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Producing global China: *The Great Wall* and Hollywood's cultivation of the PRC's global vision

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ABSTRACT

China's economic might in the film industry has transformed representation in Hollywood. This paper examines how the expanded role of the Chinese market, both in terms of audience size and financing, has both reasserted hegemonic Hollywood genre and talent selection and asserted hegemonic Chinese standards. This takes the form of more genre films, more conservative casting in terms of race and gender, and the privileging of mainstream political discourse in both the United States in China. Using the case of Zhang Yimou's 2016 martial arts monster film, *The Great Wall*, the article argues that the influence of the Chinese market on mainstream filmmaking reinforces, rather than challenges, the pressures shaping choices of financing, genre, and casting in Hollywood blockbusters.

KEYWORDS

Zhang Yimou; China; Cultural Trade Deficit; Hollywood; martial arts cinema; film genre; casting

Hollywood media conglomerates are currently trying to expand their market share in China, using pathways into the country that include joint film production with Chinese companies and investment in Chinese infrastructure. Such ventures participate in a larger movement by the Chinese central government to decrease China's 'cultural trade deficit,' or the government's perceived lack of influence on global commercial culture (Keane 2006; Wei and Xia 2008; Chen and Zhang 2012; Zang, Lin, and Shao 2012; Keane 2013; Su 2014). The projects operate as part of a systematic policy-driven attempt to enhance investment in the cultural industries in China and to increase the international cultural clout of the People's Republic of China (PRC).

As another part of this effort, Chinese companies are increasing their film investment in Hollywood projects and establishing American offices. The Chinese conglomerate Wanda, for example, purchased the Hollywood studio Legendary Pictures in January 2016. Legendary Pictures in turn produced the 2016 Hollywood-China collaboration *The Great Wall*, directed by Zhang Yimou. PRC investment in Hollywood is in some ways a response to what the Chinese cultural scholar Rey Chow has termed Chinese cinema's 'becoming-visible' to global audiences, or its attainment of recognition, prestige, and influence outside China (Chow 2007, 14). Chow describes this strategy of achieving visibility as reconfiguring the relationship between the center and the margins. Terry Flew, evoking Dan Schiller, notes China's "centrality to emergent global production networks" (2018, 9). Wendy Su points to the evolution of China's increasing power in the global film industry, albeit with the caveat that the process will take time (Su 2017).

This new visibility of talent, genre, location, and financing from China due to the growth of the market has had a troubling effect: it has compressed the range of Chinese identities that are visible to a worldwide audience. In other words, China has purchased status on the global market at the price of a simplified and politically sanitized representation of China in the films it sends out to this market. Indeed, making China visible to a global audience is treated as such an important goal that worrisome patterns of representation (most notably colorism, or the privileging of lighter-skinned people, and the under-representation of minority groups) are allowed to persist in global productions.

To consider this situation is to ask: What happens when the former margins and the historical center converge? Since Chow wrote her landmark 2007 book that argued for the importance of Asian creative labor across a wide range of visual media, Chinese funding has become increasingly influential in Hollywood. Due to the United States government's lack of involvement in film policymaking, China has a strategic advantage when trying to gain ground by leveraging its market size (Kokas 2018). And yet the process of increasing visibility, while it has indeed boosted the recognition and appreciation of Chinese talent and stories outside China, has amplified China's soft power efforts to project a homogenous, unified vision of China to the world through media collaborations with Hollywood.

The Chinese film industry, once a marginal contributor to global film production, is now positioned to wield significant influence around the world. Thus, while Hollywood retains its position as the financial and creative center of the global commercial entertainment industry, China is playing an increasingly large role. In mid-twentieth-century Hollywood, as the motion picture industry became more financially lucrative, dissenting voices were easily quashed by the growing power of the studio system. Similarly, in the collaboration between the Hollywood studio Legendary Entertainment (later purchased by a Chinese conglomerate) and the China Film Group that resulted in *The Great Wall*, the financial pressures of big-budget filmmaking facilitated the wide dissemination of a politically sanitized message focusing on the importance of China's unity. We can view the example of *The Great Wall* as emblematic of the practices of representation that are emerging through Hollywood's engagement with China.

Chinese funding in Hollywood is playing an important role in enhancing the visibility of Chinese perspectives in Hollywood. This paper examines what happens when a film industry center – Hollywood – becomes a partner in its own transformation by a country – China – that until recently was at the margins of global cinematic production. This transformation is occurring in several ways, but the focus of this paper is on Sino-American collaborations on film projects. In particular, this paper analyzes one such pioneering collaboration, the 2016 film *The Great Wall*, as an example of how Chinese financing and talent are gaining visibility in Hollywood, with the result that cultural representations of China in Hollywood blockbuster films are flattening out. While Chow emphasizes the importance of achieving visibility, this article demonstrates that the types of narratives that are becoming visible serve the needs of the powerful. In China, they advance soft power goals and promote a narrow vision of what constitutes contemporary China. In Hollywood, the narratives promise market returns while leaving intact the structures of racial hegemony. This article demonstrates how financing, talent, and genre shape the representation of China on screen in ways advantageous to Communist Party policy objectives with the support of Hollywood. Indeed, these policy strictures are, as Gina Marchetti suggests, part of the metamorphosis of our understanding of the concept of “China” on screen (Marchetti 2018).

Financing

The growth of China's film market, combined with state-level policy dictates aimed at enhancing China's media industries, has resulted in an increase in market size from USD 2.7 billion in 2012 to USD 9 billion in 2018, according to reporting by the Motion Picture Association of America (Motion Picture Association of America 2018, 2013). The growth in the market can be attributed to both increasing ticket prices and increasing theatrical capacity, which in turn were driven by mandates for media industry growth both in the country's 12th Five-Year Plan and in Chinese President Xi Jinping's 2014 New Year's Day address, published in *The People's Daily* newspaper (Xi 2014). Both the Five-Year Plan and the address urged the development of China's domestic filmmaking capacity, but with strong government oversight. Indeed, as Michael Keane and Weiyang Peng have noted, investment in filmmaking to advance China's soft power goals has been a feature of China's Belt and Road Initiative investment plan as well (Peng and Keane 2019). While the amount of Chinese capital invested in Hollywood has ebbed and flowed over time, the total has increased dramatically since China's accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001. Reliable numbers are difficult to gather due to 'Hollywood accounting' practices that understate or overstate investment levels to guard profits, but the increase in acquisitions of US companies or stakes in US companies by Chinese firms combined with increased direct investment in films adds up to an undeniable growth in investment over time (Caves 2003; Daniels, Leedy, and Sills 2006; Bibicoff 1991).

New global mechanisms for film production that support Chinese investment in Hollywood-style blockbusters are one of the foundational ways Chinese film culture expands outside China (Kokas 2017; Su 2017; Peng 2018). A prominent recent example of blockbuster-style collaboration between Hollywood and Chinese talent and financing is Zhang Yimou's Sino-US collaboration *The Great Wall* (2016). *The Great Wall* was conceived as a Sino-US co-production with collaboration between Legendary Pictures, Universal Pictures, Dalian Wanda and the China Film Group. Because it was overseen from the production through the distribution phases by what was then the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (known since 2018 as the Film Bureau), it was treated as a local Chinese film for the purposes of distribution. Though it financially underperformed relative to expectations, it also far exceeded other popular Chinese-language films in the US box office (with the exception of Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*), grossing over USD 45 million.

Collaborations like *The Great Wall* can be used strategically by Hollywood studios seeking a relatively predictable route into the Chinese market (Kokas 2017). Entry into China's film market has long been characterized by uncertainty. Some films are rejected for distribution after receiving tentative approval during production and pre-production. Co-production approval, however—provided that a film is able to retain it from the pre-production through distribution phases—ensures access to the Chinese theatrical distribution market (Kokas 2017).

This approval is necessary because China has yet to meet its WTO commitment to open up its audiovisual market (Kokas 2017). The agreement expired in February 2017 and is currently under negotiation by US and Chinese stakeholders. Co-produced films can evade China's 34-film revenue-sharing import quota (under negotiation as of August 2019) and receive a higher percentage of box office receipts from Chinese theatrical distribution (Kokas

2017). The Chinese partner in a co-production, for its part, gains access to additional production expertise and, perhaps more importantly, to global marketing networks long dominated by Hollywood studios. The co-production process establishes a precedent for high levels of Chinese central government control over the types of films present within the Chinese market. Paradoxically, while this process increases the Chinese government's control over collaborations, it also draws resources into collaborative projects at the expense of Chinese domestic films (Kokas 2017).

The Great Wall was initially approved as a Sino-US co-production with Legendary Entertainment as its American production partner. The film, a martial arts monster movie set in pre-modern China, was filmed in English in the PRC and was designed to appeal to audiences in the United States, China, and beyond. Starring A-list talent from both the United States and China and filmed by producers and crew from both countries, the film created space for participation across national filmmaking cultures.

On its face, *The Great Wall* is a quintessential example of Hollywood foreign direct investment in a co-production as a way to take advantage of a rapidly growing USD 9 billion film market (Motion Picture Association of America 2018). However, something strange happened on the way to the film's distribution. In the middle of production for *The Great Wall*, the film's major Hollywood financial backer, Legendary Pictures, was acquired by the Dalian Wanda Group, a Chinese real estate conglomerate. Thus, what was initially a Hollywood investment in a Chinese film also became a Chinese investment in Hollywood. And the film, despite its middling box office performance, provided a template for understanding how Chinese outbound direct investment in Hollywood is already shaping Hollywood.

For one thing, the increasing importance of the Chinese market for Hollywood is shifting the priorities of film financiers, many of whom now seek to leverage the Chinese market to recuperate their investment. *The Great Wall*, which according to public reports cost USD 150 million to make, was the most expensive film shot in China up to that point and was distributed in the US as a collaborative product of Chinese and US filmmaking (Mendelson 2017). In other words, the USD 150 million that went into making this film is money that was not available to support other films. In addition, the film demonstrates a shift toward new types of providers of production services. The film was one of the highest-profile endeavors of LeVision Pictures (renamed Le Chuang in March 2018), a pioneering private Chinese studio that in 2014 opened its first offices in Los Angeles. China's film industry has long been dominated by state-run firms, and the presence of a private Chinese production company as the producer of a global film with a budget of over USD 100 million signals a major shift in the role of such firms within both China and Hollywood.

Yet the film did more than simply signal a shift in the role of Chinese companies founded as privately-run firms. *The Great Wall* was also one of the first major releases of the China Film Group, China's dominant state-run film company, after its initial public offering (IPO) in June 2016. The China Film Group has a rich history as the most prominent Chinese film group established after 1949. As a state-run film group, it had the major responsibilities of representing the Chinese state and party and fostering Chinese talent. In the course of the production process, the status of the China Film Group changed from state-run to publicly-traded, exemplifying a fundamental change in the types of firms that are involved in major Chinese investments with Hollywood.

Perhaps counterintuitively, scholars have pointed out that efforts to liberalize the China Film Group in fact drove it to enforce Chinese Communist Party hegemony all the more

rigorously. In 2014, Darrell Davis and Emilie Yue-yu Yeh argued that the China Film Group's efforts to liberalize its investments operated hand-in-hand with efforts to re-nationalize the film industry. Elena Meyer-Clement (2017) argued that the financial liberalization of the China Film Group intensified efforts to increase the hegemony of the Chinese Communist Party through the film production process. Yeh, Davis, and Meyer-Clement all raise an important point about the role of capital infusions and market growth. While capital and growth may increase a country's visibility on the world stage, they have the potential to stymie visibility based upon the hegemonic power structures in place domestically. Indeed, with its IPO, the China Film Group gained more constituencies to appease; it became beholden not only to the party, but also to shareholders. It is reasonable to hypothesize that the film group's greater market power, a move toward greater discursive participation in the 'center' (if we define the center of the global entertainment industry in financial terms), led paradoxically to a diminished ability to attend to specific local interests, a supposition borne out by the tepid Chinese box office performance of *The Great Wall* in relation to other Chinese films released within the same year.

Talent

Yet it is not only the financial and corporate structures of the film that demonstrate that how Chinese investment is changing major productions. After the release of *The Great Wall's* first trailer, a major scandal erupted over the starring role of the Hollywood actor Matt Damon in this film set in pre-modern China, when European presence in China was rare. By casting Damon in this role, the project reversed a common pattern in Chinese collaborations with Hollywood. Hollywood blockbusters began incorporating Chinese actors in the early 2010s as a way to appeal to Chinese audiences (Kokas 2017), albeit often with limited success. Indeed, the actors were derided as *hua ping* or 'flower vases,' ornamental objects with little use value. Damon's casting represents an incipient phenomenon propelled by China's relationship with Hollywood: the casting of major Hollywood actors in films with primarily Chinese actors as an attempt to attract foreign audiences to Chinese films. Other examples of this phenomenon include *Back to 1942* with Adrien Brody and Tim Robbins (Feng Xiaogang 2012), *Dragon Blade* with Adrien Brody and John Cusack (Daniel Lee 2015), and *The Flowers of War* with Christian Bale (Zhang Yimou 2011). The use of Hollywood actors as 'flower vases' demonstrates a shift in the power relations between China and Hollywood by changing the politics of tokenization (Kokas 2017).

Indeed, as China's global profile has risen, Caucasian male actors have headlined a range of films shot in China and funded by Chinese sources. One of the most revealing examples is the case of *The Expendables 3* (Patrick Hughes 2014). Of sixteen lead actors on the movie poster, only one was a woman and only four were men of color. Despite funding from LeVision Pictures, the film featured only one major Chinese character. While the film expanded the forms of collaboration between US and Chinese capital (Su 2017), it reified racial and gender underrepresentation. As this example shows, the influence of Chinese capital does not necessarily increase the representation of Chinese actors in global films. In fact, in official co-productions between 2001 and 2016, only slightly fewer than half of the films treated as domestic films for the purposes of PRC co-production laws had Caucasian male lead actors (Kokas 2017)). The 'faux-productions,' the

films that started off as official co-productions but lost their status before distribution, all had Caucasian male lead actors (Kokas 2017). All of the assisted productions, films that received approval to shoot in China but had to apply separately for distribution permission under the quota system, had Caucasian male leads, as did half of the Chinese productions with Hollywood-based talent (Kokas 2017). In other words, while the financial enticements of the Chinese market encourage collaborations, hegemonic patterns of representation persist.

Yet at the same time, Damon's casting in *The Great Wall* brought attention to the ways closer discursive relationships between certain centers and certain margins or peripheries can alienate other peripheries. If Hollywood is a major center in the global system of film production, then China, as this paper argues, is moving from the periphery to a more central role. But if we shift our focus to the domestic Chinese film landscape, the mainstream state-sponsored Chinese film industry acts as the center, and films, actors, audiences, and themes that do not reflect its priorities are effectively marginalized. For example, colorism, or the preference for lighter-skinned people, is a persistent issue in China, particularly in media casting (Hunter 2007; Xie and Zhang 2011). (It has also long shaped media production throughout Asia and North America; see Ganti 2016; Corbin 2013; Parameswaran and Cardoza 2009). Following the expansion of China's film import quota from 20 to 34 in 2012, there was an 8% increase in pale-skinned actors in films distributed in China and a reduction in dark-skinned actors (Hermosilla, Gutierrez-Navratil, and Prieto-Rodriguez 2017). Casting Damon and other prominent white male actors in Chinese films demonstrates China's cultural and financial power to acquire high-profile talent. But it also reinforces colorism and arguably contributes to the marginalization of actors with darker skin, many of whom—not coincidentally—are Chinese ethnic minorities. This casting choice demonstrates the perceived commercial influence of white actors when they are leveraged to increase the box office potential and cultural power of Chinese films.

At the same time, such casting choices shine a light on the biased mechanisms of power in Hollywood. The film elicited strong reactions from Asian American communities, who felt frustrated with the pervasive use of prominent white actors, even in a film set in pre-modern China. Although the casting was being used to reinforce internationalization efforts by Chinese filmmakers in Hollywood, it spurred on conversations in Hollywood about casting in domestic films. Constance Wu, a prominent Asian American actress and activist, led these efforts to speak out against racism in Hollywood, rightly asserting that it was ludicrous to cast a Caucasian actor in an English-language film set in China, a role that would have been a better fit for an Asian American actor (Chong 2017). If *The Great Wall* and the surrounding controversies are any indication, as China gains prominence, Hollywood will have to contend with its legacy of racial exclusion, even in a landscape of increasing transnational collaboration.

But it is not only the role of acting talent that is being transformed. The nature of above-the-line production talent, the major figures who guide the direction of a film's production, is also shifting. The making of *The Great Wall* involved a wide range of above-the-line talent and stars from a range of other high-profile films. In this way, it has produced a group of film workers involved in major high-profile Sino-US productions who, rather than making their careers in China or the US, have operated between these production spaces. From the margins of their profession, they are now moving into positions of visibility and power. For example, E. Bennett Walsh, an executive producer of

The Great Wall, rose to prominence through his work on *Kill Bill: Vol. 1* (Quentin Tarantino, 2003), which was shot in Beijing as an assisted production. In 2007, Walsh produced *The Kite Runner* (Marc Forster, 2007), another assisted production in China. Walsh's experience working on these two productions gave him more China-based experience than many equivalent producers with a similar level of seniority in Hollywood.

Peter Loehr, one of *The Great Wall's* other producers, made a name for himself in China as an American producer of Chinese independent films, as the first head of the Creative Artist Agency in China, and most recently as the Chief Executive Officer of Legendary East, the Asian arm of Legendary Entertainment. Through *The Great Wall*, Loehr achieved global recognition as a broker of Chinese influence in Hollywood. Loehr's professional trajectory is entwined with China's increasing influence in Hollywood, as well as with the growth of a new cohort of above-the-line professionals focused on building collaborative efforts.

Similarly, Zhang Zhao, the former CEO of LeVision Pictures, now Le Chuang, continued to expand his role as a broker of Chinese influence in Hollywood until his resignation in June 2019 (Davis 2019). Zhang's earlier work focused on popular Chinese stories with substantial commercial influence, such as the adaptations of author Guo Jingming's *Tiny Times* (2013–2015) series about a group of wealthy Chinese women's lives and shopping habits. Zhang, a pioneer of contemporary commercial Chinese filmmaking, is enlarging his footprint in Hollywood. He also is the vice chairman of the newly founded LeEco, which focuses on a broad range of collaborative Sino-US digital entertainment. Zhang's expertise in facilitating commercial productions in China has resonated with his work as a Chinese ambassador to Hollywood (The Chinese Historical Society of Southern California and Cho 2013). Above-the-line workers like Walsh, Loehr, and Zhang are leveraging a new form of expertise in collaboration, one that builds on local knowledge in China and/or Hollywood.

The Great Wall is significant for its size and public exposure, but more broadly, it reveals phenomena that are happening beyond any individual film. Chinese investment is bringing Chinese film policy to Hollywood. This transformation, however, is not occurring strictly through funding and talent, but also through the use of genre.

Genre

In her urgent call for 'becoming-visible,' Chow explicitly asserts the need for a movement beyond genre paradigms to encourage more meaningful visibility. However, following the success of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (Ang Lee 2000), despite the increased visibility of PRC nationals and Chinese locations in films, film studios have continued to rely on genre films, and especially on martial arts-oriented action/adventure or historical films from Shanghai's semi-colonial period, to sell tickets.

Defining film genre has long been a challenging exercise for film theorists. Robert Stam, for instance, has expressed concern that the use of genre as a form of analysis may yield categories that are too broad, too pre-determined, too invariable, or too standardized to be useful (Stam 2000, 128–129). While the critiques of Stam and others are important to note (Gledhill 1985; Bordwell 1991), in the market dynamics of production, the martial arts and historical genres have a clear utility because of their popularity in the global market (Zufryden 1996). Indeed, in the pursuit of building visibility through general box office performance, genre is a crucial tool.

The strategy of drawing upon genre tropes to enhance market access has been well-documented by the literature on ‘cultural discount.’ Cultural discount refers to the degree to which an audience lacking full cultural knowledge and background can appreciate a specific media product (Hoskins and Mirus 1988). When Hollywood films are intended to appeal to East Asian audiences, the filmmakers often rely heavily on content that can be understood with limited background (Lee 2008). Studios have followed a similar strategy for Asian content seeking a global audience. Specifically, martial arts/action genre films, which make heavy use of physicality, provide reliable tropes through which audiences can visually appreciate Chinese content without a high level of cultural awareness (Zhu and Berry 2009; Keane 2010).

The use of popular genres, in other words, expands visibility. Genre filmmaking extends the number of people who see a given film. Genre tropes increase the film’s exportability (Hiramoto 2012), particularly in cases of great cultural distance and linguistic similarity (Fu 2013). For all these reasons, genre films hold an undeniable appeal for film producers and audiences. Indeed, as Stephen Teo argues, within a transnational Chinese community, martial arts films draw audiences together across national boundaries (Teo 2015). When Teo first made this argument, however, the Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Mainland Chinese film markets were much more similar in size, and Hong Kong still had a vibrant commercial film industry that was largely independent of the Mainland market. Now, when Mainland martial arts films draw audiences together across national boundaries, they do so against the backdrop of Chinese economic and political hegemony.

Many Sino-US collaboration films, most prominently Zhang Yimou’s landmark 2002 film *Hero*, have a high cultural discount. This choice tends to limit the films’ potential for nuanced discursive engagement due to the constraints of their genres. Such films also provide an optimal space to reassert hegemonic political structures based on Chinese government priorities (Berry and Farquhar 2006). Indeed, with China’s increasing financial visibility has come a greater reliance on content that requires only limited background so that it can be accessed by the largest possible audience—what the film scholar Wendy Su refers to as a “market-driven and profit-seeking yet constrained partnership” (2017, 482).

The Great Wall is no exception: it can be enjoyed by people who know little about China because it does not depend on a nuanced historical retelling or an incisive cultural critique for its appeal. Instead, it presents a flattened narrative about the nature of political power in China. Like *Hero*, which argued through its narrative for the importance of sacrificing individual ambition for the good of the collective, *The Great Wall* makes a compelling case for strong borders, a strong military, and foreign tribute to the power of the Chinese state. It follows the story of two European mercenaries imprisoned behind *The Great Wall* who eventually experience the power, innovation, and loyalty of Chinese military and political leaders as they face off against literal monsters storming the borders of the country. The film, with its depiction of the powerful wall and the wisdom of the Chinese people, suggests strongly that foreigners should follow China’s lead and share their expertise with Chinese military and political figures who are enacting their beneficent vision of a powerful Chinese border.

By leveraging the visibility of the martial arts genre in the global market, *The Great Wall* renders invisible China’s pluralism. Like *Hero*, Zhang’s first crossover hit, the film uses the conventions of the martial arts genre to assert the importance of Chinese military cohesion in the fight against interlopers from the outside (in this case, monsters). Unlike *Hero*, which was distributed by a US firm but produced by Chinese partners, *The Great Wall* promotes

its vision of a strong, centralized Chinese state in a production context that frames China's nation-building efforts as part of a wider financial expansion into Hollywood: a US-run studio led *The Great Wall's* initial phases of production, and later a Chinese-owned US studio subsidiary took over.

It is not only the warlike nature of the martial arts genre that sets *The Great Wall* up as a force for asserting the visibility of the Chinese state. Part of what allows it to make such assertions in a palatable way is the genre of the historical period drama, which blunts the political message through the historical distance of the time period. While the production of historical dramas in China has often included the exploration and rewriting of national power dynamics, *The Great Wall's* portrayal of the need for a strong, centralized China to protect itself from the literal monsters at the gate and from unscrupulous Western traders makes it clear that the film is not merely a domestic political allegory. Its use of the conflict-driven martial arts genre in a historical setting has the particular effect of asserting the power of the Chinese nation over outsiders both very clearly and with the plausible deniability of over one thousand years of historical remove. Yet this plausible deniability works only for viewers who come to the source material with limited knowledge of Chinese history.

The Great Wall was not the first martial arts film, nor even the first martial arts film by Zhang Yimou, to assert China's national dominance. It was, however, the first big-budget Hollywood studio blockbuster to do so – at least prior to the acquisition of Legendary Entertainment by Dalian Wanda in the middle of the production. Thus, while *The Great Wall* may have under-performed financially, it broke new political ground by exploiting ignorance of Chinese culture in Hollywood to win studio funding for Chinese propaganda efforts.

To complement its use of Chinese martial arts genre tropes, *The Great Wall* drew conceptually from the success of another Asian export to the US market: the monster genre. Monster movies, from Japan's *Gojira* (Ishirō Honda 1954) and its later iterations to Korea's *The Host* (Bong Joon-ho 2007), have historically been successful at crossing over from Asia to the United States (Hunt and Leung 2010; Lim 2011; Lee 2011). Whereas the use of the martial arts genre in *The Great Wall* focuses on arguing for the power and skill of China's central government, the monster movie warns of the dangers of the periphery. In the case of *The Great Wall*, monster genre tropes are used to suggest the dangers posed by external influences on the hegemonic vision of China presented within the film. The entire premise of the film relies on efforts by Chinese military and political leaders (aided by Western interlocutors) to prevent alien beings from crossing *The Great Wall* of China.

The pairing of popular genres and big blockbuster studio funding levels offers a way for Chinese films to increase their overall visibility within the global market by attempting to expand the market for stories set in China. Thus, as China becomes a more prominent player in the global cinematic landscape, the image of China that emerges is a two-dimensional and highly politicized vision. *The Great Wall* demonstrates a new model of multi-genre storytelling that goes beyond previous strategies for reaching the global market.

Conclusion

Now that Chinese creative labor is playing an increasingly powerful role in shaping the narratives made in Hollywood, to what extent is Chinese capital blunting representation in the pursuit of global market success? This paper has argued, using *The Great Wall* as a case

study, that Sino-American collaborations in conjunction with an infusion of Chinese capital into Hollywood enhance the visibility of certain hegemonic, state-supported visions of Chinese-ness, while also allowing for the erasure of forms of difference that do not feed into these narratives. Specifically, the new visibility promotes state-supported visions of China that are positive and centrist, to the exclusion of other visions. In 2019's *Abominable* (Jill Culton and Todd Wilderman 2019), the animated Sino-US film collaboration told a story about urban Chinese youth while also asserting China's contested "nine-dash-line" South China Sea maritime claim. Collaborations such as this allows blockbuster films to leverage the diversity of their national interests as a cover for the assertion of a hegemonic national vision. This particular form of visibility reinforces that national vision transnationally, strengthening Chinese power hierarchies while also reifying the financially-driven power hierarchies that already prevail in Hollywood.

This paper has also argued that Chinese media investment in Hollywood, while supporting certain types of commercial Chinese films, undermines the development of diverse domestic production in China by diverting resources into collaborative projects with global ambitions. Hollywood-China film collaborations, with their emphasis on building global media brands, aim to produce commercially viable media that can compete with Hollywood films around the world. Thus, while collaborative ventures are conferring visibility and influence on China's media industries, they are also causing only specific types of Chinese films to be created for the global market. Paradoxically, the process of 'becoming-visible' to global audiences is also fundamentally transforming Chinese film culture by limiting domestic films' access to capital.

Collaborative financial deals between Hollywood and Chinese partners present the opportunity to expand the range of the financial engagement of Chinese partners in the global film industry as compared to the period prior to China's accession to the WTO in 2001. As *The Great Wall* and other cases demonstrate, the growing influence of China's film market is already manifesting itself through changing practices in financing and above-the-line labor. However, the structures of genre, financing, and the selection of talent circumscribe the types of Chinese identity that emerge through the collaboration process. If China's investment in the US media industries continues to grow, these phenomena will become more significant not only in China, but also in the global mediascape. Ultimately, this change will recast the 'visibility' of global Chinese-ness as a form of financial power. The ascendant visibility of Chinese media capital has corresponded to the redirection of resources to global films that present circumscribed images of the world. The wider range of discursive participation encouraged by China's increased financial relevance in the global film economy has strengthened not just the hegemony of global media capital, but also the assertion of China's global power.

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