


RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The “Wolf Warrior Cycle”: Chinese Blockbusters in the Age of the Belt and Road Initiative

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## Abstract

This article concentrates on four Chinese blockbuster movies, *Wolf Warrior* (2015), *Operation Mekong* (2016), *Wolf Warrior 2* (2017) and *Operation Red Sea* (2018), referring to them collectively as the “wolf warrior cycle” on the basis of their shared themes of China’s overseas military actions. To understand why films addressing this topic have emerged since the mid-2010s, the article employs a critical political economy approach and situates the wolf warrior cycle in China’s transforming foreign policies. It argues that the Belt and Road Initiative, one of the state’s prominent foreign policies and global strategies in this period, played a crucial role in shaping the production of the wolf warrior cycle films under a trend of the politicization of commercial blockbusters in the Chinese film industry. In turn, these films contributed to the formation of the “wolf warrior diplomacy” image by reinforcing the proactiveness of China’s diplomacy and nationalistic stereotypes in Chinese society towards international relations.

## 摘要

本文重点研究四部中国海外军事行动电影大片：《战狼》（2015）、《湄公河行动》（2016）、《战狼2》（2017）和《红海行动》（2018），并根据它们共同的主题将它们命名为“战狼系”电影。为了解涉及这一主题的电影自 2010 年代中期以来出现的原因，本文采用批判性的政治经济学方法，将“战狼系”电影置于中国转型中的外交政策背景下。文章认为在中国电影商业大片的主旋律化趋势下，“一带一路”作为这一时期国家重要的外交政策和全球战略之一，对塑造“战狼系”电影起到了至关重要的作用。相对应地，这些电影通过强化中国外交中强势性的一面，以及展示中国社会中具有民族主义色彩的对国际关系的刻板印象，促成了国际社会对中国“战狼外交”印象的形成。

**Keywords:** Chinese cinema; Chinese commercial filmmaking; *Wolf Warrior 2*; Belt and Road Initiative; wolf warrior diplomacy; soft power

**关键词:** 中国电影; 中国商业电影制作; 战狼 2; 一带一路; 战狼外交; 软实力

Epitomized by *Wolf Warrior 2* (*Zhan lang 2* 战狼 2, 2017; dir. Wu Jing 吴京), a group of war/action blockbuster movies featuring China’s overseas military missions emerged in mainland China in the mid-2010s. In *Wolf Warrior 2*, Leng Feng 冷锋, a former Chinese soldier shouldering the obligations assigned by the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), evacuates Chinese and African citizens during a civil war in a fictionalized African country. The film grossed unprecedented box office returns of 5.68 billion yuan in mainland China, indicating its great popularity among domestic audiences.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Yu, Chao 2020.

Chris Berry notes that *Wolf Warrior 2* “seems to have initiated a whole new subgenre for Chinese cinema: the action-adventure overseas film.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, several months later *Operation Red Sea* (*Honghai xingdong* 红海行动, 2018; dir. Dante Lam 林超贤), a blockbuster movie depicting China’s peacekeeping activities in the Middle East, grossed around 3.65 billion yuan in mainland China and was well regarded by local audiences: as of February 2022 the average score of the film on Douban, a film-reviewing website, was 8.2 out of 10.<sup>3</sup> Notably, both *Wolf Warrior 2* and *Operation Red Sea* are sequels to original films that feature similar topics and similar positive responses from Chinese audiences: *Wolf Warrior* (*Zhan lang* 战狼, 2015; dir. Wu Jing) and *Operation Mekong* (*Meigonghe xingdong* 湄公河行动, 2016; dir. Dante Lam).

These four films, emerging in the mid-2010s and addressing similar topics, are the main subjects of this article. Referring to them as the “wolf warrior cycle,” I aim to understand the production of these films and the reasons why they each address China’s overseas military activities, a topic rarely addressed in previous Chinese war/action blockbusters. I view the wolf warrior cycle from a critical political economy perspective and situate these films in the context of the Chinese state’s new, proactive global strategy in the 2010s, which assumes China’s leading role in globalization, represented by the Belt and Road Initiative (*Yidai yilu* 一带一路, hereafter the BRI). I argue that the implementation of the BRI is a significant factor leading to the production of “action-adventure overseas” blockbusters such as *Wolf Warrior 2*. The wolf warrior cycle resonates with the BRI by presenting “Hollywoodized” adventure stories constructed under the assumption of China’s leadership in regional and global affairs.

The article will start with a brief introduction to the industry background to the wolf warrior cycle films, explaining the convergence of politics and entertainment in recent Chinese film production, a trend that laid the foundation for the wolf warrior cycle. Afterwards, I will examine the BRI as a pivotal Chinese foreign policy since 2013, and scrutinize how this policy has shaped film production. This will be followed by a detailed textual analysis of the four films, where I not only explore how the films visualize the BRI on screen but also discuss how they convey a strong nationalist sentiment through a series of stereotypes of China, the Global South and China’s position in the world. Finally, I will turn to the BRI’s soft power dimension and explore how the wolf warrior cycle impacts the critical conception of China’s diplomacy in the 2020s and helps to construct the “wolf warrior diplomacy” stereotype. While being proactive (or aggressive) might only be a temporary tactic of China during the COVID-19 pandemic, the wolf warrior cycle, by nationalistically promoting China’s military prowess and enhancing its leadership in globalization, reinforces the assertive components of China’s diplomacy.

The Chinese film industry has undergone tremendous transformation in the past decade. Since the 2010s, Chinese cinema has witnessed further marketization, the exponential growth of market and audiences, and the emergence of myriad new films and directors. A 2019 dossier in *Screen* announced the arrival of an “age of the Chinese film market” – a cluster of top box office grossers, represented by *Wolf Warrior 2*, that attest to the huge potential of the mainland China market.<sup>4</sup> This article addresses the wolf warrior cycle as one of the important phenomena in the transformation of the Chinese film industry, bringing new perspectives on this phenomenon. First, in addition to Stanley Rosen’s observation of the “marketization of politics” trend in Chinese “main melody” (*zhu xuanlü* 主旋律) films since the 2000s, this article identifies another trend of the “politicization of entertainment” in Chinese commercial filmmaking since the mid-2010s by scrutinizing the production of the wolf warrior cycle films.<sup>5</sup> Unlike the state-sponsored main melody movies, the wolf

2 Berry 2018, 42, emphasis added.

3 Yang 2021; see also <https://movie.douban.com/subject/26861685/>. Accessed 16 February 2022.

4 Lee 2019.

5 Rosen 2012. “Main melody films” are films propagating the ideology, social values and morals promoted by the CCP. They generally follow the pedagogical filmmaking tradition established in the Mao Zedong era, depicting heroes during

warrior cycle films are all commercial films produced by private companies for the entertainment market, with the state playing a very limited role during production. Films such as *Wolf Warrior 2* and *Operation Red Sea* did receive recognition from the Chinese government when they were in theatres, but only after their release. In other words, the producers of the wolf warrior cycle films chose to embody main melody ideologies themselves under the influence of the state's foreign policies. The production modality of the wolf warrior cycle will be useful to understand other commercial movies incorporating official ideologies.

Second, by linking the wolf warrior cycle to the BRI, this article enriches previous studies of these films. Berry mentions the BRI as background to *Wolf Warrior 2* but does not discuss it in detail, as his article focuses on *Wolf Warrior 2*'s incorporation of nationalism and its expression of masculinity.<sup>6</sup> Liu and Rofel's edited collection of essays discusses how *Wolf Warrior 2* echoes China's rise, employing a perspective of gender and sexuality to view the film's portrayal of the relationship between China and the Global South.<sup>7</sup> Similar gender studies points of view can be seen in Amar's analysis of *Wolf Warrior 2* and Pang's discussion of *Operation Mekong* and *Operation Red Sea*.<sup>8</sup> This article highlights the BRI as a foreign policy shaping the production of the wolf warrior cycle films, an aspect that has been neglected in previous studies. By doing so, the article contributes to a comprehensive understanding of blockbuster movies with the topic of China's overseas military actions.

### The Politicization of Entertainment

The dichotomy between propaganda films and entertainment films was clear throughout China's socialist and post-socialist periods.<sup>9</sup> But since the mid-2000s, when China took a further step to integrate into globalization, a trend of hybridization has occurred between state-produced main melody films and entertainment films.<sup>10</sup> For example, Feng Xiaogang's 冯小刚 *Assembly* (*Jijie hao* 集结号, 2007) was a commercial film embodying main melody themes. Produced by Huayi Brothers 华谊兄弟, a private film and entertainment enterprise, *Assembly* tells the story of a soldier in the Chinese Civil War. Two years later, *The Founding of a Republic* (*Jianguo daye* 建国大业, 2009) initiated a modality for the state-sponsored "new main melody films."<sup>11</sup> *The Founding of a Republic* exhibited a series of events and heroes prior to 1949. The film was directed by Huang Jianxin 黄建新 and Han Sanping 韩三平, the chairman of the state-owned China Film Group Corporation 中国电影集团公司, to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC). The film was highly marketized both online and offline and its cast included 172 stars from mainland China and the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, many of whom played supporting roles with few lines of dialogue. Thanks to its marketization, the film grossed more than 400 million yuan in the Chinese market and became the top-grossing film for mainland China in 2009. After the success of *The Founding of a Republic*, many movies in the 2010s, such as *The Founding of a Party* (*Jiandang weiye* 建党伟业, 2011; dirs. Han Sanping and Huang Jianxin), combined main melody themes with the casting of film stars, Hollywoodized filmic expression and extensive marketing strategies.

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the Chinese socialist revolution and the establishment of the PRC and educating audiences about patriotism, collectivism and self-sacrifice. See Clark 2012.

6 Berry 2018.

7 Liu and Rofel 2018.

8 Amar 2021; Pang 2019.

9 Zhu, Ying 2003.

10 China started its globalization-through-marketization reform with the reform and opening up policy in the 1980s. In the 2000s, China furthered its globalization by joining the World Trade Organization and becoming the "world's factory." At the same time, the Chinese film industry saw further marketization and liberalization. See Zhu, Ying 2003.

11 Rosen 2012; Nakajima 2016.

The films in the wolf warrior cycle were produced against the background of this industry trend. Since the mid-2010s, main melody films are no longer necessarily sponsored by the government but can be produced by private companies, as many commercial filmmakers and producers have seen the market potential of main melody blockbuster movies. Bona Film Group 博纳影业集团 is one of the private enterprises that is well known for its mainland–Hong Kong co-produced main melody blockbusters.<sup>12</sup> For example, Bona’s action movie *The Taking of Tiger Mountain* (*Zhiqu weihushan* 智取威虎山, 2014) is based on a Cultural Revolution-era opera of the same name that portrayed the heroes of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) who emancipated Chinese residents from local gangs. Directed by Tsui Hark, a Hong Kong director renowned for his martial arts films, the film presents a James Bond-style protagonist and grossed 880 million yuan at the box office in China. *Operation Mekong* and *Operation Red Sea*, two of the films I will discuss in detail in this article, are also main melody co-production blockbusters produced by Bona. The two film projects were respectively initiated by the Ministry of Public Security and the Chinese navy, in order to demonstrate China’s efforts to counter drug dealers and terrorists overseas. The Ministry of Public Security and the navy outsourced these films’ production rights to private companies, and Bona won the bids of both.<sup>13</sup> Instead of making the films propagandistic, Bona employed the Hong Kong director Dante Lam to produce these films in a Hollywood blockbuster modality, which is seen through the fast-paced cause-and-effect narrative, star actors and heart-pounding visual spectacles generated by 3-D and CGI technologies.<sup>14</sup>

Both *Wolf Warrior* and *Wolf Warrior 2* are main melody action movies made by the kung fu star and director Wu Jing. Portraying Leng Feng, a soldier in the Chinese special forces maintaining the security of the Chinese territorial border, *Wolf Warrior* grossed 545 million yuan at the box office in mainland China. Although the film gained personnel and equipment support from the Nanjing Military Region of the PLA, it was produced by Beijing Dengfeng International Media 北京登峰国际, Wu Jing’s film company, rather than by a state-owned film company. In fact, the production and distribution companies of *Wolf Warrior* are all private enterprises, including Chunqiu Shidai (Tianjin) Pictures 春秋时代影业, Beijing Dengfeng International Media and Hengye Pictures 福建恒业影业. *Wolf Warrior 2* was also produced by Dengfeng, retelling the evacuation of Chinese citizens from Libya during the country’s civil war in 2011 in a Hollywoodized format.

The stories depicted in the wolf warrior cycle mirror China’s ascending attention to its role in globalization. Given that main melody films always convey the ideologies of the Chinese government, it can be inferred that the emergence and depiction of China’s overseas missions as a new topic in main melody blockbusters are also a reflection of the Chinese state’s objectives. Therefore, to understand why the wolf warrior cycle films emerged and what they propagate, it is necessary to look at China’s interaction with the world in the 2010s through its foreign policies and diplomacy.

12 Bona Film Group is located in Beijing. The CEO, Yu Dong 于冬, was a former deputy section chief of the state-owned Beijing Film Studio 北京电影制片厂. The co-production between mainland China and the Hong Kong SAR was facilitated under the Mainland and Hong Kong Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement (CEPA) that commenced in 2003.

13 See two online news reports about how Bona won the production rights to *Operation Mekong* and *Operation Red Sea*: Gao Qingxiu, “Bona ruhe qiangxia ‘Meigonghe xingdong’? Yuanlai shi rang Gonganbu donglexin” (How did Bona win the bid to produce *Operation Mekong*? It convinced the Ministry of Public Security), *Huxiu.com*, 4 October 2016, <https://www.huxiu.com/article/165950.html>. Accessed 27 June 2022. Xiao Yang, “‘Honghai xingdong’ weishenme neng zheyang hong” (Why *Operation Red Sea* is so popular), *Dangjian.com*, 27 February 2018, [http://www.dangjian.com/djw2016sy/djw2016wkztl/wkztl2016djwztk/specials/djzthswy/hswy/201802/t20180227\\_4600489.shtml](http://www.dangjian.com/djw2016sy/djw2016wkztl/wkztl2016djwztk/specials/djzthswy/hswy/201802/t20180227_4600489.shtml). Accessed 27 June 2022.

14 A hot topic debated online is that as these films were projects of the military the State Administration of Press and Publication, Radio, Film, and Television made them exempt from certain censorship requirements and thus they were able to exhibit scenes of violence. See “‘Honghai xingdong’ shi zenme tongguo guangdian shenpi de” (How did *Operation Red Sea* pass the censorship of the State Administration of Press and Publication, Radio, Film, and Television?), *Zhihu.com*, 2018, <https://www.zhihu.com/question/267231608>. Accessed 12 October 2022.

## The Wolf Warrior Cycle and the BRI

### The BRI

One of the most important policies of the Chinese state since the 2010s, the BRI, promoted by President Xi Jinping, refers to building a “Silk Road Economic Belt” and the “21st Century Maritime Silk Road” to geopolitically connect China with Asia, Africa and Europe.<sup>15</sup> The BRI aims to forge a China-centred alternative to the Europe–US-centred apparatus of neoliberal globalization. One of the BRI’s major projects is infrastructure construction; China helps other developing countries to build roads, pipelines for resource transportation, and telecommunications and electricity facilities.<sup>16</sup> The BRI also includes political cooperation, regional trade, education and environmental protection programmes.<sup>17</sup> These projects, underscoring win-win cooperation, enable China to search for resources, new export markets and job markets internationally. The BRI is financially supported by the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the Silk Road Foundation, both organized by the Chinese government.

The BRI marks a major transformation in China’s foreign policy in the past decades – from keeping a low profile to pursuing a leading position in regional and global affairs.<sup>18</sup> The transformation occurred in a period in which China rose to become the world’s second-largest economy and significant broader international circumstances: uncertainty surrounding US-led neoliberal globalization following the 2008 global financial crisis, Brexit and Donald Trump’s presidency.<sup>19</sup> The BRI, therefore, aimed to construct a new globalization structure in order to continue China’s economic growth in this period of uncertainty.<sup>20</sup>

The BRI has completed a series of infrastructure projects such as railways, highways and ports in member countries in Asia and Africa so far, and imports and exports between China and the BRI countries have increased significantly.<sup>21</sup> Nonetheless, these do not mean that the BRI has proven successful. For example, given that the BRI’s decision-making team lacked experts with an understanding of local markets and project-management skills, some BRI projects were not implemented well in the European market.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, many countries hesitate to implement BRI projects or do not accept them with satisfaction. The BRI faced challenges in Vietnam because of the South China Sea dispute and the conditions attached to loans (for example, the member country has to use Chinese technologies in its infrastructure projects).<sup>23</sup> Malaysia cancelled some BRI projects, BRI dept evoked resentment in Pakistan and some African countries started to raise questions about corruption problems in BRI projects.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic postponed many BRI projects, although China sought to strengthen the connections with member countries via

15 Huang 2016.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.; Liu and Dunford 2016.

18 Ohashi 2018.

19 Neoliberal globalization has been promulgated since the 1970s, characterized by privatization, liberalization and marketization under the economic mode of the “Washington consensus” (Harvey 2007). However, a series of nationalistic policies issued by the Trump administration added to the uncertainty of neoliberal globalization, such as rising tariffs in both the US and China (aka the China–US trade war) since 2018, withdrawing from global organizations such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), and preventing global immigration. See Dueck 2019.

20 Apart from continuing economic growth, there are, of course, many other motivations underpinning China’s BRI project. For example, the BRI is a strategy for facilitating cohesion among different groups inside the Chinese state. See Ye 2019.

21 Hu 2019; Ohashi 2018.

22 Yu, Jie 2018.

23 Le 2018.

24 Christopher Balding, “Why democracies are turning against Belt and Road,” *Foreign Affairs*, 24 October 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2018-10-24/why-democracies-are-turning-against-belt-and-road>. Accessed 23 August 2021.

its “mask diplomacy” which provided medical and health aid.<sup>25</sup> The importance of the BRI, for now, seems to still largely lie in its envisioning of a new global order rather than the actual progress it has achieved.

### *Chinese film production under the BRI*

Together with this more proactive global strategy, the Chinese state raised new agendas for the culture industries, including the film industry. In 2014, a year after the advent of the BRI, at the Beijing Forum on Literature and Art Xi Jinping emphasized that culture industry practitioners should produce works that reflect the “spirit of the time” (*shidai jingshen* 时代精神) and broadcast patriotism, a primary “core socialist value.”<sup>26</sup> While the notion of the “spirit of the time” was not clarified in Xi’s speech, a significant part of it consists of the policies and ideologies promoted by the Chinese government, including the Chinese Dream, the “core socialist values” and China’s transforming global strategy. The Ministry of Culture subsequently issued a plan for developing Chinese culture from 2016 to 2020 in response to the BRI.<sup>27</sup> Coinciding with the “going out” aim of the BRI, the plan announced that its fundamental aim was to bolster cultural communication between China and the BRI countries and to increase the international influence of Chinese culture. Precisely, the plan called for a series of film and television drama projects related to the BRI. The plan also highlighted the importance of cultural activities including the Silk Road International Film Festival, which exhibits films from the BRI member countries. Apart from these specific projects, the plan encouraged local literature and art production to address the theme of the BRI (*fanrong “Yidai yilu” zhuti wenhua yishu shengchan* 繁荣“一带一路”主题文化艺术生产).<sup>28</sup>

In film and television production, the Film Industry Promotion Law (*Dianying chanye cujin fa* 电影产业促进法) of the PRC legitimized the state’s support of films featuring “key topics” (*zhongdian tica* 重点题材) – sometimes appearing as “major topics” (*zhongda tica* 重大题材) – that disseminate socialist culture and the core socialist values.<sup>29</sup> The key topics refer to the major historical and contemporary events of the CCP that convey the “main melody” of the state. The key topics vary at different times according to the different emphases of the state’s propaganda. Examples include the Second Sino-Japanese War, socialist construction and poverty alleviation, the Chinese Dream, and recently the Korean War and the fight against COVID-19.<sup>30</sup> In the years before the screening of the wolf warrior cycle movies, few official documents clearly identified the BRI as one of the key topics. However, in the schedule for developing television dramas during the 14th Five-Year Plan, which was issued by the National Radio and Television Administration in 2022, the ten-year anniversary of the BRI was listed as one of the key topics for television drama production.<sup>31</sup>

25 Mouritz 2020.

26 “Xi Jinping zai wenyigongzuo zuotanhui shang de jianghua” (Speech by Xi Jinping at the Forum on Literature and Art), *People.cn*, 15 October 2015, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n/2015/1015/c64094-27699249.html>. Accessed 2 May 2022.

27 “Wenhua bu guanyu yinfa ‘Wenhua bu “Yidai yilu” wenhua fazhan xingdong jihua (2016–2020 nian)’ de tongzhi” (Ministry of Culture notification: “One Belt One Road” Cultural Development Action Plan [2016–2020]), *Mct.gov.cn*, 28 December 2016, [http://zwgk.mct.gov.cn/zfxgkml/gjhj/202012/t20201204\\_906371.html](http://zwgk.mct.gov.cn/zfxgkml/gjhj/202012/t20201204_906371.html). Accessed 2 May 2022. The Ministry of Culture was dissolved in 2018 and is now known as the Ministry of Culture and Tourism (MCT).

28 Ibid.

29 “Zhonghua remin gongheguo dianying chanye cujinfa” (The Film Industry Promotion Law of the PRC), *Samr.gov.cn*, 7 November 2016, [https://gkml.samr.gov.cn/nsjg/bgt/202106/t20210610\\_330510.html](https://gkml.samr.gov.cn/nsjg/bgt/202106/t20210610_330510.html). Accessed 3 May 2022.

30 “Guangdian zongju bushu diaodu zhongdian tica dianshiju bochu gongzuo” (SARFT deployed and scheduled the broadcasting of television dramas with key topics), *Gov.cn*, 23 July 2020, [http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2020-07/23/content\\_5529344.htm](http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2020-07/23/content_5529344.htm). Accessed 3 May 2022.

31 “Guangdian zongju dianshiju si fuzeren jiu “shisiwu” Zhongguo dianshiju fazhan guihua’ da jizhewen” (The answers to journalists from the principal of the NRTA about the schedule for developing television dramas during the 14th

The BRI, as a major policy of the Chinese state, is likely to be addressed by film producers to gain official endorsement. Although films such as *Wolf Warrior 2* were not directly initiated by the government, it is clear that the producers of many of these films perceived the state's global strategies and the changes in the cultural industry, and thereby started to make films resonating with these changes. According to my conversation with an independent film director who works in Beijing, film producers and investors know clearly that "a new policy promoted by the government means official support and funding [for related film projects]." Therefore, "when the government issues a new policy, many people follow [by trying to incorporate related topics in their work]."<sup>32</sup>

The changing topics during Wu Jing's filmmaking trajectory testify to this – *Wolf Warrior* was inspired by his previous television drama, *Special Arms II* (*Wo shi tezhongbing zhi liren chuqiao* 我是特种兵之利刃出鞘, 2012), which portrayed soldiers in the Chinese special forces. Both *Special Arms II* and *Wolf Warrior* focused on China's military actions inside the country's territorial borders rather than overseas, emphasizing that its troops must not cross borders because China respects the sovereignty of other countries. But *Wolf Warrior 2* abandoned the topic of its predecessor and chose to depict overseas missions of the PLA. The change of topic might have been Wu Jing's personal decision, but it made *Wolf Warrior 2* a recipient of the "Special Fund for Outstanding Films" (*Dianying jingpin zhuanxiang zijin* 电影精品专项资金) of the China Film Administration in both 2016 and 2017.<sup>33</sup> The Special Fund for Outstanding Films, initiated in 1996, provides 100 million yuan each year for successful applicants to share.<sup>34</sup> Although the funding is open to all kinds of film and television projects, films focusing on the key topics are more privileged. In 2017, for example, most funding recipients were main melody films. Likewise, *Operation Mekong* and *Operation Red Sea* obtained Special Fund for Outstanding Films funding in 2016 and 2017 respectively.

It should be noted here that compared with the number of films on other key topics such as the Second Sino-Japanese War, in the past decade there were few movies about the BRI screened in theatres apart from the wolf warrior cycle films. *Extraordinary Mission* (*Feifan renwu* 非凡任务, 2017) and *The Rescue* (*Jinji jiuyuan* 紧急救援, 2021) respectively feature China's anti-drug mission in the "Golden Triangle" (an area at the intersection of Laos, Burma and Thailand) and an international rescue mission, but neither was well regarded by audiences, nor did they succeed at the box office.<sup>35</sup> *Lesser Fullness* (*Xingfu de xiaoman* 幸福的小满, 2019) depicts how a Chinese woman balances her work in a BRI project and her family. However, the film was not widely distributed in theatres.

In this sense, Berry's prediction of a new "overseas action-adventure genre" mentioned at the beginning of the article seems to be in doubt, because there are not enough films to forge such a genre. Regarding this phenomenon, I consulted a scriptwriter in the Chinese film industry, whose company had once engaged in a BRI-related project. According to the scriptwriter, "there are not many films and television dramas about the BRI because the BRI does not have significant achievements so far."<sup>36</sup> The individual director consulted above, who has also participated in

Five-Year Plan), *Nrta.gov.cn*, 10 February 2022, [http://www.nrta.gov.cn/art/2022/2/10/art\\_3730\\_59523.html](http://www.nrta.gov.cn/art/2022/2/10/art_3730_59523.html). Accessed 3 May 2022.

32 Interview with a film director, 4 May 2022.

33 See the appendix to "2016 niandu dianying jingpin zhuanxiang zijin ni zizhu xiangmu (diyi pi) gongshi" (The 2016 Special Fund for Outstanding Films provisional recipients [first group]), *China Film Administration*, 14 September 2016, <https://www.chinafilm.gov.cn/chinafilm/contents/170/1333.shtml>. Accessed 2 May 2022. For the 2017 recipients, see <https://www.chinafilm.gov.cn/chinafilm/contents/170/1338.shtml>.

34 See "Guanyu zhichi dianying fazhan ruogan jingjizhengce de tongzhi" (A notification about economic policies supporting the development of films), *Chinatax.gov.cn*, 31 May 2014, <http://www.chinatax.gov.cn/n810341/n810755/c1150475/content.html>. Accessed 3 May 2022.

35 Chu 2022.

36 Interview with scriptwriter, 3 May 2022.

filmmaking about the BRI, expressed a similar opinion. This means that the key topics for film production are not fixed. Rather, the key topics depend on the state's policies and the implementation of those policies (for example, few films presented the Korean War until the state listed it as a key topic in July 2020, due to the downturn of the China–US relationship). The current low number of BRI-related films is the result of the underperformance of the BRI in many countries, and whether this type of film will prosper in the future depends on how the BRI develops.

### Portraying China's Foreign Policies

Although the main theme of the wolf warrior cycle films is how the Chinese state and the PLA protect the rights of Chinese citizens overseas, these films demonstrate China's new global strategy through their portrayal of China's evacuation missions, trying to foster an image of China as a forceful and responsible global power. In this section, I will analyse how the wolf warrior cycle films portray China's foreign policies from three perspectives – economic assistance to BRI member countries, China's efforts in regional cooperation and China's participation in global governance. I will also analyse how this portrayal contains stereotypes underpinned by nationalism.

#### *Economic assistance to BRI member countries*

The ways in which China helps BRI member countries include investing in local factories, building local infrastructure and providing medical and financial aid. According to the BRI official website, China invested around US\$770 million in 138 BRI member countries from 2013 to 2020.<sup>37</sup> These investments were mainly directed to local energy and transportation industries and facilities such as roads, factories and cables for electricity and communications. In *Wolf Warrior 2*, the fictional African country in which Leng Feng lives feasibly represents a BRI member country, which has built its infrastructure assisted by China.<sup>38</sup> The film visualizes China's assistance through its settings and characters, such as China-funded factories and Chinese doctors. For example, during the local civil war, the Chinese navy is required to evacuate Chinese workers in a Sino-African joint venture factory that happens to be on the battlefield. Owned by a young Chinese businessman who wishes to build his career in Africa, the factory has both Chinese and African employees (the African workers are also rescued by the protagonist). The factory indicates the economic cooperation between China and Africa – China builds facilities like factories in the BRI countries, which benefits the local economy by manufacturing and providing job opportunities. For China, this cooperation broadens its markets and investments overseas.

*Wolf Warrior 2* also exhibits China's health and sanitation assistance to BRI member countries, which is consistent with China's foreign aid policy in the 2010s.<sup>39</sup> In the film the character of Dr Chen, a Chinese scholar working in an African hospital, is indicative of China's medical aid projects providing equipment and medical teams to African countries. The PLA and Leng Feng undertake a mission to rescue Chen because he has invented a medicine to defeat the contagious and fatal "Lamanla virus" prevailing in the country. The antagonists in the film are local rebels who attempt to gain the formula for the medicine and monopolize its production in order to control the country. The importance of China's medical aid to Global South countries is thus visualized and underscored on screen, although this is, arguably, a biased portrayal indicating China's superiority – the Chinese doctor acts as a "saviour" to vulnerable African people suffering from disease and reliant on outside help.

37 See <https://green-bri.org/investments-in-the-belt-and-road-initiative-bri/>. Accessed 30 July 2021.

38 Teo 2019.

39 See Information Office of the State Council, "China's foreign aid (2014)," 10 July 2014, [http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white\\_paper/2014/08/23/content\\_281474982986592.htm](http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2014/08/23/content_281474982986592.htm). Accessed 16 July 2018.



### Facilitating regional cooperation

The wolf warrior cycle films mirror China's regionalization policies under the BRI. China has started to develop friendships with its neighbour countries in South-East Asia and Central Asia from the 1980s through treaties and organizations such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations–China Free Trade Area and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. In the 2010s, the BRI served as a facilitator of further regional cooperation between China and other countries, balancing the power of existing regions such as North America and Europe and their organizations represented by the European Union and the North American Free Trade Association (NAFTA).

Although *Wolf Warrior* presents a story mainly taking place within the Chinese territorial borders, it displays China's regional anti-terrorist and crime prevention actions, as the antagonists faced by Leng Feng and the Chinese special forces are a group of transnational criminal gangs operating in South-East Asia. *Operation Mekong* exhibits both China's economic and political cooperation with South-East Asian countries more explicitly. The film is based on a true case that occurred in 2011. A drug-trafficking group operating in the Golden Triangle murdered 13 Chinese merchants who were travelling on the Mekong River. The Chinese police collaborated with the Thai government to arrest the criminals. *Operation Mekong* presents how Chinese police completed the mission overseas despite encountering difficulties and dangers. The joint law enforcement between China and Thailand in the film indicates the political cooperation between China and South-East Asia. *Operation Mekong* also showcases the regional economic interactions of China in this area through the role of Chinese merchants. In addition, a sequence in the film shows Chinese policemen disguising themselves as businesspersons to talk to the drug traffickers in order to find their leader.

### Global peacekeeping and anti-terrorism

The films in the wolf warrior cycle also exhibit how China undertakes its international obligations, such as defending global security. Although this is not an explicit part of the BRI, it is consistent with China's long-term foreign policy of maintaining regional and global security, suggesting that China is a viable leader in global governance. China has engaged in peacekeeping, environmental protection and counterterrorism under the United Nations since the 1990s. "As of the end of 2012, over 2,000 Chinese peacekeeping personnel were carrying out UN missions around the world. China has the largest number of peacekeeping forces abroad among the permanent members of the UN Security Council."<sup>40</sup> China also supports global anti-terrorist actions to guarantee regional security as well as its economic activities in Asia and Africa, for which it collaborates with other major powers such as the US on counterterrorism.<sup>41</sup>

The antagonists in the wolf warrior cycle films are either armed drug dealers or terrorists, representing the factors threatening the security of the world. For instance, in *Operation Red Sea*, China's actions for global security are depicted through the PRC's activities in countering pirates and preventing the development of chemical weapons. The film opens with a gunfight between the Chinese navy and Somali pirates who have hijacked a Chinese cargo ship, conveying the information that China contributes to global maritime security. The major mission of the Chinese navy in *Operation Red Sea*, however, is to evacuate all the Chinese citizens in a Global South country that is undergoing a military coup (the movie is based on an evacuation of Chinese civilians from Yemen during the 2015 Yemeni Civil War) led by terrorists smuggling "yellow cake uranium" – a material used to produce radioactive bombs. To get the material, the terrorists kidnap the employees of an energy company, including a Chinese woman. The PLA has to not only save this Chinese citizen but also stop the terrorists from obtaining the radioactive material. Like

40 Zhu, Zhiqun 2016, 202–203.

41 United States Institute of Peace, "China's approach to international terrorism," 2 October 2017, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2017/10/chinas-approach-international-terrorism>. Accessed 16 July 2018.

*Wolf Warrior 2*, *Operation Red Sea* is characterized by the frequent depiction of a strong Chinese military with advanced weapons and naval ships. At the same time, the film presents China's use of its military power to maintain global security rather than as posing a threat to the world.

### *Nationalism and stereotypes*

The wolf warrior cycle films aim to exhibit China's responsibility as a new global power. However, they also cater to growing nationalist sentiment in Chinese society and the stereotypes of Chinese audiences about a powerful modern China, an undeveloped Global South and a new global order in which China plays a leading role.<sup>42</sup>

The wolf warrior cycle films indicate a strong pride stemming from a rising China which has already eliminated its past humiliation. A typical scene in *Wolf Warrior* allegorizing Western humiliation is one in which Western mercenaries paint "Chinese boy scouts" on a stone when they enter the territory of China, mocking the weakness of the Chinese army. However, the stone is soon exploded by Chinese soldiers during a battle, signalling that China's military power now is no longer as weak as the mercenaries had assumed. This plot point seems to reproduce a famous scenario in the kung fu film *Fist of Fury* (1972), in which Bruce Lee destroys a sign reading "sick man of East Asia" that is presented by the film's Japanese antagonists. *Wolf Warrior's* homage to *Fist of Fury* might be attributed to director Wu Jing's early experiences as a kung fu star in Hong Kong, but these two scenarios share the nationalist sentiment that China and Chinese people are no longer weak. The showcasing of China's military power in the wolf warrior cycle, including well-trained Chinese soldiers, highly efficient police, cutting-edge naval ships and advanced technology, together reinforce this freeing-from-humiliation complex which is recognizable to audiences born and educated in mainland China.

Meanwhile, the Global South in the films appears undeveloped, chaotic and vulnerable. For instance, *Wolf Warrior* and *Operation Mekong* depict a South-East Asia characterized by gangs and drug trafficking. The drug dealers use child labour, controlling them with drugs and training them to kill, which incites fear among audiences and at the same time implies that human rights cannot be guaranteed in these areas. Likewise, Africa and the Middle East in *Wolf Warrior 2* and *Operation Red Sea* are entangled in wars and terrorism. These portrayals not only satisfy the stereotypes of Chinese audiences about the Global South but also serve as a contrast to the modern China depicted in the films. As a result of this juxtaposition, a sense of gratefulness is easily evoked among audiences with Chinese identity: they were born in a safe, developed and powerful country, unlike these chaotic areas. Indeed, this is testified to in many Douban comments on the wolf warrior cycle films. For example, one reviewer gave the film five stars ("highly recommend") and expressed appreciation for being a Chinese citizen by juxtaposing pictures of a helpless Syrian child in a refugee camp and a Chinese child accompanied by the Chinese navy during the 2015 Yemen evacuation.<sup>43</sup> The review is the most popular Douban review of *Operation Red Sea* as of July 2022, having been liked 12,200 times and receiving 3,334 responses – an indication that many other users shared the same feelings.

Finally, the wolf warrior cycle films, in which China leads regional and global governance and protects regional and global security, nationalistically envisage China's new international relations with the Global South based on the BRI. In *Wolf Warrior 2*, Africa is infantilized, in need of the help of China as its new "father," replacing the old "Western father," allegorized in a sequence

<sup>42</sup> Cai 2018.

<sup>43</sup> See <https://movie.douban.com/review/9157080/>. And see a similar review entitled "'Honghai xingdong' gaosu women, sheng zai heping de guodu shi yijian duome xingyun de shi" (*Operation Red Sea* tells us it is very lucky to be born in a peaceful country), available here: <https://movie.douban.com/review/9165052/>.

in which Leng Feng knocks a mercenary leader down and saves African people from war.<sup>44</sup> *Wolf Warrior 2* claims that compared with the Western countries, China is a more qualified “father” to protect human rights overseas. This is shown through the film’s sarcasm at the expense of the US embassy. When Leng Feng, together with Rachel, an American nurse, escape from a hospital occupied by the rebels, Rachel suggests that Leng Feng go to the US embassy for help, saying that “it is the safest place in this African country.” However, calling the embassy, she finds it closed. “I saw the stars and stripes flag on one of the ships leaving the continent this morning,” says Leng, “when you are in danger overseas, where is your country?” Subsequently, Leng drives to the Chinese embassy, which is open. A sense of China’s superiority emerges through this contrast – during the civil war, the Chinese consulate is more responsible and reliable. Scenes like this, together with the Chinese national flag and the repeated announcement of Chinese identities in the film, make sense to people who belong to and support the Chinese nation as their imagined community.

### Wolf Warrior Diplomacy: Films and Chinese Soft Power in the BRI Era

This section looks at the relationship between the wolf warrior cycle and China’s soft power. Produced in response to the BRI, the wolf warrior cycle answers to China’s quest for soft power during this period. However, as will be discussed below, these films were not widely distributed overseas, and their major audiences outside China were still ethnically Chinese. Moreover, the muscle-flexing of China’s military power in these four films seems to emphasize the aggressive aspect of China’s diplomacy in the past decade, forging a “wolf warrior” image of China. This image has been buttressed by the Chinese government’s proactive diplomacy during the COVID-19 pandemic, forging a new stereotype – wolf warrior diplomacy – in the pandemic era.

In contrast to a country’s hard power, including its economic and military forces, soft power refers to a nation’s “intangible assets such as an attractive personality, culture, political values and institutions, and policies that are seen as legitimate or having moral authority.”<sup>45</sup> The BRI contains soft power in this sense, being a foreign policy of “inclusive globalization” that focuses on developing countries marginalized by the Western world.<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless, research confirms that the influence of Chinese soft power in BRI member countries and non-BRI member countries shows no significant difference before and after the initiation of the BRI, reflecting the aforementioned drawbacks of the BRI such as the lack of experts and unsuccessful implementation in local markets.<sup>47</sup> The fact that the BRI has always been under question leads to the demand for cultural products to relieve opposition and garner endorsement. For example, one report in *People’s Daily*, an official news agency of the CCP, noted a series of criticisms of the BRI, including that it is “China’s new colonialism” and the “Chinese version of the Marshall Plan”; the report argued that China needs to foster public opinion via media and cultural products to lubricate the implementation of its new foreign policy.<sup>48</sup> Precisely, Chinese media products are expected to “tell China’s stories well” (*jianghao Zhongguo gushi* 讲好中国故事) and construct a “Chinese discourse and narrative system” (*goujian Zhongguo huayu he Zhongguo xushi tixi* 构建中国话语和中国叙事体系).<sup>49</sup>

44 Amar 2021.

45 Nye 2004, 6.

46 Liu and Dunford 2016.

47 Voon and Xu 2020.

48 “Yi guoji gezuo chuanbo zengqiang Yidai yilu ruanshili” (Strengthening the soft power of the Belt and Road Initiative via international cooperation of communication), *People.cn*, 17 May 2019, <http://media.people.com.cn/n1/2019/0517/c426843-31090771.html>. Accessed 10 August 2021.

49 See the quotes from Xi’s speech here: “Xi Jinping: jianghao Zhongguo gushi, chuanbohao Zhongguo shengyin” (Xi Jinping: tell Chinese stories well, and circulate the voices of China well), *Qstheory.cn*, 2 June 2021, [http://www.qstheory.cn/zhuangu/2021-06/02/c\\_1127522386.htm](http://www.qstheory.cn/zhuangu/2021-06/02/c_1127522386.htm). Accessed 11 August 2021.

Having succeeded in the domestic market, the wolf warrior cycle films were distributed overseas. For instance, *Wolf Warrior 2* was shown in North America, Europe, Africa, Australia and Japan.<sup>50</sup> The film was also submitted to multiple film festivals and awards such as the China ASEAN Film Festival, the Macao International Film Festival, the Asian Film Awards and the Academy Awards as China's submission for the best foreign-language film category. Likewise, *Operation Mekong* and *Operation Red Sea* were screened in the US, the UK, Australia, South-East Asia and the Greater China area including Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan.

Nevertheless, most audiences who viewed wolf warrior cycle films overseas were still Chinese or within the Chinese cultural community. One question on Zhihu, the Chinese version of Quora, is “will *Operation Red Sea* be welcomed overseas or not (like the situation of *Wolf Warrior 2*)?” Among the 175 answers, many shared their personal experiences when watching *Operation Red Sea* and *Wolf Warrior 2* in America, confirming that most audiences in theatres were Chinese and noting that these films were not advertised to English-speaking audiences.<sup>51</sup> In addition, while the wolf warrior cycle films were screened in East Asia and South-East Asia, they were not screened in Africa (except for *Wolf Warrior 2*), nor in the Middle East.<sup>52</sup> The films' limited overseas audience is evidenced by the dichotomy between their domestic and overseas box office grosses. For instance, the domestic box office gross of *Operation Red Sea* accounts for more than 90 per cent of its overall box office, while less than 10 per cent of its box office gross was earned overseas.<sup>53</sup> The situation is similar for the other three films.

Depicting China's new foreign policies in a nationalistic way, the wolf warrior cycle led to the notion of wolf warrior diplomacy, which has been used to understand China's proactive diplomacy in the past decade, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. “Those who offend China will be punished even if they are far away,” a slogan and the main theme of *Wolf Warrior* and *Wolf Warrior 2*, generated a more generalized concept of the “wolf warrior” as referring to either an aggressively nationalistic Chinese person or a high-profile and assertive China that is more likely to censure outside blame, accusation and criticism.<sup>54</sup> During the COVID-19 pandemic, this notion has been used by journalists to describe the assertive discourses of China towards outside accusations relating to COVID-19. The earliest news item referring to this phenomenon that I have been able to find online is a 6 May 2020 article in *Voice of America* that points out the changing attitude of the Chinese government towards Western criticism: “[nicknamed] by the media ‘wolf warriors’ – after a blockbuster movie in which Chinese special forces vanquish American mercenaries in Africa and Asia – China's envoys seem determined to break with older traditions of China's more discreet diplomacy.”<sup>55</sup> A Reuters report on 15 May 2020 also notes the term wolf warrior diplomacy and cites the *Wolf Warrior* films as the origin of the term.<sup>56</sup> Zhao Lijian 赵立坚, a former envoy in

50 Yu, Chao 2020.

51 <https://www.zhihu.com/question/267378568>. Accessed 4 July 2022.

52 Wang Wenhui, “Zhanlang 2' zouru nanfei zuida dianying yuanxian” (*Wolf Warrior 2* entered the largest theatre circuit in South Africa), *ChinaCulture.org*, 15 November 2017, <http://cn.cccweb.org/portal/pubinfo/2020/04/28/200001003002001/9d074b33233b4961a48ec7dad830cf5e.html>. Accessed 4 July 2022.

53 <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/release/r13154478593/>. Accessed 21 August 2021.

54 The original sentence is “fan wo zhonghua zhe sui yuan bi zhu 犯我中华者虽远必诛,” written in ancient Chinese. The ambiguity of the ancient Chinese language results in multiple versions of its translation. For instance, in a BBC news report, the slogan is translated as “Anyone who offends China will be killed no matter how far the target is.” See “*Wolf Warrior 2*: the nationalist action film storming China,” *BBC News*, 4 August 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-china-blog-40811952>. Accessed 23 August 2021.

55 Jamie Dettmer, “China's ‘wolf warrior’ diplomacy prompts international backlash,” *Voanews.com*, 6 May 2020, [https://www.voanews.com/a/covid-19-pandemic\\_chinas-wolf-warrior-diplomacy-prompts-international-backlash/6188830.html](https://www.voanews.com/a/covid-19-pandemic_chinas-wolf-warrior-diplomacy-prompts-international-backlash/6188830.html). Accessed 19 September 2022.

56 Luke Baker and Robin Emmott, “As China pushes back on virus, Europe wakes to ‘wolf warrior’ diplomacy,” *Reuters*, 15 May 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-europe-china-insig-idUSKBN22Q2EZ>. Accessed 19 September 2022.

Pakistan and now a deputy director of the Information Department in the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, is one of the representative “wolf warrior diplomats.” He is famous for his confrontational tweets responding to Western criticism of Chinese human rights practices and for tweets satirizing problems in Western society (especially the US under Trump’s government) such as the slow response to COVID-19 and racism.<sup>57</sup> This style was also adopted by the diplomat Yang Jiechi 杨洁篪 during the high-level US–China Alaska talks in 2021 and the spokesperson Hua Chunying 华春莹.

It is hard to say whether this assertive style of diplomacy is directly influenced by the wolf warrior cycle. But one thing is clear: this attitude of Chinese diplomats is consistent with the rising nationalism in China, as is the wolf warrior cycle. “[Nativist] groups are inherent in China’s globalization process and they reincarnate in different forms and manifestations. Wolf warrior diplomacy is their incarnation in pandemic geopolitics.”<sup>58</sup> The rise of wolf warrior diplomacy, therefore, can be seen as emerging from a synergy of Chinese nationalism, the transformation of China’s global strategy and the popularity of the wolf warrior cycle films.

In Zhiqun Zhu’s analysis, wolf warrior diplomacy serves the state’s goals of strengthening China’s soft power because it is a part of China’s efforts to strengthen its own discourse by directly responding to blame from other countries.<sup>59</sup> However, both this style of diplomacy and the notion of the wolf warrior become synonyms for China’s aggressiveness and new variations on the long-lasting China threat theory, thereby forging a new stereotype of China.<sup>60</sup> The reasons why the generalized wolf warrior notion cannot be used to understand the overall, dynamic diplomacies of China are as follows: First, wolf warrior diplomacy only applies to several Chinese diplomats and is subject to change in line with the international political context. This diplomacy is not China’s official policy.<sup>61</sup> Zhu noted that not all Chinese diplomats are wolf warriors and as “China faces growing external criticisms and demands for reparations over the coronavirus, it is not inconceivable that Chinese leaders may rein in confrontational diplomacy to create an environment conducive to domestic reconstruction.”<sup>62</sup> Recent news reporting has already addressed the ebbing of wolf warrior diplomacy.<sup>63</sup> Second, wolf warrior diplomacy currently remains a form of digital diplomacy taking place on Twitter and aimed at shaping public opinion, and it mainly targets the US and its allies given the ongoing Sino-US trade war.<sup>64</sup> Additionally, besides wolf warrior diplomacy, China has other, non-aggressive, foreign policies such as the aforementioned “mask diplomacy.” For example, during the COVID-19 outbreak in Europe in March 2020, both the Chinese government and private enterprises offered medical supplies such as face masks to multiple European countries, including Italy, Spain, Belgium, France, the Czech Republic and Serbia.<sup>65</sup> In addition, China provided personal protective equipment including face masks and gloves to 54 African countries and 33 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean.<sup>66</sup> Arguably, mask diplomacy aims to facilitate Chinese soft power and is consistent with the BRI, helping China to legitimize itself as a global leader.

57 Alex W. Palmer, “The man behind China’s aggressive new voice,” *New York Times*, 7 July 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/07/magazine/china-diplomacy-twitter-zhao-lijian.html>. Accessed 26 August 2021.

58 Ye 2020.

59 Zhu, Zhiqun 2020.

60 Martin 2021.

61 Shumba 2021; Ye 2020.

62 Zhu, Zhiqun 2020.

63 Ray Weichieh Wang, “China’s wolf warrior diplomacy is fading,” *The Diplomat*, 27 July 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/07/chinas-wolf-warrior-diplomacy-is-fading/>. Accessed on 19 September 2022.

64 Gill 2020; Sullivan and Wang 2022.

65 Wong 2020.

66 Shumba 2021; Telias and Urdinez 2022.

## Conclusion

Blockbuster action movies displaying Chinese military power and China's overseas actions have been a noticeable phenomenon in the Chinese film industry since the mid-2010s. Forming the wolf warrior cycle, *Wolf Warrior*, *Wolf Warrior 2*, *Operation Mekong* and *Operation Red Sea* emerged as responses to China's changing foreign policies epitomized by the emergence of the BRI. This article has examined the industrial and national environment of these films' emergence, demonstrating the complex interplay of entertainment and politics in Chinese commercial film production. A popular saying in Chinese cyberspace in recent years is that "patriotism has become a business."<sup>67</sup> The wolf warrior cycle epitomizes main melody films as well as their highly commercialized production mode in this period. In addition, the way that the wolf warrior cycle caters to China's politics by addressing the "key topics" might provide some insights into the further exploration of Chinese cultural policies and films under other key topics (such as the Korean War, elevated to a key topic since July 2020).

Regional disparities and imbalances in audience demography in the overseas distribution of the wolf warrior cycle films point to the fact that in the academic analysis of the wolf warrior cycle films the voice of audiences from the Global South remains peripheral. Therefore, how the wolf warrior cycle has been received among these audiences deserves further research with fieldwork and quantitative analysis. This research also opens up a further discussion about the relationship between the wolf warrior cycle and Chinese soft power. While the state assumed that the wolf warrior cycle could enjoy the same popularity overseas as it did domestically, these films constructed a "wolf warrior" stereotype of China and Chinese diplomacy because of their nationalistic expressions and stereotypes. As China has always been pursuing soft power, these films can be important cases for further research to gauge the gains and losses of the state's soft power strategies.

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67 "'Tonggao aiguo' bushi aiguo, shi yizhuang liuliang shengyi" ("Patriotism through news release" is not loving your country, but a website traffic business), *Thepaper.cn*, 29 September 2021, [https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail\\_forward\\_14716236](https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_14716236). Accessed 18 September 2022.

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