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Ian Huffer & Yuan Gong

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‘Falling leaves return to their roots’? The reception of Chinese blockbusters by Chinese university students in New Zealand

Ian Huffer ^a and Yuan Gong ^b

^aSchool of Humanities, Media and Creative Communication, Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand; ^bSchool of Humanities, Media and Creative Communication, Massey University, Auckland, New Zealand

ABSTRACT

This article examines the extent to which the films *Wolf Warrior 2* (战狼2) (Wu 2017) and *The Wandering Earth* (流浪地球) (Guo 2019) might help to cultivate pride in the dream of a revitalised China among Chinese university students in New Zealand. A combination of state oversight, private capital and market forces have led to the People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) increased production of blockbuster films that promote the ‘Chinese Dream’. These films receive regular theatrical release within New Zealand but our understanding of how PRC university students in New Zealand respond to these films remains limited. Understanding this response is vital given the state’s view of these students as ‘civil ambassadors’ and ‘a diaspora in the making’. Using focus group data, the article shows how the reception of these films is complicated by the pluralised context of these films’ production and consumption, with the engagement of some participants pivoting upon issues of genre more than ethno-national identification. Nevertheless, for some of the participants these films *do* help to affirm their identities as Chinese and generate pride in a rejuvenated China via the complex ways in which these films connect to their lives.

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Introduction

A combination of state oversight, private capital and market forces have led to the People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) increased production of blockbuster films that promote the ‘Chinese Dream’ (Meyer-Clement 2017; Shi and Liu 2020; Teo 2019). These films receive regular theatrical release within New Zealand (Huffer 2020) but our understanding of how the Chinese diaspora within New Zealand or elsewhere might respond to these films remains limited. Recent anglophone scholarship on the media use of the Chinese diaspora has focused upon social media (Chen 2021; Zhao 2019), reflecting a wider movement within studies of diasporic media use from ‘from

CONTACT Ian Huffer  I.Huffer@massey.ac.nz  School of Humanities, Media and Creative Communication, Massey University, PN241, Private Bag 11222, Palmerston North 4442, New Zealand

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the symbolic to the functional registers of mediation' (Athique 2016, 79). Whilst some work on the symbolic role of film among the Chinese diaspora does exist, this has tended to be on the reception of diasporic filmmaking (Han 2018; Zalipour, Michelle, and Hardy 2014). This existing research is valuable in highlighting the ways in which members of the Chinese diaspora may manage their identities and relationships online and how these audiences may make meaning from representations of the diasporic experience. However, it is important to understand how recent blockbuster films produced by the PRC may shape the perception of China among Chinese overseas. This is in part due to the ways in which this diaspora has found itself courted by the PRC as potential 'civil ambassadors' (Ding 2015; Thunø 2017; Sun, Fitzgerald, and Gao 2017). PRC university students overseas have been particularly targeted as potential advocates given their status as 'nascent members of a diaspora or a diaspora in the making' (Han and Tong 2021, 581; Christian 2019). What role then might Chinese blockbusters play in this set of relations, if any? More specifically, to what extent might these films help to cultivate pride in the dream of a revitalised China among Chinese university students overseas? This article addresses this question through analysis of the reception of two of China's most successful blockbusters – *Wolf Warrior 2* (战狼2) (Wu 2017) and *The Wandering Earth* (流浪地球) (Guo 2019) – by Chinese university students in New Zealand.

The Chinese Dream and Chinese cinema

First utilised by Xi Jinping in 2012 when promoted to leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the concept of the Chinese Dream hinges upon the 'great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation' (Xi in Patience 2013). Such rejuvenation is seen to involve increased prosperity and a strengthening of China's global status along with strategic reform and innovation designed to strengthen the dominance of the CCP – all framed through a lens of intense nationalism (Kuhn 2013; Ni and Liu 2020; Patience 2013). The ways in which this dream may manifest itself in China's films is, however, a complicated process. The opening up of Chinese film production to private capital, including foreign capital, and its attempt to compete with Hollywood blockbusters, has resulted in a negotiation between political and commercial forces (Rosen 2012, 199). Such negotiations have partly produced a greater emphasis on transnational elements (Berry 2013), undermining the idea of Chinese films as simply propaganda. Nevertheless, Meyer-Clement (2017) also describes how 'the CCP has in fact been able to incorporate many private producers ... into networks with government officials, thus enabling a new dimension of indirect political interference under the conditions of commercialisation' (2017, 428). This is compounded by strict censorship and increasing self-censorship (Meyer-Clement 2017, 424), along with the transfer of authority over the entertainment industry from the scrapped State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPFRT) to the Publicity Department of the CCP (Brzeski and Siegel 2021). Furthermore, the market, via ticket-sales and reviews, may exert pressure on Chinese films to conform to a state-endorsed worldview due to the 'the impact that continuous political-ideological control ... over the media has on taste formation in China' (Meyer-Clement 2017, 426). Popular Chinese cinema thus emerges as a space that is greatly marked by, but not entirely reducible to, state-endorsed agendas.

It is in this context that we can situate two of China's most notable blockbusters, *Wolf Warrior 2* and *The Wandering Earth*. Both of these films have come to stand for the rejuvenation of the nation, through content emphasising China's strength and leadership, technical advances in their production, and huge box-office success that made them the first and third highest-grossing films of all time in China when the focus groups for this study were conducted (Endata 2021; Zhang 2020). Both films had significant investment from the private company Beijing Jingxi Culture and Tourism Co Ltd, but the company's stated intention to 'spread Chinese culture', 'spread mainstream values' and 'emphasize social responsibility through film as a product of ideological output' closely echoes the state's rhetoric, and the films also benefited from state support as well (Davis 2019; IMDb 2021a; 2021b; Xie 2021). This echoing of the state's aspirations is most evident in the plots of these films. *Wolf Warrior 2* tells the story of ex-special forces soldier Leng Feng (Wu Jing), residing in an unnamed African state, who is called back into action to save Chinese citizens from a military coup due to UN constraints preventing the Chinese military from intervening on foreign soil. Through his heroism (and the help of some missiles from the Chinese Navy) he is able to rescue these Chinese citizens along with African workers from a Chinese factory. *The Wandering Earth* is set in 2061 and shows China playing an integral role in the United Earth Government's (UEG) mission to move the earth out of its current solar system via giant thrusters in order to avoid being engulfed by an expanding sun. Most importantly, International Space Station astronaut Liu Peiqiang (Wu Jing) and his son, father-in-law and their adopted family and friends on earth are pivotal in averting a collision between Earth and Jupiter. This is achieved via the heroic mission of the characters on earth to restart a failed earth engine in Sulawesi, Indonesia, and Liu's self-sacrifice aboard the space station to create an explosion large enough to push the earth out of Jupiter's orbit. Whilst both films provide varying degrees of fantasy their plots and locations could also be seen to form connections with existing real-world policy, such as the Belt and Road initiative which 'offers aid, construction, trading opportunities and political friendship to a strategic array of undeveloped and developing countries in Southeast Asia, South Asia, Central Asia, the Middle East and Africa' (Teo 2019, 330). Together then these films represent the Chinese dream of international leadership, grounded in economic, military and technological strength.

Diasporic audiences

Examining the reception of these films by Chinese students in New Zealand necessitates consideration of the particular situational and societal contexts in which the 'sense-making' of diasporic audiences is situated (Schröder 2019, 157). Defined as 'global constituencies for ethnically-specific media' (Athique 2011, 1), diasporic audiences are positioned in a 'triadic relationship ... between the place of origin, place of settlement, and a diasporic consciousness that shifts between the two' (Dudrah 2002, 20). Within this set of relations, ethnically-specific media can take on a symbolic dimension, mediating if not determining these audiences' understanding of their places of origin and settlement and themselves. For example, Zalipour, Michelle, and Hardy (2014) examine the reception of Asian-New Zealand filmmaking by Asian-New Zealanders, revealing how these audiences make sense of these films through comparison to their own lives. More

specifically, their study reveals ‘forward gazing’ participants consciously ‘reshaping the self (the new self and/or diasporic self) in active engagement with an imagined sense of their future life in the new society and what that may entail’ (Zalipour, Michelle, and Hardy 2014, 328). It may be the case that such a reshaping of the self is already apparent in the nascent diaspora of Chinese students, which may in turn inflect their interpretation of the vision of China constructed through the country’s blockbusters. However, research on the use of ‘homeland’ media by first generation migrants from the PRC in New Zealand found that participants tended to ‘root their identity in their distant homeland rather than their immediate physical location’ challenging the ‘popular view that with the rise of deterritorialized online digital media, migrant identity is no longer rooted in places and is characterized by hybridity’ (Yin 2015, 562, 569). Given the status of Chinese blockbusters as ‘homeland’ media and the relatively recent arrival of the Chinese students interviewed for the present study, these films could thus encourage these audiences to root their identity in the PRC, which may in turn aid these films’ cultivation of pride in a rejuvenated China.

Athique (2011) further complicates our understanding of diasporic engagement with ‘homeland’ media, arguing that ‘the role of pleasure ... in the media choices being made by “ethnic” communities should not be made entirely subservient to explanations which portray ethnic media use as a statement of ... social and cultural identification’ (14). Athique grounds his argument not only in the diverse forms of engagement with Indian cinema revealed by his research and that of Banaji (2006) but also in the transnational elements of the films themselves, with ‘the degree of ethno-cultural literacy required to enjoy the pleasures of Indian cinema ... relatively low in practical terms (17). Such a consideration potentially complicates any ethno-nationalist role played by Chinese films and is especially pertinent to the reception of the recent wave of Chinese blockbusters given their embrace of genres more associated with Hollywood cinema. To what extent then might the reception of these blockbusters by Chinese students in New Zealand pivot upon social and cultural identification or not? Answering this question can provide us with greater insight into the ability of such films to promote the Chinese Dream among such audiences.

Chinese film audiences in New Zealand

New Zealand is one of only a handful of countries outside of China in which *Wolf Warrior 2* and *The Wandering Earth* were theatrically released (Box Office Mojo 2021a; 2021b). These films were released more or less simultaneously with their opening in China (Box Office Mojo 2021a; 2021b) as well as circulating through legal and semi-legal online platforms (Huffer 2020). More importantly, Chinese students in New Zealand are a growing sector of this audience. The number of students leaving China to study globally each year has grown from 480 in 1978–703,500 by 2019 (Thunø 2017, 187; Shuo 2020). Instigated by Deng Xiaoping through the state-funding of a small elite, the current numbers are now a product of Chinese parents’ increasing investment in overseas education as a substitute for their children going through, or due to their children’s failure in, the brutal Chinese college entrance exam, the Gaokao (高考) (Ma 2020, 27; Bai 2008; Thunø 2017). New Zealand is one of the top ten destinations for Chinese students (Textor 2021) and, with 28,588 student visas

granted to Chinese students out of almost 50,000 in total in 2017, China is the single largest contributor of international students to New Zealand (Stuff 2018). The experience of Chinese students in New Zealand is also set against a backdrop of significant migration from the PRC to New Zealand since the mid-1990s, with China being the second largest source of immigrants gaining residency (behind Great Britain) from 1997/8–2015/16 (Liu 2018, 12) and the second highest overseas birthplace of New Zealand's usually resident population (behind England) in 2018 (Statistics NZ 2020). New Zealand thus provides a useful case study for considering how the nascent diaspora of overseas Chinese students may perceive Chinese films and China.

Method

The findings of this article are based upon three focus groups conducted in September 2019, which were conducted and transcribed in Mandarin and translated into English prior to analysis. The research team consisted of a white male scholar with experience of studying the distribution and exhibition of Chinese cinema and a female Chinese national with expertise in Chinese media audiences.

Both researchers attended the focus groups and undertook the respective roles of video recorder and moderator. Participants were recruited through a snowballing approach beginning from the researchers' contacts. There were sixteen participants in total. The majority of the participants were PRC-born university students of Han ethnicity living in Auckland, aged between 19 and 23 years old, and who had lived in New Zealand between two and six years. Overall, eight of the cohort were male and eight were female.

The focus groups were designed as an opportunity for the participants to express their thoughts and feelings about Chinese films as freely as possible. For this purpose the groups were conducted in Mandarin and interviewees were provided with refreshments. The moderation of the focus groups by a Chinese national who was an insider of Chinese language and culture was likely to reduce the distance between the participants and the research team and encourage more sincere conversations. The possibility exists that the participants' responses might have been shaped by an attempt to perform for the imagined expectations of a research team consisting of both a fellow citizen and a foreigner. However, this didn't occur at the expense of the heterogeneity of the responses, as all of the groups were notable for displaying open critique of, and praise for, Chinese films and China.

The participants were questioned on a range of issues relating to their engagement with Chinese films. This included what kinds of films they watched and how they watched them. The participants' taste in film was diverse and wide-ranging, including everything from arthouse fare such as the films of Jia Zhangke to mainstream comedy/dramas such as *Hello Mr. Billionaire* (西虹市首富) (Yan and Peng 2018). A number of the participants also regularly watched Hollywood and Korean films. It would be impossible to delineate the full complexity of their film viewing behaviour within the confines of this article, but it is important to acknowledge the pluralised global media environment in which their viewing of Chinese blockbusters is situated in order to avoid overstating the extent to which their media consumption consists only of Chinese blockbusters or exists within an 'ethnic microcosm' (Athique 2016, 82). Participants were specifically

asked whether they had seen a range of recent Chinese films that had been successful at the Chinese box office, including *Wolf Warrior 2* and *The Wandering Earth*. Following this, participants were also questioned on whether they understood the concept of the Chinese Dream and, if so, what films might constitute this. Their comments about *Wolf Warrior 2* and *The Wandering Earth* have been chosen as the central focus for this article due to the depth of discussion of these films compared to other recent films, and the way in which their comments explicitly or implicitly connected these films to characteristics which have become associated with the concept of the Chinese Dream. Indeed, these two films were the *only* films mentioned in relation to the concept of the Chinese Dream. It should be acknowledged that the analysis that follows consequently provides an insight into just one component of these audiences' film viewing through terms that are, in part, constituted through the research process itself. Furthermore, given the sample size, this analysis is not an attempt to 'extrapolate the worldview of an entire population' (Athique 2016, 82). Nevertheless, through considering the relationship between the participants' reflections on these films and discourses explicitly or implicitly connected to the concept of the Chinese Dream, this article helps to develop our understanding of the role of such films in mediating the PRC government's aspirations for Chinese cinema and the nascent diaspora of Chinese students.

Analysis

Wolf Warrior 2

Despite the centrality of the concept of the Chinese Dream to official rhetoric of the PRC, the focus groups varied in their awareness and understanding of the term. The lack of understanding was most pronounced in Focus Group 3, captured by Lu's comment that 'I know the phrase "Chinese Dream", but I don't know what it stands for'. There was also confusion in Focus Group 2, until one participant took the lead in explaining the term. This strengthened another participant's suggestion that *Wolf Warrior 2* might exemplify the concept:

Interviewer: The next question is do you know what 'Chinese Dream' means?

Hu: To become a member of the Communist Party?

Wu: No.

Interviewer: What movie do you think embodies 'Chinese Dream'?

Zhu: I don't know.

Shen: Doesn't *Wolf Warrior 2* embody 'Chinese Dream'?

Wu: Let me explain what 'Chinese dream' specifically means. It is to fulfill the dreams and contribute to the revitalization of the nation.

Interviewer: The revitalization of the nation, which movie do you think embodies that?

Wu: *Wolf Warrior 2*.

The Chinese Dream is revealed to be a somewhat unstable discursive construction through these discussions, contingent upon the knowledge of the participants. However, the explicit connection made between *Wolf Warrior 2* and the idea of China's revitalisation suggests the relevance of this concept to this film and we can find implicit connections of a similar nature in the wider discussion of the film across the groups. Most significantly, the way in which this revitalisation was expressed in *Wolf Warrior 2* was a site of tension for some participants, taking the form of an excessive 'patriotism' that undermined the pleasure they gained from the film's qualities as an action/war film:

(Focus Group 1)

Interviewer: Do you like *Wolf Warrior 2*?

Xu: I think the plot of *Wolf Warrior* is fine, but there are some awkward parts in it.

Interviewer: For example?

Xu: The patriotism.

Interviewer: You think the patriotism shown is too much?

Xu: Yes. It's too exaggerated.

Interviewer: In your opinion, how to express it?

Xu: Rather than yelling it out loud, you can just do it quietly ... I am patriotic, but I feel awkward after watching it.

Zhou: Nothing wrong with the movie itself. However, it's too much.

Interviewer: What do you mean by saying 'too much'?

Zhou: The part where they hold the Chinese flag and yell is quite exaggerated.

Xu: The war part is acceptable.

(Focus Group 2)

Zhu: I didn't watch it with any thoughts or political stand. I was just curious about what kind of action film people can make in China, but I felt more or less a little awkward because of the lines. Don't even mention the part where they hold the flag in the end. The lines were too official.

Xu's qualification that 'I am patriotic' could be seen as an attempt to distinguish between his critique of the film and that of China more generally, anxious about how his peers in the group or the interviewer might judge him. Nevertheless, for Xu, along with Zhou and Zhu, the film's emphasis on patriotism is clearly 'too much' and 'too official' to the point of making them feel 'awkward'. The film's ending in particular is jarring for them. In it, Leng and the convoy of rescued Chinese and African citizens he is leading pause as they approach rebel forces besieging a town. He then unveils the Chinese flag, prompting the rebel general to call 'Hold your fire, it's the Chinese'. Rather than making them swell with pride, such overt (and literal) flag waving gets in the way of the formal pleasures these participants are looking for in this film.

Despite these tensions, the ‘war part is acceptable’ in the film and there is ‘nothing wrong with the movie itself’, suggesting that the participants’ genre expectations are met. Indeed, the film is carefully designed to deliver upon action movie expectations of ‘spectacular physical action, a narrative structure involving fights, chases and explosions, and ... an emphasis in performance on athletic feats and stunts’ (Neale 2000, 52). For example, much of the film’s running time is taken up by five action set pieces, culminating in a climax that includes multiples tanks in battle, spectacular destruction, and intense hand-to-hand combat between Leng and the primary antagonist Big Daddy, the commander of a mercenary force aiding the rebels. These sequences also involve numerous athletic feats and stunts, such as Leng vaulting over a second floor railing and catching on to a dangling chain, and the film as a whole is organised around the established action genre structure of the seemingly indestructible Leng being made vulnerable by a (not quite so) deadly virus before his triumphant resurgence (Smith 1993, 156). The participants’ engagement with the film primarily through these genre pleasures consequently seems to support Athique’s critique of the notion that diasporic media consumption is primarily an act of ethnic affiliation.

The critique aimed at the film by some of the participants in Focus Group 2 could be seen to be connected to a wider suspicion of propaganda that has been made more acute by exposure to differing perspectives overseas. Zhu elaborated on his critique of the film’s politics during the discussion, stating that ‘I think that it’s brainwashing for many people’. He also noted parallels between the film and ‘the patriotic propaganda [that] was very popular and powerful in my area’ when he was in primary school. When questioned further on the development of his more critical view, another participant in his focus group highlighted the significance of going abroad and being exposed to the ‘bad side’ of the Communist Party through Western social media such as YouTube:

(Focus Group 2)

Interviewer: What I find interesting is that you mentioned that some people are brainwashed by *Wolf Warrior 2*, but obviously you are not. What do you think is the reason? ...

Lin: I personally think because most people in China didn’t go abroad and they were not exposed to other information ... I learnt through social networking sites such as YouTube, that the Communist Party only covers the good sides. I can only get to know the bad sides from other websites.

In this instance then, the globally pluralised mediascape within which international Chinese students are situated may be in tension with the ideological address of a blockbuster like *Wolf Warrior 2*.

However, the participants’ experiences overseas might not necessarily lead to critique of this film, with the patriotic message of *Wolf Warrior 2* having resonance for some of the participants due to their formative experiences in China. This was evident in Focus Group 3 and in this particular example from Focus Group 1:

(Focus Group 1):

Interviewer: Does the film have any influence on you?

Zhao: No, because my mother used to be soldier, I always feel China is quite strong.

Interviewer: No feeling?

Zhao: I felt something about Chinese passport. After watching the film, I think it's impossible to change my passport or nationality. If you have something urgent abroad, China would come to your rescue and you can escape with Chinese passport. That part is quite real.

Interviewer: But you thought China is strong before watching the film?

Zhao: Yes. I felt that because I lived in military housing when I was a kid.

Zhao is alluding to the film's final shot here, in which an image of the Chinese passport appears on-screen along with the following words printed on it: 'Citizens of the People's Republic of China, when you encounter danger in a foreign land, do not give up! Please remember, at your back stands a strong motherland.' (in Berry 2018, 40). Despite downplaying the influence of the film, then, Zhao's comments reveal the importance of the film's ending in reinforcing their belief in a strong China initially formed out of their military upbringing. Moreover, this ending encourages Zhao not to change their passport or nationality even if they remain overseas. As such, *Wolf Warrior 2* could be seen to cement the bond between some Chinese students and the state – both ideologically and literally – despite the qualms about this film expressed by other participants.

The Wandering Earth

Whilst *The Wandering Earth* also tells a tale of Chinese leadership and strength on the global stage, it was distinguished from *Wolf Warrior 2* by one participant for being less 'obvious' and more 'international' in its approach:

(Focus Group 2)

Wu: I think *The Wandering Earth* is better ... It's not so obvious. *The Wandering Earth* just tells us what happens in China. It's an international event and everyone is helping.

Emphasis on the international nature of the event at the centre of the film, and the globalised nature of the film itself, is evident from the outset of *The Wandering Earth*. At the beginning of the film a non-diegetic narrator describes the events that led to, and the logistics of, the Wandering Earth Project, explaining that 'when faced with this unprecedented catastrophe, mankind became united like never before'. This coming together is echoed in the news media images that accompany this explanation of events. Shots of environmental disaster and the construction of massive 'Earth Engines' in locations such as Paris, New York, and the Pyramids of Giza are relayed via footage from international real-world broadcasters NBC, CNN (both US), KBS1 (Korea), NHK (Japan), Россия–24 (Russia), BBC (UK), Channel 1 (Egypt), and France 2 (France), integrated with footage from the Chinese broadcasters China Central Television (CCTV), Beijing TV (BTV) and Hainan TV of events closer to home. Following this footage, the title for the film appears on screen and we hear voices in English, French, and German bid farewell to the solar system, before blending into an indistinguishable panoply of languages. Whilst the film is primarily focussed on the efforts of Chinese characters on earth and in space, situating their efforts in the context of this 'international event' in which 'everyone is helping' appears to construct a more palatable representation of China's importance in the world for Wu than *Wolf Warrior 2*.

He (2020) discusses the delicate balance between nationalism and cosmopolitanism within *The Wandering Earth*, placing it in the context of the Chinese concept of *tianxia* (天下). As He explains:

While cosmopolitanism in the Western tradition is more a wish to free oneself from the shackles of the nation-state and an assertion of individual rights, *tianxia* in China emphasizes that ‘all under heaven’ belong to an enlarged family, and that all of its members are obligated to ensure the safety, prosperity, and well-being of this family. (2020, 532).

The fact that, traditionally, ‘all under heaven’ are ‘united in their common allegiance to *tianzi* (天子, the emperor or the “son of heaven”)’ has led to criticism of *tianxia* as ultimately patriarchal, hierarchical and sinocentric (He 2020, 533). However, He argues that these problematic aspects of *tianxia* are ‘kept in check’ in *The Wandering Earth* due to the ‘community of dissensus’ established in the film, ‘in which no one dictates orders to another through coercion or force’ (He 2020, 538). His arguments seem borne out by the comments above from Wu, and the vision of *tianxia* in *The Wandering Earth* is further complicated by the fact that, rather than being united in allegiance to *tianzi*, the characters of the film are bonded by their attachment to the earth as home (He 2020, 538). However, whilst this bond has a seemingly global dimension, some of the participants situate it through specifically Chinese terms, drawing a distinction between a Hollywood hero leading people to a new home and the Chinese characters’ refusal to abandon earth:

(Focus Group 2)

Shen: ... *The Wandering Earth* ... uses special effects to tell a complete story. It has a cultural purpose. Human is the focus of Hollywood sci-fi films. It shows how human saves the world or the earth. But in Chinese sci-fi movies, home is the focus. It’s the earth that wanders. It doesn’t say that human saves the world, leaves the earth and looks for a new home. For us Chinese, it is returning to the roots. If we can’t survive or save the earth, we will take it with us, even die together. I think that’s quite important.

(Focus Group 3)

Liu: I like *The Wandering Earth*, because it is quite different from those Hollywood films. Many disaster movies we watch normally have a hero who leads people to another place. In fact, I hate those movies. This movie kinda embodies Chinese values. For Chinese people, it’s ‘falling leaves return to their roots’. The earth is another home for us. We can’t abandon it or build a home somewhere else. On the contrary, we have to save it.

Interestingly, both of these participants draw directly or indirectly upon the proverb ‘Falling leaves return to their roots’ to explain the significance of the concept of home in *The Wandering Earth*. In doing so they reveal the importance of their own roots as Chinese. This attachment to home as something especially if not exclusively Chinese is strengthened by the acts of leadership performed by Chinese characters in the film. Halfway through the film it is revealed that the UEG (consisting of the US, UK, Russia, France and China themselves) have decided to abandon earth to what seems to be its inevitable destruction, instead using the international space station as a vessel of planetary migration through its store of 300,000 human embryos and 100 million crop seeds. Rejecting this fate Liu Qi (Qu Chuxiao) hatches a plan to ignite Jupiter’s hydrogen to blast earth back on course. His father Liu Peiqiang, onboard the space station, asks the

UEG to order people to help enact this plan. They reject this request but allow Liu to broadcast his personal plea to the world, which is then taken up, though this still ends in failure, resulting in Liu Peiqiang having to blow up the space station (and himself) to save earth. In this sense, whilst allegiance to *tianzi* may be lessened in the vision of *tianxia* articulated by *The Wandering Earth*, male characters still ultimately save the day, and narrative elements can be seen to combine with the audiences' cultural understanding to inflect the film with a degree of sinocentrism. A dream of global leadership thus emerges in Shen's and Liu's engagement with the film that may be more cosmopolitan than *Wolf Warrior 2* but is still distinctly (and proudly) Chinese.

The pleasure that Shen and Liu take from the film's perceived Chineseness reminds us of the potential importance of ethnic affirmation in shaping overseas Chinese's engagement with Chinese films even if, as discussed in relation to *Wolf Warrior 2*, this might not be exclusively the case. Indeed, even those participants whose primary pleasure in *The Wandering Earth* came from its special effects framed this through the terms of national progress, with some connecting this to the concept of the Chinese Dream:

(Focus Group 1)

Interviewer: Did any of the movies you watched convey the concept of the Chinese Dream?

Xu: *The Wandering Earth*.

Interviewer: Can you explain?

Xu: It shows the progress of Chinese technology and special effects.

Interviewer: In terms of film production, right?

Xu: Yes.

(Focus Group 3)

Interviewer: What if you have to choose a favourite one? [out of 2019 films]

Wang: It's *The Wandering Earth*.

Interviewer: Can you tell us why?

Wang: It's mainly because we haven't had this kind of film in China before. It's the first time that it could reach that level.

Interviewer: Reach what level? Can you explain specifically?

Wang: It can even compare to Hollywood sci-fi movies. At least I think it has the ability to compare with them.

The film is full of spectacular special effects from beginning to end, showcased in scenes that bear close resemblance to Hollywood genre precedents. For example, in one continuous computer generated shot the camera pulls away from the characters driving a truck, up past the enormous Earth Engines, and into space. In doing so it provides a shot of the lonely planet earth that has become characteristic of the 'cli-fi' of Roland Emmerich (Salmoose 2018, 1416). Images of Shanghai's Oriental Pearl Tower encrusted in ice also echo the use of iconic landmarks in the films of Emmerich (Salmoose 2018, 1421), and

an ill-fated spacewalk amidst exploding debris from the space station echoes the spectacle and suspense of *Gravity* (Cuarón 2013). Whilst such similarities were described disdainfully by some US critics (De Kloet 2022, 157), they seem to be a source of pride for the participants above. As important as it is to think, following Athique (2011), in a more nuanced fashion about the various levels upon which diasporic engagement with films may occur, then, these comments reveal the difficulty of separating out such audiences' pleasure from processes of national or ethnic identification. More specifically, the participants' comments reveal ethno-national pride in these technological and formal advances, with the films successfully symbolising China's growing strength to them.

Conclusion

Taken as a whole, the participants' comments provide an insight into the extent to which Chinese blockbusters might help to cultivate pride in the dream of a revitalised China among Chinese students in New Zealand. The idea that Chinese films might play such a role is complicated by a number of factors. This includes the way in which the reception of these films is situated within a reflexive reshaping of the self that is informed by these students' media consumption overseas, shifting their perspective of China and themselves. Furthermore, the potential ethno-nationalist function of these films is complicated by forms of engagement among some of the participants that seem to pivot largely upon issues of genre and form. This mode of engagement also alerts us to the specific ways in which *Wolf Warrior 2* and *The Wandering Earth* draw upon Hollywood conventions, continuing the transnational tendencies in Chinese cinema identified by Berry (2013). Following Athique's work on Indian cinema (2011), a more pluralised cultural field of production and consumption thus emerges that loosens these films ties to ethno-national boundaries. This could be seen to further undermine the already limited and uncertain penetration of the concept of the Chinese Dream (as envisaged by the state) among the participants.

However, despite these complications, there is still evidence of these films helping to generate pride in a rejuvenated China among the participants. For example, *Wolf Warrior 2* helps to reinforce Zhou's belief in a strong China and the importance of maintaining legal ties to the 'motherland', *The Wandering Earth* provides an attractive model of cosmopolitan global leadership to some of the participants that is distinctly Chinese, and the formal pleasures that some gain from these films can be seen to generate a degree of national pride. Furthermore, through articulating the virtues of these films and China in the focus groups these participants can be seen to be performing the role of civil ambassadors as hoped for by the state. In this sense, then, these films can help the PRC realise its ambitions for the nascent diaspora of Chinese students overseas. Importantly though, this is achieved not in a crudely deterministic manner but through the complex ways in which these films connect to the students' lives. Further research on the reception of Chinese blockbusters by a more diverse range of diasporic Chinese audiences would be valuable. For example, how might Chinese in New Zealand from Hong Kong or Malaysia respond to the spectacular blockbusters discussed here? What's certain is the continued need for the voices of these audiences to be heard.

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Notes on contributors

Dr. Ian Huffer is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Humanities, Media and Creative Communication at Massey University, New Zealand. His research focuses upon the social, cultural and economic relations constituted through the circulation and consumption of film. Recent work has examined the circulation of Chinese film in New Zealand, and the relationship between online film distribution, film audiences, and social/cultural distinction.

Dr. Yuan Gong is a Lecturer in the School of Humanities, Media and Creative Communication at Massey University, New Zealand. Her research areas include consumption of popular culture, global and transcultural fandom, and digital media. Her recent works focus on fans' subject and class formations through the engagement with cross-cultural media in reforming China.

ORCID

Ian Huffer  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2992-3197>

Yuan Gong  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8352-3541>

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