to cite many aspects of the film that they found exaggerated or irrational, whereas Chinese respondents in China were not very sensitive to these controversial parts.

When I was watching the movie, I felt the plot that Leng Feng using spring mattress to stop a missile is really stupid. But I saw a review with a director, he said this plot is based on a real story happened in a southeast Asian country. But I still feel too unreal and stupid. (BC1)

It was the first time I knew that a Chinese film could make a film that could make people's blood boil so much, and in terms of the plot and the acting. And the content it expresses and some of the feelings it conveys to people, I feel it's all great. (HC1)

The difference between them is especially evident in the final scene of the film, when Leng Feng holds up a Chinese flag and allows the warring sides to cease fire for him and then pass through.

When the ending comes out to put the story to an emotional climax, I was kind of sensually numb already. Because the whole story has always been around the patriotic behaviours of Leng Feng and the greatness of China, the ending really does not move me very much. (BC2)

At the end when he raised the flag through the war zone, I too was actually very proud in my heart. I feel that our country is really different from what it used to be. In the old time, people said we were the sick man of East Asia (Dongya Bingfu), but now that we are so strong and have such a position in the international community. I really feel very proud. We deserve it. (HC2)

But both the Chinese students in Canada and China have more in common with their

understanding of the film than they disagree with each other. For example, they both expressed their love for the patriotic themes expressed in *Wolf Warrior II* and their affection for their country as Chinese. However, the difference is that the Chinese respondents in Canada had a clear sense of the film's deliberate sensationalism, while the Chinese respondents in Hainan did not have a similar feeling.

I don't think foreigners can feel how we feel. The target audience of this movie is definitely Chinese. I think only as Chinese you can understand the subtle feelings about protections and supports from your own government. The patriotic gene is rooted in our blood. We are educated like this since childhood. So, that is why although this is a very fake movie, we are still touched to some extent. This whole storyline is not appealing to foreigners at all. How can they echo with it emotionally if they are not interested enough to watch it through. (BC1)

I think the image of the Chinese navy, seeing this kind of scene will bring tears to my eyes, because really when I see this kind of scene, I will think of more than ten or twenty years ago when we were backward, we were bullied by the Americans, bullied by all kinds of international powers, but now we are strong, I feel very touched. (HC2)

Playing down Africa, Playing against America

The fictional African country in *Wolf Warrior II* is not only undergoing a brutal civil war but is also ravaged by a virus. Hostage presidents, zombie-like sick African civilians, endless urban slums, crazy rebel forces and European mercenaries who slaughter innocent people. All these negative stereotype-laden portrayals, despite their absurdity to the African interviewees, had their validity in the eyes of the Chinese students. Some of them did not consider the stereotypes to be stereotypical because they were in line with African realities, while others thought that such stereotypes were justified as common narrative on international screen.

I don't think this is stereotype. I think it is just the fact. Virus such as Ebola is indeed coming from Africa. Pirates and civil wars are real as well. No matter what the reasons behind all these are, wars and diseases are real. Besides, such background of Africa is the routine and usual setting for international movies. I think it is acceptable. (BC2)

The American movie like *Resident Evil*, its virus was also found in Africa. So, I don't think it's completely free of bias, I think there's still a little bit of bias, but we're certainly not doing it on purpose. (HC1)

When participating in focus groups with African students, the Chinese students tended to show their understanding of African cultural diversity and some very nationalist views were left unexpressed. In these mixed groups, both Chinese students in Canada and China exhibited reflections on the negative portrayal of Africa in film. In an atmosphere of explicit antipathy from her African classmates, one Chinese interviewee in Canada agreed that the film was a

failure:

... [In this movie,] China is offended as well. There is no historical rationality of China in this movie. It can be replaced by other countries, but the story will remain the same. So, it is not the real China. It does not really tell why China is special from others. (BM)

This Chinese participant in Canada believes that China as a socialist country is different from Western capitalist countries. This view was widely shared by the Chinese student in Hainan.

We're not doing the same things as what the Americans or what other imperialism countries are doing. So, I don't think we're, uh, it represents the new colonialism. (HM)

In the eyes of some of the Chinese interviewees, China-Africa friendship is the fundamental difference between China in Africa and the West in Africa. These Chinese students' memories of the China-Africa friendship are firmly embedded in the official historical discourse framed by the Chinese government.

One of the main reasons that China is the permanent member of UN is because many African countries voted for it many years. It was also under the circumstance that they were fighting together against America against U.K. because they thought that they are imperialist countries. China and African were together as socialist allies. (BM)

I think China has always been in the peaceful development in the, um, in the modern international environment. I cannot see any track of a new colonialism of China. And from the movie we can see that the Chinese people just want to evacuate themselves from Africa and they always stress unity between Chinese and African people. (HC1)

But for African students, they were neither familiar with the historical discourse of socialist friendship between China and Africa nor convinced that there was anything special about China's current behaviour in Africa:

Chinese and Africans are friends. It is a huge statement. What do you mean by that? Are they friends in mutual terms? (BA1)

In the mixed group in Canada, the African students doubted this argument that Chinese and Africans are friends. One of them asked the Chinese member: 'as a Chinese, do you find that Africans and Chinese are friends? Do you agree with that? How do you see that point?' Their dialogue shows the bias among African and Chinese students on this issue:

Chinese Student: This is a very historical topic because friendship was under the circumstance of anti-imperialism. When the western capitalists not only doing brutal things on homeland, but also doing things elsewhere in the third world. So, the friends like, what links China and Africa together is the outsider's invasion. In

that circumstance China was rebellious and revolutionary and Africa also sought for their nations' independence from capitalism colonization. In that circumstance we can understand that they are friends.

African Student: But now China is in Africa doing capitalist stuff.

Chinese Student: We can discuss this later because it is a very complex topic. But in this film. China and Africa are interpreted as one. They are friends. (BM)

Similarly, African students expressed incomprehension over the marriage of Chinese and African workers in the film:

African Student 1: I see (in the movie) a Chinese married an African. I don't want to say in real life a Chinese has never fallen in love with an African, but what you usually see on the ground is they impregnate them instead of marrying them. Especially those Chinese factory workers, they don't marry them. They just have sex with them, give them money, of course because money is the reason the women come to them. By the time when these Chinese leave for their own country, these women are usually all pregnant.

African Student 2: I am feeling skeptical. I am like this is not true because the Chinese I know who are in Ghana... there is no way... they don't care about us. I don't want to say it won't happen, but I don't believe it will happen.

Moderator: Did you ever see in your lifetime that a Chinese marry an African?

African Student 1: Yeah. But it was not in Africa. It was in Edmonton (Canada). (BA2)

Yet for the same scenario, Chinese participants resonates with the scene where a Chinese African couple is forced to separate because of war and finds it very touching.

Chinese Student 1: I am emotionally connected to this part. To pull a married couple away from each other is not good. I think, at least, this part is very human and far more touching than the fighting scenes.

Chinese Student 2: Me too. I feel the human charm of Leng Feng just grows stronger. (BC2)

It is evident that the 'China in Africa' presented in *Wolf Warrior II* is interpreted positively by Chinese audiences and is in line with their imagination of China-Africa relations. The feedback from African audiences shows that although this imagination is mistaken (as many Chinese students are aware), it does not prevent them from affirming the narrative of China's rise in this mistaken imagination. In addition to Africa, the other entity that serves as a foil to China's rise is the United States. *Wolf War II's* entire Hollywood-style presentation and the story's satire of the United States embody a conflicting discourse. Chinese audiences seem unconcerned with this contradiction while African students are a bit confused with such

paradoxical narrative.

It is very funny. It is like they took the American cookie-cutter and placed it on China. It is like replace America with China (BA1)

So, even without the outline of this movie, I can still guess what kind of ending it will have because of its Hollywood style narrative. It is like it is just borrowing the ideas. (BA2)

For many African students, it is disappointing to see Chinese films perpetuate Western prejudices about Africa:

So ... when you introduced me the trailer, I was very interested in watching it. I thought it is going to be something very different. But then now it is just portrayed the same dominant ideology that has been portraying Africa. So, I want this to be recorded that I am not interested in watching this movie anymore because it is the same thing and it is disappointing because China is also taking the same pathway ... yeah... (BA1)

But for Chinese students, a well-produced Hollywood-style Chinese blockbuster is exactly what they are most eager to see on the international screen:

... I am happy to see movies such as *Wolf Warrior II* and *Red Sea*³ being more successful than *Monster Hunt*⁴ and *Mermaid*⁵. Despite the flaws of the storyline, the investment and efforts put into this movie is very considerate. It is undoubtedly a well-produced movie. (BC2)

We Chinese, including the whole world, define Hollywood as good film. They are so famous because they work hard on them. Their movies are really good and famous. But the *Wolf Warrior II* movie reflects that our Chinese movies are slowly developing and getting better. Many of us used to chase Hollywood and think they are really great, like a TianGou⁶. But now we don't need to do that anymore, Hollywood has become a dispensable thing for us. (HC1).

There is an interesting logical contradiction in Chinese students' attitudes towards the United States, namely, they are proud that *Wolf Warrior II* is a Hollywood-style movie that can now be compared to the United States. But a sarcastic episode in the story about the closing of the U.S. consulate is another reminder that relations between China and the United States

³ Operation Red Sea is a Chinese-Hong Kong action-war movie released in 2018. The story is adapted from the true event of evacuation of 600 Chinese citizens from Yemen in 2015.

⁴ Monster Hunt is a Chinese-Hong Kong fantasy movie released in 2015. It is a fictional story set in ancient China when humans and monsters co-exist and fight each other for sovereignty.

⁵ The Mermaid is a Chinese fantasy-romantic movie released in 2016. The story is about a human being falling love with a mermaid.

⁶ TianGou(舔狗): A dog that keeps licking things. This word is used to describe the people who like to compliment and flatter others.

are not harmonious:

It feels like China this flower needs a leaf of America to make it more colourful ...
But this competition between China and America is also noticeable in real life. I
have read report comparing the efficiency of Chinese and American embassies.
(BC2)

Although it seems agreeable that China is competing with America to show which is a better country, many of the Chinese audiences believe that the United States as a country is not a worthy object of study for China. Such contradiction is sharply pointed out by one African student in Canada:

If you don't want people to see you as a copy of America, then why you are following a Blockbuster style? (BM)

On the question of whether China is following the capitalist development path of the United States, the African students uniformly agreed that China is a capitalist country. The Chinese students in Hainan, on the other hand, believe that China is a socialist country and is not in the same way as the United States. Chinese students in Canada admitted that China seemed to be imitating the United States, but this was incorrect. There are also a few Chinese students who believe that both China and the United States are capitalist and that the two are now in a purely competitive relationship, with no ideology involved.

There is a Chinese company in my country... My friend who works there is a first-degree holder ... he is working more hours given what the other guy was doing. This other guy who came from China didn't have the experience. So, it was my friend who was doing the training. But in the end the trainee earned more than the one doing the training. So, it tells you how unfair it is. And I would say that sometimes when they feel they have the power of a politician or someone who gives them that confidence to do whatever they want ... they feel they can exploit people at will. (BA2)

What capitalist powers like the United States fear most is the rise of China. They fear that China has the same intentions to dominate the world as they do. The Americans keep saying that China wants to engage in the rise of some great power and hegemony. In fact, they are just afraid that China doing so threatens the position of the United States ... China is a socialist country, and we will never follow the capitalist path of world domination of the West. China is rising peacefully. (HC1)

Even though Chinese students have different views on the development path of their own country, most of them will immediately cite American movies as examples to justify such portrayals when the plot of *Wolf Warrior II* involves racial discrimination or stereotypes.

Real wars are much more brutal than movies, and the killing of civilians is also common. For example, in *Hacksaw Ridge* and *American Sniper* these movies, there are very cruel war scenes, more terrible than *Wolf Warrior II*. (HC2)

This shows that Chinese students are very familiar with American movies and TV shows. However, it is noticeable that the American cultural or ideological values conveyed in American movies and TV dramas are not successfully recognised by Chinese audiences. It is as if *Wolf Warrior II*'s narrative about China is invalid with African students as well.

Discussion

Following Stuart Hall's (1973) encoding/decoding model of communication, the Chinese and African audiences of *Wolf Warrior II* are categorised as of three decoding positions. First, audiences taking upon the dominant-hegemonic position tend to decode 'the message in terms of the reference-code in which it has been coded' (Hall, 1973: 15). Most Chinese students in Hainan and some of the Chinese students in Canada are of this category. In their eyes, *Wolf Warrior II* is a well-produced and positive movie about China, and they resonate with the patriotic spirit of the narrative. Second, audiences holding the negotiated position, in comparison, prefer to understand the dominant meaning of the text based on 'local conditions' and form a tailored perception (Hall, 1973: 17). The Chinese and African students of this type situate the narrative of the movie in their personal context and interpret some of the storylines differently. For example, on the scene that the Chinese embassy stops the rebels and rescues Chinese citizens and African refugees, one Chinese student in Canada said that based on her experience with the Chinese consulate in Vancouver it is not very likely for Chinese embassy to be so efficient. But overall speaking, audiences of this type are not against the messages delivered. However, for audiences that are more inclined towards oppositional decoding, they 'detotalise the message in the preferred code in order to retotalise the message with some alternative framework of reference' (Hall, 1973: 18). Most of the African students of this research do not see *Wolf Warrior II* as a good movie. Instead, they think the fictional plots, such as Chinese hero rescuing African refugees, Chinese African marriages or Chinese adopting African children, very ironic and unrealistic. The divergent readings of the movie producing almost adverse meanings on the same content, proves to be a structured polysemy (Morley, 2005: 79).

It is noticeable from this study that the national identities of Chinese and African students are the most prominent determinant of their different interpretations of the movie. For the Chinese students in this study, official media discourse became the main sources of their impressions on the distant continent of Africa. Therefore, they can more easily relate to the theme of China-Africa friendship highlighted in the film. As a participant revealed, 'well, as a Chinese, you can understand the underlying contexts of some plots, so you are naturally inspired by such sentimental connection with your motherland' (BC2). However, much of the film's discursive construct, which represents a very familiar political rhetoric for Chinese audiences, remains ineffective and even counterproductive for the African participants. They are instead more concerned about the pressuring issues of 'China in Africa'. Amongst the participants with the same national identity, it is still able to find variations of interpretation due to their different places of residence. The Chinese students in Hainan have an almost unconditional love for their motherland than the overseas Chinese students in Canada.

Although many of them have never been to a Western country, they are convinced that the United States is an immoral capitalist country and trying to prevent the rise of China. Likewise, the African students in Canada were more direct and explicit about the controversial plot of the film, whereas those pursuing a degree in China were more careful with their use of language.

Conclusion

This research reflects the enormous impact that the pre-constructed social identities of the audience have on their perceptions of the media text. This includes how the complex discourses contained in the production of social identities influence their understandings of certain topics. For example, the Chinese audience's consolidated understanding of the long-lived friendship between China and Africa is contingent upon the propagandist agenda of China's state-owned media and its overall political context. Also, the mediated collective memory of a heroic image of the People's Liberation Army and the lingering anti-American sentiment continually reinforced by the party-state propaganda provide Chinese audiences with the discursive toolkit to decode the messages of *Wolf Warrior II*. The same holds true for African audiences. Although the African interviewees in this study were not the refugees or sweatshop workers featured in the film, they also gained an understanding of 'China in Africa' through the lived experiences of their neighbours and the discursive constructs of African media. However, more crucially, it shows how the audience's pre-constructed identities are reinforced and solidified following the film's narrative. This process is so pervasive that both Chinese and African viewers increasingly find themselves reluctant to interpret China-Africa relations beyond the overarching narrative presented in this specific context, narrowing the scope of their understanding and perspective.

The distinct interpretation by African audiences serves as a powerful rebuttal to the cultural imperialism paradigm, which has faced critical examination and been identified as problematic since its heyday in the 1970s. However, this situation also presents a challenge to research advocating for the autonomy and reflexivity of audiences from diverse cultures, particularly when examining non-Western cultural products. Unlike the American drama *Dallas* (CBS, 1978-1991), perceived as a singular cultural narrative, *Wolf Warrior II* delves into complex issues of race, national identity, and the very conventions of its blockbuster genre. Here, African audiences are not mere spectators of foreign cultures but active participants within the film's narrative, contributing to the portrayal of Chinese ethnic superiority. This portrayal, in turn, is articulated through an emulation of American-style heroism. The varied reactions of African students in China and Canada—ranging from silence in Hainan to outrage in Burnaby—stem from their struggles with specific stereotypes, influenced by their diasporic experience. This raises important methodological reflection for researchers: How would African students residing in Africa perceive the film? Free from the diasporic context, would their reactions remain silent or outraged, or might they dismiss it with laughter?

In such an exclusivist movie genre, it seems irrelevant what race the protagonist is. It is a templated ideological tool. Like one Chinese participant said, *Wolf Warrior II* is just for Chinese, no one else will understand it. The same words could probably be used by American audience to describe *Top Gun*. The real problem with *Wolf Warrior II* is that it fails to provide an alternative narrative about Africa for African audiences, as one African participant described, he was very excited when he first heard that there was a blockbuster movie about

the Chinese in Africa, but halfway through the interview he was very disappointed and said he would never watch it. In fact, the story of China's presence in Africa is much more fascinating and varied than *Wolf Warrior II*. There are stories of exploitation and inequality observed by African students as well as morally and emotionally challenging stories of human decency. But this kind of narrative, which blindly imitates American blockbusters and aims to compete for bigger muscle, only reify all complexity into a one-dimensional confrontation which has become the mainstream zeitgeist of current Chinese politics and popular culture.

The film, released in 2017, became a phenomenal representation of China's patriotic sentiment. However, many of the storylines in the movie have the opposite reality in the year of 2020 when the global epidemic broke out. The country where the deadly plague has broken out is not in Africa, but in China. The film promotes the idea that expatriates are protected by the motherland, when in fact many Chinese people overseas were unable to get a ticket due to the country's airline restrictions. Back in 2018, despite the frictions between China and the United States, the bilateral relations are within the normal diplomatic framework as noticed by the Chinese student: 'I don't think the real Chinese embassy would like to use offensive words about America, because the high-level officials are promoting cooperation between two countries' (BC2). However, the plummeting U.S.-China relationship has also led to a fundamental change in the overall international situation.

The global anti-China sentiment during the pandemic of Covid-19 was met with an even stronger nationalist resurgence within China. The Chinese government's foreign policy has become radicalised and aggressive, at one point framed by the Western media as *Wolf Warrior Diplomacy* (Sullivan and Wang, 2022). Even the phrase 'Wolf Warrior' was bluntly picked up by the official spokesman of the Chinese government Zhao Lijian on his social media to legitimise his ultra-nationalistic criticism of the western governments (Palmer, 2021). Accordingly, more patriotic films appear on the Chinese cinema. As one of the Chinese interviewees in this study realised, the success of *Wolf Warrior II* is the inevitable result of a nationalist ideology that has been brewing and developing for a long time in China. In such an environment, a mutually reinforcing closed loop is formed between the patriotic text and its audience: 'This movie reflects an embarrassing fact: only movies with such themes and such stories (or those rubbish entertaining movies) can have high box office' (BC1).

The burgeoning nationalist sentiment, vividly encapsulated within the thematic narratives of China's ascent to global dominance, is increasingly interwoven with the country's populist culture. This fusion reflects a strategic portrayal of national identity and power, which is not only aimed at domestic audiences but also projected onto the global stage through cinema. The question then arises: how will international audiences interpret and react to such potent messages embedded in Chinese films, messages that are deeply enmeshed with the realities of the current global landscape? Given the global context, these films serve not just as cultural exports, but as instruments of soft power, potentially influencing international perceptions of China's geopolitical role. Consequently, there is a pressing need for comprehensive research to unravel the intricate web of cross-cultural audience reception especially from the diasporic perspectives that non-Western films, especially those from China, navigate. Such studies are imperative for understanding the multifaceted impacts of cinematic narratives on global audience perceptions and the broader discourse on cultural exchange and geopolitical influence.

Biographical Note

Dr. Yu Xiang is currently an adjunct faculty member at Susquehanna University and a faculty associate at Bucknell University in Pennsylvania, United States. She holds a PhD in Media and Communication from the University of Westminster in London, United Kingdom. Her research focuses on international communication, transcultural audience reception, and critical multimodal discourse analysis.

Contact: yuxlovmayo@shu.edu.cn

Xiaoxing Zhang is a PhD candidate in the School of Communication at Simon Fraser University. His research interests include political economy of communication, global communication, cultural politics, and development communication. His dissertation, which presents a detailed case study of a heritage Chinese village and explores the concept of the “good life” through the lens of urban-rural relations, aims to make theoretical and empirical contributions to rural communication research, China studies, and development studies.

Contact: xiaoxing_zhang@sfu.ca

Jiarong Zhang is currently an associate professor at Hainan Tropical Ocean University. She graduated from Harbin Normal University with a master's degree, majoring in English Language and Literature. Her research focuses on intercultural communication, second language acquisition and cognitive linguistics.

Contact: 244118651@qq.com

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