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**“China and Africa are friends”: Representations of Africa
in Chinese Blockbuster *Wolf Warrior 2***

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INTRODUCTION

During the celebrations for the Chinese Lunar New Year in 2018, I was living and studying in Beijing as part of an exchange program for my BA. It was my first time in China, and I thought that spending an evening watching the famous Spring Gala broadcast for the occasion on CCTV would make for an exciting learning experience. I therefore found myself witnessing what had the potential to become a diplomatic suicide for Sino-African relations on the Chinese part, which came to be known as the infamous “racist blackface sketch” (BBC, 2018). At the time I could not help but think, “is this how Chinese people see Africa? Who thought it would be ok to air something like this?” But once I managed to chase partial judgements away from my head, what was left was one undeniable piece of information: regardless of how Africa was represented in the sketch, it *was represented* in one of the most watched TV shows on Chinese soil, and this was a clear indication that Africa has entered and occupies a relevant place in the imagination and in the communication practices of producers of media contents in China. As for the “how” and “what” of these representations, they are undoubtedly a fascinating subject of research for the more and more numerous scholars who wish to look at the media dimension of Sino-African relations, and who consider the discursive and communication practices at the core of media products to be as crucial to Sino-African relations as top-down policy-making or macroeconomic decisions are.

In the past twenty years, since the inauguration of the Forum of China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in Beijing in 2000, the engagements between China and the African continent have increased greatly in a variety of fields, encompassing education and cultural exchanges, financial services, agricultural cooperation, infrastructure, and the establishment of special economic zones (Alden and Large, 2011), to the point that in 2011 China became Africa’s largest trading partner (Strauss, 2013), contributing to the phenomenon known as “Africa’s rising” (Alves, 2013: 217). Starting from economic and geopolitical considerations, but later expanding to many other disciplines, scholars have investigated the engagements between multiple Chinese and African actors. Considering how numerous the possible angles are, at present there is no consensus in academia as to how Sino-African relations should be explored.

In the literature review chapter of my dissertation, I try to outline the main features of the broader debate, and then focus on my angle of choice, that of media studies, of which I review some relevant contributions with regard to news media and, more importantly, film and television productions. Having identified a gap in research on films, as most scholars so far have analyzed documentaries or TV shows, I chose to dedicate my dissertation to the analysis of a filmic piece that has something phenomenal about it: the 2017 blockbuster *Wolf Warrior 2* (*Zhanlang 2 战狼 2*), which was reported to be the highest grossing film ever in China. In the third and fourth chapters of my dissertation, after clarifying my choices in terms of analytical framework and methodology, I delve into the analysis of the film to attempt to reply to the following research questions:

How is Africa (and Sino-African relations) represented in Wolf Warrior 2?

How do these representations fit in broader Chinese discourses on Sino-African relations?

The audiovisual analysis reveals that while the meanings constructed in the film are largely aligned with the official discourse of the PRC's leadership, which presents China's approach to Africa as "exceptional" in that it stems from genuine feelings of friendship and mutual benefit, other elements suggest the inability to overcome stereotypical and simplified visual imagery.

CHAPTER TWO MAKING SENSE OF SINO-AFRICAN RELATIONS

In the first section of this chapter I briefly introduce the main academic positions on Sino-African relations and their evolution in recent times. The second and third sections deal with the field of media studies and serve more prominently as the background for my own project: I present some relevant contributions respectively in the study of news media and of films and TV productions. Finally, in the fourth section, I explain where my study fits in this panorama.

2.1 State of the Field: Two Phases, Three Positions

Over the last few decades, Sino-African relations have not ceased to attract the curiosity of academia and the media alike.¹ The first studies investigating China's engagement with Africa appeared as early as 1965 (see Yu, 1965). However, starting from the 2000s, a new wave of interest swept the shores of the field, particularly from 2006, due to the renewed engagements of the participants of the November 2006 Forum of China-Africa Cooperation, who swore "the establishment of a new type of strategic partnership between China and Africa featuring political equality and mutual trust, economic win-win cooperation" (FOCAC, 2006a).

I would argue that there are essentially two chronological phases in the scholarly attention that Sino-African relations have generated ever since. Using the definitions proposed by Adem (2014) and Asongu and Nwachukwu (2017), the first phase is what I would define as a polarization, with pessimists and optimists at the extremes. The Sino-pessimist outlook appeared slightly earlier and prevalently among supporters of the Washington Consensus.² The mildest pessimists wonder whether the nature of China in relation to Africa is that of a partner or a hegemon (e.g. Melber, 2008). Southall and Melber (2009) suggest looking at China's engagements with Africa as part of the global phenomenon of the "new scramble" for resources, influence, and international prestige. Tull (2006) worries about the political consequences of China's "no-strings-attached" deals with the corrupt elites of some African countries, while

¹ Although there is a sort of feedback cycle linking media coverage of and academic research about Sino-African relations, I mainly focus on the latter. For a more in-depth analysis of the evolution of media coverage see Park, 2013.

² Here I am referring to Asongu and Nwachukwu's (2017: 264) succinct but clear explanation of the "Washington Consensus" as founded on USA-inspired "liberal democracy, private capitalism and priority in political rights".

Taylor (2004: 99) goes as far as to state that Chinese engagement with Africa “almost certainly does not contribute to the promotion of peace, prosperity and democracy on the continent”. The most extreme describe China as a neo-colonial power feeding off Africa’s rich mineral and agricultural resources (e.g. Naidu and Davies, 2006; Daly, 2008); and even as a threat to the hegemony of the USA (see Rogers, 2007).

In response to these “attacks” emerge the optimists, most of them Chinese scholars who, in line with the Chinese official discourse, avoid mentioning any tension or strain and insist that with the intensification of Sino-African engagements, trade is growing, economies are developing, and everyone is benefitting (Marton and Matura, 2011). These researchers vigorously present China’s engagement with Africa as a “Good Thing” to which Africans themselves have consented, as Strauss (2013: 157) reports. Some Chinese scholars interrogated on the matter by Hanauer and Morris (2014: 22-23) pointed out that if problems arise, they “should be solved by Africans themselves, free from outside intervention and imposition of values, judgment and ideology”.

Nevertheless, scholars as early as in the 2000s have started to advocate for the necessity of more nuanced and honest perspectives (e.g. Mawdsley, 2007; Large, 2008), paving the way for veritable operations of “myth-busting”. It has become of common agreement that early research, by mostly dealing with the Chinese side, often neglects the factor of African agency. Moreover, the uncritical reliance on macroeconomic data and on quantitative analysis, motivated by the fact that the majority of these studies belong to the fields of international relations and economics, produces simplified pictures of “China” and “Africa” as monolithic and static entities. More and more scholars have recognized that pessimist positions, echoing the general trend of Western media in the early 2000s of speculating on the effects of the global rise of China (the so-called “yellow peril” journalism), are but the manifestation of anxiety on the part of Western commentators. As Hirono and Suzuki (2014: 445) put it, “the rise of an Asian power is implicitly seen as a ‘unique’ and ‘unknown’ development that would somehow threaten the moral fabric of the international order that has historically been constructed and dominated by the West”.

The optimist position has been thoroughly questioned too: the type of narrative that emerges

from it constitutes a form of simplification that does not clarify who the winners are or what is at stake (Strauss, 2013). While there is substantial research proving that China and Africa have reaped the (mostly economic) benefits of their intensifying exchanges, it is impossible to predict whether these positive dynamics will perpetuate forever. Furthermore, although China was not implicated in the colonial domination of Africa in the past, there is no guarantee that the leadership will not conjure some sort of “colonialism with Chinese characteristics” in the future (Adem, 2014).

The myth-busting efforts have led to the second phase, that of the dilution of the debate, in which I believe we still are today. Polarized views have not entirely disappeared: some are convinced that China is either building an empire in Africa (e.g. French, 2014) or planning to conquer the world by means of the “silent army” of Chinese migrant workers in Africa (see Cardenal and Araújo, 2014). Just like others feel the need to clarify that there is no such thing as neocolonialism on the Chinese part (for example Addis and Zhu, 2018). However, it seems that the prevailing scholarly attitude is a “middle way”, or what Asongu and Nwachukwu (2017) define as accommodation school. Adem (2014: 95) explains this position as follows: “Between the two divergent views are those sitting on the fence for the time being, the Sino-pragmatists, who, although less sanguine about the potential outcome of China-Africa relations, are willing to reserve judgment until the dust settles”.

Free from aprioristic judgements, at present scholars tend to reject generalizations and simplifications: they focus on specific case studies, explore methodologies other than quantitative analysis, and dedicate their research to a new array of actors. For instance, Alves (2013) analyzes the hard and soft impacts of infrastructure-for-resources loans, conceived by the Chinese leadership as one of the practical tools to achieve the rhetorical objective of the “win-win” cooperation. Schmitz’s (2018) article based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in China and Angola (China’s largest African trading partner) aims at revealing how different Chinese actors conceptualize Chinese presence in Africa. Sautman and Yan (2007; 2009), after uncovering the political motives behind the systematic negative portrayal of Sino-African relations in Western media, go on to investigate African perceptions of the continent’s links with China—and find that the opinions are in fact “variegated and complex” (2009: 729). Lee’s

(2009) exploration of the relations between Chinese managers and African workers in two China-sponsored infrastructural projects reflects the shift in scholarship from the analysis of government policies to the multiplicity of agents involved in these exchanges, giving voice to the people rather than strictly focusing on the elite.

In conclusion, it seems that the “discourse of fear” (Alden, 2007: 19) that surrounded Sino-African relations in earlier times is slowly but surely dissipating. As Strauss (2013: 158) puts it, there is “no dominant framework or narrative for conceptualizing engagements between China and Africa in the twenty-first century”. I see this fact as mostly positive: it creates spaces to fill with rigorous research. Rather than attempting to encapsulate in the constraints of an essay or a report what is going on between almost three billion people spread across two continents, we can look at the field as an interdisciplinary continuum, to which the individual researcher can only but contribute with a small block of content. Through my work, I intend to contribute with my own small block to this continuum.

2.2 On the Page: Sino-African Relations in News Media

Despite the extensive media coverage of Sino-African relations in recent years, and despite the major role media outlets play in shaping opinions about the nature of these relations, media relations between China and Africa are still a “story largely untold” (Van Staden, 2013: 4). Since African media presence in China is virtually non-existent (Wu, 2012: 22), most of the research so far has focused on the expansion of Chinese media in Africa, particularly with regard to journalism and news media. Scholars generally agree that in recent years China’s media engagement with the African continent, be it in the form of infrastructural assistance, investments, training, or content production, responds to the agenda of building a positive image of China so as to expand its influence on the global stage: in other words, it is a deliberate form of soft power.³

Li and Rønning (2013) posit that the conversation on soft power in China started when the translation of Joseph Nye’s “Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power” began

³ To briefly quote Nye’s (2004: x) simple and straightforward definition, soft power is “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments. It arises from the attractiveness of a country’s culture, political ideals, and policies”.

circulating in the country in 1992. The authors claim that Chinese scholars, when confronting Nye's theory, "distinguish American soft power, which they label as hegemonic assimilation and cultural imperialism, from Chinese soft power, which they characterize as non-aggressive but generically reflexive and benign" (Li and Rønning, 2013: 103). Chinese conceptualization of media as a tool of soft power seem to be confirmed by the Beijing Action Plan written during the FOCAC 2006, which states that both Chinese and African sides have to provide "comprehensive and objective news coverage of the other side" and to "play a positive role in enhancing mutual understanding and friendship" (FOCAC, 2006b).

Wekesa (2017) clarifies that Africa is one of the recipients, but not the only one nor the most significant one, in the many ramifications of Chinese media's "going out" strategy; while Zhang (2013: 82) goes as far as to define Africa as the "testing ground" for the leadership-sanctioned media expansion, which is part of the broader quest to "showcas[e] China's soft power and challeng[e] the perceived Western-centric world order". In a similar fashion, some have expressed concern over what an exportation of the "Chinese model" could mean for African media systems in terms of freedom of speech, censorship, and mediatic control (see Kurlantzick, 2007; Farah and Mosher, 2010). In response to this, Ngomba (2011) seems very convinced that it is unlikely that China will become the new model to follow in the still largely Western-oriented mediascapes of Africa any time soon.

Gagliardone (2013: 29), aiming to look at China's media engagements with Africa in terms of original contributions, lucidly notes that the Chinese leadership is trying to play the role of a persuader, to "win the hearts and minds" of people not by directly portraying itself in a positive light, but rather by introducing a new image of Africa that breaks with the dominant narrative of the "hopeless continent" in global media. Others have seen this quest of Chinese media outlets for positive journalism as part of the contra-flow movement, i.e. the broader initiative of non-Western media outlets to offer diverse and inclusive news reports (see Marsh, 2016; Li, 2017). An attempt to interrogate African (more precisely South African) audiences to assess whether state-owned media outlets are succeeding at spreading positive images of China and Sino-African relations can be seen in Gorfinkel et al.'s (2014) study.

Nevertheless, as Wasserman (2018) states, there is not enough empirical data to demonstrate

the actual impact Chinese media have on Africa, African media, and African audiences. The author prefers to put under the spotlight African journalists, finding that their attitude to Chinese media sources is not uniform, with some of them using dominant Western outlets as reference while others pick Chinese sources, based on the angle they need to give to their reports. All in all, as Wu (2012: 24) synthesizes, through the interactions and in some instances collaborations with Chinese media outlets, African actors are gaining “the capacity to create [their] own content and an alternative platform to tell Africa’s story and to view China’s story”.

Another, less explored, angle of research, is the media coverage of Africa (and of Sino-African relations) by Chinese domestic media outlets for Chinese audiences. To this end, Zheng (2010) compares representations of Africa in two Chinese news media outlets and finds that the one targeting domestic audiences gives more space to African voices, in order to convey the idea that equality and friendship are the principles underlying Sino-African relations. Similarly, Li and Rønning (2013) analyze how Chinese news media have reported on Africa in recent years and try to determine the effects of the expanding media coverage of Africa on Chinese readers’ perceptions. According to the authors, Chinese leaders have been working on “spreading, in China, the value of cooperating with Africa. Among the propaganda tasks, defining a strategic partnership with Africa and stimulating the public’s interest in Africa, rank top of the list” (2013: 118-119).

The problem with the overfocus on journalism and textual analysis is that it excludes from the equation other kinds of media as well as the audio and visual dimensions, with the result that these aspects are comparatively under-researched. The reliance on soft power as a theoretical framework, moreover, may lead to putting the Chinese government at the center while neglecting other actors (Jedlowski and Rösenthaller, 2017). Some scholars have tried to bypass these issues by investigating social media, to shed light on how the Chinese public feels about Sino-African relations. For example, Wu’s (2013) study centers around the tension between social media as a tool for “digital diplomacy” and as a site of expression of public sentiment, thus shifting the focus to the relations among citizens of China and African countries. Van Staden and Lu (2013) investigate the role social networking plays in mediating migration and business encounters of Chinese migrants in Africa. Nevertheless, despite the attractiveness

of social media as a subject of analysis in that it puts under scrutiny actors other than the Chinese leadership, the downside is once again the primacy of textual materials. Fortunately, some scholars have bridged this gap by dedicating their research to audiovisual materials.

2.3 *On the Screen: Audiovisual Representations of Sino-African Engagements*

Cooperation in film and TV production as a crucial point in bilateral agendas appeared only in the Action Plan of the FOCAC V in 2012 (FOCAC, 2012), and was confirmed during the 2013 China-Africa Media Forum, which promoted Sino-African cooperation “in television production, including agreements on talent training and codeveloping television dramas” (Ran, 2016: 57). This might explain why research on representations of Africa in Chinese media other than the journalistic realm is comparatively scarce.

Martha Saavedra (2009) analyzes the 2004 Hong Kong-produced⁴ soap opera *The Last Breakthrough* (*Tianya Jiayi* 天涯俠医), finding that it promotes an ideal of Sino-African relations as “enlightened humanitarianism” (2009: 762). The plot revolves around a team of Hong Kong-based doctors and nurses who fly to Kenya to assist the local population. Poverty and backwardness are never politicized, but rather presented as the result of ignorance and superstition that can be overcome by acquiring technological knowledge—which lies in the generous hands of the Chinese doctors. The relations are therefore constructed along what I would define as a “magnanimous benefactor/needy recipient” paradigm, rather than equality. The series, however, makes efforts to portray some novel and frankly quite advanced themes, namely the necessity to understand and learn from the values and culture of the local community, and the diversity of the peoples of Kenya: Africa is not represented as an amorphous entity, but as a defined geopolitical body with its multiple and varied realities. Surprisingly, given the documented anxieties about sexual and amorous encounters between Africans and Chinese (see Shen, 2009), there is even an intercultural marriage between one of the (male) Chinese doctors and the daughter of a prominent figure in the local community. All in all the series oscillates between aspects of novelty that the author attributes to a “Chinese gaze”, and elements similar

⁴ Although the series is not produced in mainland China, I chose to include Saavedra’s study because, as the author herself points out, the series does not problematize nor delve into the political aspects of the relations between Hong Kong and mainland China (Saavedra, 2009: 773-774).

to the stereotypical Western depictions of Africa as “backwards with pockets of suffering that call for a humanitarian response and allow for personal redemption” (Saavedra, 2009: 774).

Madrid-Morales and Gorfinkel (2018) analyze the documentary series *Faces of Africa*, broadcast from 2012 by CGTN Africa for African and global audiences. The series seems to be the perfect site to examine the dynamics underlying cross-cultural cooperation, as its production required the negotiation between the contracted Kenyan and South African filmmakers and the content supervisors from the Chinese state-sponsored media outlet in “crafting a hybrid Sino-African narrative on contemporary Africa” (2018: 918). By combining content analysis and structured interviews, the authors find that compared to news media coverage (of both Chinese and global news outlets), the portrayal of African people in *Faces of Africa* is more humane and positive. As the members of the crew pointed out when interviewed, it was necessary to find “softer angles” to counterbalance negative representations that are prevalent in coverage by other media organizations (ibid.: 923). The show is proof that state-owned media outlets are (or want to be seen as) ready to create their narrative on contemporary Africa in a way that is hopefully better but at least at the same level as the rest of the globe.

Among the products targeting domestic audiences, Ferry (2012) analyzes *Forever Africa* (*Yongyuan de Feizhou* 永远的非) and *A Passage to Africa* (*Zoujin Feizhou* 走进非洲) in an attempt to explore how soft power is “cultivated domestically” (Ferry, 2012: 206). *Forever Africa*, a 12-part television drama produced by CCTV in 2000, has a similar subject to *The Last Breakthrough*: a team of Chinese doctors fighting an infectious disease in Africa. The key differences are that *Forever Africa*, although filmed in Tanzania, is set in an unspecified African country and adopts stereotypical and reductionist depictions of Africans as tribal, backwards, and potentially cannibalistic. Nor is love between Africans and Chinese possible, although the way human relations are constructed suggests respect and a certain degree of equality. In addition, there is a deliberate juxtaposition of Chinese versus Western approaches to Africa, embodied in the character of a French doctor who, unlike his Chinese colleagues, makes no effort in trying to connect with the local community and is exclusively moved by self-interest. Ferry posits that, despite the presence of themes of mutual benefit and friendship, staples of the PRC’s narratives on Sino-African relations, the focus is on “China’s technological advancement

and its crucial humanitarian presence in global flows” (ibid.: 210).

The 2003 travel documentary *A Passage to Africa* goes in a similar direction: the “civility, social life and economic development, alongside the land’s natural beauty and animal world” (ibid.: 215) that the documentary displays serve as a pretext for spectators to fantasize about their own potential mobility as global citizens. Domestic spectators can identify with the ideal of a Chinese citizen actively participating in the flows of global capitalism, while emphasizing that China’s cultural values are inherently and traditionally humane and respectful of other cultures. The proposal of an “inward-looking” soft power as a theoretical framework is very successfully executed in Giovanna Puppini’s (2017) analysis of the first episode of the 2011 documentary series *African Chronicles* (*Feizhou Jishi* 非洲纪事). Puppini (2017: 132) believes that national media, through the images they construct for domestic audiences, play a fundamental role in “manufacturing consent and guaranteeing social stability”. She conducts a thorough social semiotic analysis of the material, with the goal to explore Sino-African “mediated relationships”, which she conceptualizes, making use of Thompson’s (2005) definition, as “new forms of action and interaction and new kinds of social relationships, intrinsic to their taking place within the media” (Puppini, 2017: 134-135). Her findings reveal a characteristic of the official rhetoric of the PRC on China-Africa engagements that has persisted throughout history: the idea of an indissoluble “emotional bond” founded on similar past experiences and common fates. It is the sphere of emotions that glues together old and new rhetoric, allowing for continuity and impeding the collapse of Chinese identity vis-à-vis the changing forms of engagement of the PRC with Africa.

2.4 *Where Does My Project Fit in This Scenario?*

Most of the authors that I mentioned in the previous section analyze television materials, with the underlying assumption that state-sanctioned television content best allows to investigate Chinese narrations of Sino-African engagements for Chinese use and consumption, and to gauge how official rhetoric is rendered through popular media forms.

Conversely, despite the appearance of Africa in several Chinese film productions since the

1990s,⁵ there is a considerable gap in related research. Furthermore, the use of soft power as a framework, by suggesting a top-down way to look at media products, fails to acknowledge that the narrations constructed and transmitted through media are the result of subtler processes of negotiations between “the top” and media practitioners. With my thesis, on the one hand, I wish to position myself with the scholars who are interested in Sino-African “mediated relationships”, particularly in the audiovisual dimension. At the same time, however, I wish to investigate what happens when Africa appears in commercial products that are not directly state-sanctioned, nor intended for television broadcast: for this reason, I chose the 2017 blockbuster film *Wolf Warrior 2* as the audiovisual material for my analysis, with the aim of exploring how Africa and Sino-African relations are represented in the film, and to try to assess how these representations relate to broader narratives on these matters in China.

⁵ Saavedra (2009) provides some titles: *Crazy Safari* (*Feizhou Heshang* 非洲和尚, 1991), *Crazy in Hong Kong* (*Heung Gong Wun Fung Kwong* 香港也瘋狂, 1993) and *An African Superman/The Gods must be Funny* (*Feizhou Chaoren* 非洲超人, 1994).

CHAPTER THREE
PREPARING THE GROUND FOR THE ANALYSIS:
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

Media scholar Van Staden (2013: 6) exhorts researchers of Sino-African relations to “immerse themselves in media” with the right tools, i.e. those which allow to “sift through the masses of media produced every day in order to clarify what is being expressed” (ibid.). In the first section of this chapter I introduce the theoretical tools that helped me in my “immersion”, while in the second I present the practical tools.

3.1 Discourse Theory and Social Semiotics as Frameworks for the Study of Media

Drawing from the works of the forefather of discourse theory, French philosopher Michel Foucault, Myra MacDonald (2003: 1) defines discourse as “a system of communicative practices that are integrally related to wider social and cultural practices, and that help to construct specific frameworks of thinking”. Our understanding of the world, in other words, is shaped by ideas that circulate in society through communication and the interaction of a variety of actors. Yet these ideas are not eternal nor unchangeable: Foucault dedicated part of his intellectual activity to explore the evolution of discourse in several fields of human experience over time, for example crime and punishment and the consequent implications in Western penal systems (1977), and sexuality (1979). Indeed, as MacDonald posits, discourse is best understood not as fixed, but rather as a “*process* of making meaning” (2003: 1, emphasis in the original). It is not in my interest to analyze the diachronic evolution of Chinese discourses on Sino-African relations,⁶ as I conducted a micro-analysis of a specific contemporary cultural product. What is important to mention, however, is that from this process of making and communicating meanings emerge the so-called “hegemonic discourses”, that is, “the dominant viewpoint(s) throughout society, kept stable by political power dynamics” (ibid.: 32), which ultimately determine the way people act and relate to each other.

But what do media have to do with all this? According to MacDonald, “the concept of discourse is sympathetic to the notion that the media help to construct versions of reality, and that these

⁶ For some examples of scholars (although not from the field of media studies) who have attempted to do so, see Alden and Large, 2011 and Strauss, 2013.

constructions are always open to contest” (ibid.: 16). It is important to stress the keyword “help”: media practitioners, in general, do not invent new discourses, but rather they “[maneuver] a way through pre-existing and competing discourses” (ibid.: 2). Such a notion seems particularly relevant in China, where media content is usually subjected to an array of control and censorship mechanisms.⁷

Since the “versions of reality” that media help construct and transmit are constituted not only of text, but also of images and sounds, an additional framework one can rely on is semiotics. Semiotics is primarily concerned with exploring the meanings constructed and conveyed in texts (Berger, 1998: 16),⁸ but on a broader level it can be (and has been) applied to anything that “communicates something”, including still or moving images. Of course, it is humans who are on both ends of the communication process: humans are producing, but also receiving, interpreting, and consuming meanings. Social semiotics not only highlights the material, social, and political implications of these processes, but also acknowledges that “the analyst’s own reading position is likely to guide [their] interpretations” (Iedema, 2004: 6). This can be seen as a limitation but also as a strength: keeping in mind that my “social, ethnic, economic, gender, and knowledge backgrounds” (ibid.) can engender biases in my interpretation served as an important critical check throughout the analysis.

3.2 *From Theory to Practice: Conducting an Audiovisual Analysis*

To single out and deconstruct the discourses in the film, I decided to conduct an audiovisual analysis, which is based on the description, explanation, and interpretation of images and sounds. In order to make the process more orderly and systematic, it is common for scholars to break their material of choice into units: for example, Iedema (2004) proposes an approach based on six levels hierarchically distributed from the smallest (the frame), to the broadest (the work as a whole). In the preparatory stage of my analysis, I preferred to follow the example of Schneider (2012) in dividing the material into sequences. Schneider quotes William Phillips’s definition of a sequence as “a series of related consecutive scenes, perceived as a major unit of

⁷ For an overview of how these mechanisms work in China, see Schneider, 2012: 266-289.

⁸ More precisely, semioticians look at signs, which are, in famous semiotician Umberto Eco’s words, something that “on the grounds of a previously established social convention, can be taken as something [referent] standing for something else [object] to someone else [interpretant]” (Eco, 1979: 16, quoted in Schneider, 2012: 228).

a narrative film” (2002: 554; quoted in Schneider, 2012: 245). Looking at sequences allows to observe the flow of the narration and its dynamism, to keep track of the changes in space and time or character development, and to identify the discourses that the narration deploys. Excluding the film credits, I found fifty-eight sequences, which I arranged into a sequence protocol,⁹ taking note of the length, the locations, the characters involved, the music,¹⁰ the main events of each sequence, and the discourses¹¹ that I identified. I marked with different colors the sequences that offered visual or verbal representations of Africa and/or of Sino-African relations and proceeded to look at smaller units, or shots, that is “an uninterrupted strip of exposed motion-picture film or videotape that presents a subject, perhaps even a blank screen, during an uninterrupted segment of time” (ibid.: 555; quoted in Schneider, 2012: 251).

I extracted the shots I deemed most interesting and organized them in protocol tables, which made easily available for analysis visual signs (such as the camera work¹² or the *mise-en-scène*¹³) as well as acoustic and verbal signs. As for the verbal signs, I drew from the official subtitles in Mandarin and in English on the version of the film available on the Chinese streaming platform Youku.¹⁴ After preparing the material, I went on to write down my observations, which I then reorganized in what became the analysis chapter.

⁹ Due to space constraints, I could not include the full protocols here; some samples are available in the Appendix. In the analysis chapter I made use of Figures to provide the reader with visual references.

¹⁰ I ended up not attributing much importance to the music, as I found that the same few melodies that alternate each other in accompanying the plot do not add much to the meanings, but simply mark the various degrees of heroism of the protagonist, or of danger of the situation.

¹¹ To give a few examples, I categorized them with labels such as “Africa as dangerous”, “Africa as sick”, “Africa as wilderness”, “Sino-African friendship (macrolevel)”, “Sino-African friendship (microlevel)”.

¹² For this aspect, I heavily relied on Berger, 1998: 33-34 and Schneider, 2012: 253.

¹³ *Mise-en-scène* is “the director’s control over what appears in the film frame [...]: setting, lighting, costume and makeup, and staging and performance” (Bordwell and Thompson, 2013: 113).

¹⁴ The film is fully accessible at the link https://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XMza4OTA4OTQyMA==.html for users with a premium account on Youku (last access 05/05/2020).

CHAPTER FOUR “CHINA AND AFRICA ARE FRIENDS”? ANALYZING *WOLF WARRIOR 2*

In the present chapter, after briefly introducing the film and its synopsis (Section 4.1), I proceed to discuss the content focusing on the representations of Africa (Section 4.2) and of Sino-African relations (Section 4.3 and 4.4). I also dedicate a section (4.5) to the character of Leng Feng and what he stands for.

4.1 *Propaganda Film or Hollywood Blockbuster? About Wolf Warrior 2*

With a whopping \$643.7 million in ticket sales, *Wolf Warrior 2* (*Zhanlang 2* 战狼 2) is the highest-grossing film ever at the Chinese box office, a record it accomplished in only twelve days since its release on 27th July 2017 (Papish, 2017). The film was co-written, co-produced, and directed by Wu Jing, who is also the lead actor. It was conceived as a sequel to the 2015 *Wolf Warrior*, although the subject is different in that it crosses the geographical boundaries of the PRC. After being discharged from the PLA, former soldier Leng Feng finds himself in an African country at a time where anti-government uprisings and the spread of a deadly virus are putting at risk the lives of locals and of Chinese nationals residing in the country. While looking for clues on the disappearance of his former lover Long Xiaoyun, Leng Feng ends up embarking on a mission to evacuate a Chinese Medical Team and the workers of a Chinese-investment factory, recruiting on the way Chinese-American Doctor Rachel Smith and an African child named Pasha, whom he saves from an attack to the local Chinese-investment hospital. Thanks to his spirit of sacrifice, courage, and strength, Leng Feng manages to defeat the evil European mercenary group whom the rebels have contracted, and to save the workers.

Judging from the SARFT¹⁵ banner that immediately appears on the screen upon pressing “play”, testifying that the film received the metaphorical stamp of approval from the government,¹⁶ I would be tempted to hypothesize that the meanings constructed in it are not in

¹⁵ The State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT) is an official institution of the PRC which supervises and regulates the production and distribution of radio, film, and television content. For an explanation of its internal structure, regulations, and functioning, see Schneider 2012: 266-275; for an overview of censorship mechanism see Schneider, 2012:155-158.

¹⁶ The same cannot be said for the sequel *Wolf Warrior 3*, firstly announced in 2017 and later canceled, allegedly after the issue of a crackdown on films with representations of China as aggressive or with excessively patriotic themes, which could attract foreign criticism and affect China’s reputation (Maoying Wenyu, 2018).

rupture with the Chinese hegemonic discourses on Sino-African relations. However, prior to watching the film I happened to read the opinion of film critic Dong Shu, who noted that the piece, following Hollywood-style storytelling, looks nothing like the typical state-commissioned propaganda film (Kuhn, 2017). This could be explained by the fact that the film is “produced by a team that included Hollywood directors like the Russo brothers [...] as advisers” (Qiu, 2018). Indeed, Yao (2017) reports that in an interview Wu Jing himself implied the film has characteristics of both patriotic films and commercial blockbusters. *Wolf Warrior 2* is thus interesting to analyze as the product of negotiation between what the censors would consider as acceptable, i.e. the top-down “accepted truths” about Sino-African relations, and the personal rendition of these truths by a director (a private individual) who reportedly had the goal of making a commercial product.

4.2 Representations of Africa: What Is Shown and What Is Said

The first point that deserves to be discussed is the setting. Throughout the film there is no clear reference to the specific African country where the story unfolds: whenever a new location is shown, the onscreen text that accompanies it is “Africa” followed by the name of the town or village, as if Africa were a country, instead of a continent. Moreover, the toponyms that appear (except Madagascar) are invented; not to mention that the tank battle scenes set at the Chinese-investment factory, which take up the latter and decisive part of the film, were actually filmed in Hebei (Bo, 2017).

But what is this “Africa” like? Allow me to linger on a few exemplary visual features taken from the initial and middle sequences of the film to illustrate it.



Figure 1.a: examples of visual representations of Africa in the film (1)

From left to right: establishing shot of the “Baimeiyu” flanked by pirates in the waters of the Indian Ocean, near Madagascar; the chaotic harbor of Shenmatasawa; friendly gesture between Leng Feng and one of his local business partners.

In the very first sequence of the film, an establishing shot offers a preliminary visual

representation of the continent/country: a gang of dark-skinned pirates on motorboats flank the cargo ship “Baimeiyu”, as the loud blare of alarms warn passengers about the attack and the onscreen text places the sequence in the waters of the Indian Ocean in the proximity of Madagascar (Figure 1.a). These elements invite the suggestion that “Africa” is a place so dangerous not even the waters surrounding it are safe.

Thanks to Leng Feng’s heroic intervention, the ship manages to dock at the harbor of the fictional location of Shenmatasawa Bay. As the hero moves about to engage in transactions with local vendors, the viewer can peek into the reality of the harbor area and the market, that of an “Africa” which is as vibrant as it is chaotic. I picked a long shot from this sequence (see Figure 1.a) to show how the camera space is so crowded with people, boxes, vehicles, and disorderly-arranged stands that Leng Feng, who is sitting in the back of a truck carrying Chinese goods, almost disappears from sight. The thick flow of people coming and going, crowding the camera space, continues as we follow the friendly economic exchanges Leng Feng has with locals, marked by reciprocal gestures such as understanding smiles, handshakes, and one-armed hugs. The gestures add to the implied informality of these transactions: goods and money are being handed over from the back of a truck to another, no receipts are issued, and prices are not fixed.



Figure 1.b: examples of visual representations of Africa in the film (2)

From left to right: the drinking contest; close-up on hands playing a drum; Leng Feng, Tundu and other friends party on the beach around a bonfire.

Soon after, a two-minute sequence shows the nightlife of the community: Leng Feng drinks and socializes with locals at a bar, where he partakes in a drinking contest (Figure 1.b). The contest is constructed with a series of very dense medium shots filled with cheering locals, among which Leng Feng once again almost disappears, signaling he blends in perfectly with the community, while simultaneously conveying the idea of chaos and unruliness. The ritual of the moment is marked by the repeated alternation of these shots with medium close-ups of Leng and of the other contestants, Harry and Patrick. The cheering crowd is fitted in the frame to signify the ritual co-participation of the spectators, who are not merely onlookers, but rather

witnesses, or even judges, of the competition. A few very brief extreme close-ups of hands rhythmically banging on drums contribute to the fast pace of the sequence; the drums can otherwise be heard insistently playing in the background. Few words are exchanged, the rest are excited screams and chanting. The excitement peaks as the ritual is completed: Leng Feng has been accepted into the community; and with him, the viewer also feels drawn in, thanks to the close-ups and the eye-level angle of the camera throughout the sequence.

The fact that Leng Feng has successfully become a part of the community is confirmed in a sequence a while later, where he is shown chilling on the beach with his friends and the boy Tundu¹⁷ around a bonfire. The composition of a shot in this sequence (see Figure 1.b) caught my attention: the frame is split symmetrically in the middle, with Leng Feng positioned on the right side, which is also occupied by several dancing locals (one of them is, once again, playing a drum). The left side, where the prominent figure of the defeated contestant Patrick is sitting, is conversely empty: this suggests that the community not only has accepted Leng, but has sided with him as the winner of the ritual, as the new strong man of the community. Yet this change in authority dynamics does not equal a threat to the newly acquired stability of the community, as the relaxed and friendly atmosphere throughout the sequence proves. In fact, the conflict is brought in from the outside: the offscreen sound of explosions announces the invasion of armed men on the set. The editing choice here (i.e. the beach sequence is tied to the uprising sequence very smoothly through the aural device of off-screen explosions) connects and legitimizes two stereotypical discourses about Africa: that of a land of simplicity and tribality, and that of a place whose political instability typically results in gruesome armed conflicts between rival factions. The latter narrative continues in the following minutes: Leng Feng grabs Tundu by the hand and runs away, and what follows is one of the most violent sequences of the film: a crossfire in the market area.

¹⁷ I talk more extensively about him in the following sections.



Figure 1.c: examples of visual representations of Africa in the film (3)

From left to right: crossfire at the market; chaos and violence at the market; the rebels bomb a bus full of civilians.

For around four minutes, a combination of medium-long shots with members of the two factions at the two extremes of the frame, and shaky hand-held camera shots, pull the viewer into the market-turned-battlefield, signaling that the brutality of war has entered the daily life of civilians, and giving to Chinese spectators the illusion of witnessing it first-hand. Debris land directly on the camera lens, injured or dead civilians fall to the ground in slow motion; the camera follows the destruction as several buildings are blown up. The sequence closes with the explosion of a bus full of civilians, rendered through the rapid alternation of bird-eye-view angles and medium-long shots at eye level for an extra dramatic effect (Figure 1.c).



Figure 1.d: examples of visual representations of Africa in the film (4)

From left to right: men in anti-bacterial suits drag a supposedly sick man away; a mass grave in the town of Sankoojia; Leng's point of view of sick villagers bearing physical signs of the illness.

Anti-government uprisings are not the only plague tormenting the population of this unnamed African country: the extremely infectious Lamanla virus is also rapidly making victims. In the initial market sequence I mentioned above, for a few seconds the already stuffed and chaotic space of the *mise-en-scène* is abruptly invaded by men in anti-epidemic gear dragging away a sick local, showing that sickness has reached the core of the community. This also foreshadows the moment later in the film when, after the bodily contact with corpses in the mass grave of the Sankoojia village, Leng contracts the virus. Indeed, the high-angle camera slowly zooming in the mass grave and the capture from Leng's point of view of the visibly sick bodies of the villagers are grim reminders that this country is not ready to contain nor to respond to the pandemic (Figure 1.d).



Figure 1.e: examples of visual representations of Africa in the film (5)

From left to right: bird-eye-view angle of the scenery; Leng Feng, Dr. Rachel and Pasha drive into a pack of lions feasting on a zebra carcass; a documentary-like capture of a giraffe walking by.

The last example I want to mention, is that of the car drive from St. Francis Hospital to the Chinese-investment factory, the two main stops of the journey of Leng Feng, Dr. Smith, and Pasha. This “on-the-road” fragment, which in my understanding was filmed at the world-famous Maasai Mara Natural Reserve (Sina Shanghai, 2017), spreads across two separate sequences for no real plot-related reason. It therefore becomes the ideal moment for the camera to linger on breath-taking natural landscapes from a bird-eye-view angle. Particularly striking here is the extreme long shot that shows the car as a tiny spot in the sea of green, while the real dominant figures in the frame are a pack of lions eating a zebra. A few more brief stills of the lions and of a walking giraffe, taken from a (human) eye-angle, might as well have been extracted directly from a documentary on African wilderness (Figure 1.e).

Considering the elements I have highlighted so far, I would argue that in the film there are essentially six types of representations of “Africa”, which I summarize as follows: 1) a place so dangerous not even the waters surrounding it are safe; 2) a chaotic hub where economic transactions are informal and not always entirely legal; 3) a paradisiac land of ritual drinking, beach parties, bonfires, and tribal drums; 4) a politically unstable territory torn by anti-government uprisings 5) a backwards place in need of the medical assistance of more advanced partners (i.e. China); 6) a giant natural reserve where one can bump into a pack of lions during a regular car ride.

As for what is *said* about Africa, two instances seem to converge with these stereotypical images, both taking place during the celebrations at the factory the night before the supposed arrival of a UN rescue helicopter. The first one is PLA veteran He Jianguo’s response to Leng Feng wondering how the local workers can celebrate and be happy considering that, just some hours earlier, all hopes had seemed lost. According to the veteran, Africans (or, as he calls them,

“black brothers” *hei gemen* 黑哥们, translated as “African friends” in the English subtitles) are able to forget any hardship or concern as long as they gather around a bonfire. He goes on to list the things he appreciates about Africa: good food, nice scenery, and beautiful women.¹⁸ The way Leng Feng looks at him afterwards and his dismissive laughter suggest that he does not fully approve either of the content or the form of He Jianguo’s remarks, but he chooses not to confront him about it, possibly out of respect for the elder soldier.

The second instance is immediately after: the owner of the factory (a spoiled second generation wealthy youth), Zhuo Yifan, approaches Dr. Smith to have a very one-sided conversation about his aspirations to leave the paternal nest and establish himself in Africa, since he likes the place. He also feels the needs to explain what he likes about it: “lions, crocodiles, AK 47s, sniper rifles and the melody of gunfire you can’t get in a peaceful country”. Dr. Smith, who is construed as the voice of sensibility on many occasions throughout the film, politely but poignantly criticizes his fetishization of warfare and weapons, pointing out that Pasha became an orphan because her father was shot to death, and exhorting him to sympathize with the tragedy of losing a loved one because of weapon violence.

In both instances, it appears that the stereotypical opinions voiced out by He and Zhuo are criticized, or at least disapproved of, by the two leading characters. As the “moralizing figures” in the film, Leng Feng and Dr. Smith direct or rectify how Africa has to be narrated, the former through action, and the latter through speech. Indeed, it is Dr. Smith who, during her monologue at the cemetery (Figure 2), offers what is supposed to be a virtuous example of how to talk about Africa.¹⁹

¹⁸ His words are actually a bit more colorful: “great food, nice scenery, hot women” (*chide hao, jing hao, guniang hao* 吃的好, 景好, 姑娘好).

¹⁹ The monologue stands out as it is situated at the beginning of the latter half of the film, in a stage that is crucial to the development of the story: right after Leng Feng’s fever-induced delirium (he contracted the virus), during which he symbolically lets go of the memories of his disappeared lover, thus making saving Africa the sole motive of his actions.

Chinese text

我爸爸说十万年前人类走出非洲。非洲是现代文明的摇篮。可是，当自诩文明的人们再次来到非洲带来的却是苦难、奴役、病毒和战争。韩国人、冰岛人、斯拉夫人、美国人。那些是中国人。他们都是来自世界各地的，像我爸爸一样的人。为了非洲他们付出了自己的青春。到最后把自己永远地留在这片土地。

English subtitles

My dad said man walked out of Africa 100,000 years ago. Africa is the cradle of modern civilization. Yet when the “evolved, civilized” humans returned to this land, they brought along with them nothing but suffering, slavery, disease and war. Koreans, Icelanders, Slavs, Americans and over there are the Chinese. People from all over the world, people like my father. For Africa they gave their best years. In the end they got to remain here for eternity.

Figure 2: Dr. Rachel’s monologue at the cemetery

Africa is defined as the place where the human species originated and as the “cradle of modern civilization”. This celebration of Africa’s long history and of its crucial role in the development of humanity is juxtaposed with a condemnation of the ruthless colonizers (the “‘evolved, civilized’ humans” in English; the Chinese version additionally defines them as “self-appointed” *zixu* 自诩) who have hindered the progress of the continent by exploiting it, ultimately making Africa and its peoples miserable. But it goes a step further: it lists a series of nationalities or ethnicities,²⁰ among which are the Chinese, who went to Africa not out of self-interest, but rather for humanitarian reasons, such as to provide medical assistance—just like Dr. Smith’s father, a Chinese-born doctor who is implied to be buried in the cemetery together with people of different nationalities who gave their lives for Africa.

I would argue that Dr. Smith’s monologue evokes the characteristics of Chinese official rhetoric about Sino-African relations as described by Alden and Large (2011) with the term “exceptionalism”. The authors maintain that the discourse of the PRC leadership conceptualizes China as different from the West, and therefore exceptional, because its approach to Africa is based on equality, mutual benefit, and cooperation,²¹ with the promise to avoid degenerating in forms of exploitation. I see the “exceptionalism” both in the content of Dr. Smith’s monologue and in the monologue’s construction as a supposedly positive and celebratory (and

²⁰ I am not sure about the reasons underlying this cherry-picking of nationalities/ethnicities; my take is that they were picked because none of them are commonly known to have actively participated in colonialism in Africa.

²¹ Alden and Large (2011: 21) identify the origin of these ideals in the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, put forward by China during the 1955 Bandung Conference: “political equality, mutual benefit, sovereignty, non-interference, and ‘win-win cooperation’” are the principles that inform China’s approach to Africa and constitute its moral basis.

thus exceptional) way to talk about Africa. I also see the monologue as part of what I would define a pedagogic mission that Leng Feng and Dr. Smith seem to be carrying out. Such a mission has two functions. First, it is directed towards the characters of Chinese nationality in the film, therefore, if transferred outside the diegetic world,²² it speaks to Chinese spectators with the objective to instruct them on how to break with long-time stereotypes and address Africa properly. Secondly, it shows to a potential international audience²³ that Chinese people *can* address Africa properly and are willing to correct and educate each other.

To summarize, the characters' verbal narrations of Africa are carefully scripted to be proper or criticized by other characters when they are not. However, this is not the case when it comes to elements that do not depend on the diegetic characters, and that contribute to the film in a way subtle enough that a spectator could even forget they are determined by someone outside the story, i.e. what the camera focuses on and the location choices. In this light, I would posit that while the verbal narrations of Africa can be seen to go in the same direction as the rhetoric of "exceptionalism" and as the state-mandated efforts to represent Africa in a positive way in media (see Chapter Two), the visual dimension differs. In particular, the portrayal of "Africa" as a war-torn, disease-riddled generic location (as well as the confusion regarding the continent's geopolitical status) is not exceptional at all, but seems quite aligned with the stereotypical representations commonly seen in Western cultural products, as famous Kenyan author Wainaina (2019) exposes in his exemplary essay "How to Write About Africa". "Africa" becomes a vague concept, rather than a multiplicity of real geographical, political, cultural, and social entities. It is reduced to the simplified background for the plot to unfold, for the hero to showcase his many qualities and ultimately win.

4.3 *Sino-African Relations: the Macrolevel*

Moving on to how Sino-African relations are represented in the film, there are two main dimensions at play: that of diplomatic ties between the PRC and "Africa"; and that of Leng Feng's encounters with African individuals or, more broadly, the encounters between Chinese

²² The diegetic world is the filmic world where the narration takes place.

²³ Following the Chinese version, the film was also screened in the US, Singapore, Australia, and the UK (Yao, 2017).

and African individuals.

The macrolevel of Sino-African relations has to do with economy (mostly in the form of capital investment), immigration (the Chinese-investment factory also employs Chinese migrant workers), and forms of aid (*yuanzhu* 援助). The notion of aid firstly appears during Ambassador Fan's phone call to the fictitious Prime Minister of the country, Mr. Kelson (Figure 3).

English text	Chinese subtitles
Mr. Prime Minister, please listen to me. I'm deeply sorry for what's happening in your country. But I believe you have not forgotten about the help we provided to your country and the friendship between our countries. I believe you understand how important our citizen Dr. Chen is to Africa. Please send somebody to protect his safety.	总理先生听我说。贵国发生这样的事情我很遗憾。但是我相信你也一定不会忘记历史上我国对贵国的援助之情，我们两国之间的友谊。我相信你也知道我国援非的陈博士对非洲的重要性。请派兵保障陈博士的安全。

Figure 3: Ambassador Fan's phone call with Prime Minister Kelson

The Ambassador expresses his grievance for the current situation of the country, but also reminds the politician of the “help we provided to your country and the friendship between our countries”, hoping to obtain that he send someone to protect the leading figure of the medical mission, Dr. Chen. Fan communicates with Mr. Kelson in English, but it is interesting to look at the official Chinese subtitles. First, there is a mention of the historical dimension of the relations, a feature which, according to Strauss (2009), has been common in Chinese official discourses about Sino-African relations since their genesis. Secondly, while Fan uses the verb “provide” in English, in the Chinese subtitles there is no correspondent verb, but rather the meaning is rendered with the use of a prepositional phrase where the object “help” is translated as *yuanzhu zhi qing* 援助之情. *Yuanzhu* is the word commonly used in Chinese for “aid” in formal contexts; *qing* alludes to the sphere of feelings, and it connects to “friendship” at the end of the sentence, suggesting a certain emotional connection between the two countries. However, both in English and in the Chinese subtitles, Fan underlines Dr. Chen's “importance to Africa” (*dui Feizhou de zhongyaoxing* 对非洲的重要性): the switch from “your country” in the previous sentence, to “Africa” immediately after, shows that once again no effort is made to clarify that Africa is a continent and not a country.

Lastly, aid is brought up in the context of military assistance (*junshi yuanzhu* 军事援助) later in

the film, when the PLAN Captain alludes to the fact that having to comply with international agreements slows down China's readiness to provide military assistance.

It is noteworthy that Ambassador Fan, who embodies Chinese diplomatic institutions in the film, uses the words "friendship" and "friends" to designate Sino-African relations. Other than the example I just mentioned, Fan uses them again slightly earlier in the film. In the extremely tense juncture in which Leng Feng, Tundu, and other civilians, having made their way through the crossfire, are about to enter the Chinese embassy, a group of heavily armed rebels intercepts them. Luckily, Ambassador Fan arrives just in time, insisting (in Swahili)²⁴ that China and Africa are friends: just like that, the rebels let them go. The theme of the friendship between China and Africa is another of the evergreen elements discernible in the PRC's official discourse (Strauss, 2009; Alden and Large, 2011), therefore it is no surprise to hear such words come out of the Ambassador's mouth. However, in both cases the words "friendship" and "friend" are used not in neutral statements, but to obtain something, and with the implication that this something is due. "China and Africa are friends" here does not translate into the ideal relation between equals based on "mutual benefit" and "win-win cooperation" that Chinese leaderships have trumpeted for decades (Strauss, 2009; Alden and Large, 2011). Rather, it is a reminder that China has provided Africa with various forms of aid without asking for anything in return, out of good will and a sense of commonality; but now Africa is either directly called to reciprocate, or expected to. It appears as if in this unnamed African country, being Chinese, or saying out loud that one is Chinese, is expected to work as a magic spell to obtain things, including being spared by the rebels. Interestingly, the "spell" only works on Africans: the mercenaries do not think twice before killing the doctors of the Chinese medical mission, which causes a fight between the leader of the mercenaries Big Daddy and the commander of the rebel forces General Aotu. As to why General Aotu is so upset and has to reiterate many times that the Chinese are no target, he himself finally offers clarification a little over an hour into the film: "China is a permanent member of the UN Security Council. And I need them on my side if I am to take political power".²⁵

²⁴ The fact that Ambassador Fan can communicate in both English and Swahili is a testament to the competence of Chinese diplomatic institutions on foreign soil.

²⁵ Coincidentally, these are also his last words before Big Daddy slits his throat and takes full command of the operation.

In conclusion, on a macrolevel the relationship between the two countries, despite being labeled as friendship, is actually unapologetically constructed as a form of dependency: Africa needs China for economic, medical, and military assistance, as well as for political reasons (i.e. the supposed new government will need China's support vis-à-vis the UN in order to gain legitimacy). Nevertheless, I would argue that there is a metalevel where the dependency turns into codependency: China needs to help "Africa" to placate the anxieties about its own global standing, to confirm that it is in the position to help others by dispatching military assistance (albeit in the limits of international regulations) and by providing medical aid successfully.²⁶

4.4 Sino-African Relations: the Microlevel

As for the microlevel of Sino-African relations, I believe it is explicitly staged to appear as egalitarian and "progressive" and to engender an emotional response from the spectator. Since the very beginning of the film (see Section 4.2), Leng Feng appears to be well integrated in the local community: he drinks and parties with the locals, he tries his best to communicate in English with them and, most importantly, he does not seem to expect anything in return just because of his nationality.²⁷ But the most exemplary instance of the emotive undertone of the microlevel is Leng Feng's relation with Tundu, which is also an example of the symbolical fatherhood of Chinese men to African children.²⁸

²⁶ Considering that the cure was found by Dr. Chen, I would say that China here is shown as being even more successful than any other countries in sharing its medical advancements with others in need.

²⁷ In fact, the only example of Leng Feng using the Chinese card with non-Chinese people and in order to obtain something is in the final scene, when he uses the flag trick with the rebels in order to be let through (see Section 4.5). However, he did not do it for selfish reasons, but rather for the sake of the refugees with him on the trucks.

²⁸ Another example would be Dr. Chen with Pasha, whom he defines as his daughter although she is a patient and the subject of an experiment to produce a cure to the virus.



Figure 4: Leng Feng and Tundu

First row, from left to right: Leng Feng playfully points a toy gun at Tundu, as the kid welcomes him back to the village; Leng Feng throws away the porn DVDs Tundu was trying to sell him; Leng Feng grabs Tundu's hand and drags him away from the crossfire.

Second row, from left to right: Leng Feng shields Tundu from the explosions with his body; Leng Feng lies to the PLAN soldier, saying that Tundu is his son; Leng Feng promises he is going to save Tundu's mother.

Since the biological father of the kid is out of the picture, Leng Feng arbitrarily fills in for that role, instructing Tundu to call him “godfather” (*gandie* 干爹). He intervenes in Tundu’s education, scolding him firmly when the kid tries to sell him contraband porn DVDs, but also protecting him with his own body, never letting go of his hand as they escape from the crossfire at the market, all the way to the Chinese embassy. Leng Feng even lies to a Chinese marine, saying that Tundu is his son, to get him on one of the boats of the PLAN headed back to China. The emotional quality of this relationship is best represented by the over-the-shoulder shot that shows Leng Feng reassuringly holding Tundu’s face, as he promises to the kid that he will save his mother (Figure 4). Despite never having met Tundu’s mother, Nessa, Leng knows that she works at the factory together with the Chinese nationals trapped there, and saving her is as much a motivation for him to volunteer for the mission as saving the Chinese workers. In fact, I believe that while Leng’s personal quest to find the truth about Long Xiaoyun is what guides his actions at the beginning, his bond with Tundu, his ability to sympathize with the plight of the workers (a relevant portion of which are locals), and his higher sense of duty as a fearless hero are what ultimately lead him to risk his life to fight the mercenaries and save the workers. When, during the final battle, Big Daddy warns him that he’s going to die for those people, Leng determinedly replies he was born for them, showing that he fully accepts his destiny.



Figure 5: Romance among the factory workers

First row: factory workers share moments of tenderness with their partners amid the sorrow for the impending separation.

Second row, from left to right: factory workers share moments of tenderness with their partners amid the sorrow for the impending separation; Leng Feng observes from above as Lin Zhixiong separates Chinese from local workers; Leng Feng tears up for the couples.

Here I want to expand a bit more on the workers community.

When selfish factory manager Lin Zhixiong firstly announces that only Chinese nationals will be boarded on the UN helicopter, a Chinese man pleads to bring along his lover, an African woman who is pregnant with his baby. Another man angrily insists his wife should go too, claiming she is “one of them” since they are married. There are multiple close-ups on several mixed couples sharing moments of tenderness and desperation because they are going to be separated soon, alternated with close-ups on Leng’s face showing his eyes full of tears (Figure 5). This denotes his sympathy, and therefore the fact that love between Africans and Chinese not only is possible, but even normalized, so much so that the prospect of breaking these couples up is something to cry about, even for a tough and hard former soldier like Leng Feng. We are talking about heterosexual couples, but they are heterogeneous: in some couples the man is Chinese and the woman is African, in others the woman is Chinese and the man is African. We can observe here something similar to what Saavedra (2009) finds in *The Last Breakthrough* (see Chapter Two): there is no anxiety whatsoever about amorous and even sexual encounters between Africans and Chinese. Leng Feng (successfully) proposes to extend the evacuation procedures at the factory to the local workers and their families, essentially saving them from certain death and asserting that their lives matter as much as those of the Chinese nationals.

To sum up, love, kinship, and the spirit of sacrifice seem to be the emotive principles which

regulate relations between Chinese and Africans at the individual level: at first glance there seems to be nothing hinting at the same dependency, codependency, or underlying inequality that the analysis brought to light at the macrolevel. Nevertheless, digging a bit deeper can be revealing.



Figure 6: Leng Feng and the locals

First row, from left to right: Leng Feng merges with the locals, engaging in a drinking game with Harry and Patrick; African women cheer as Leng Feng shows off his muscles; Nessa gratefully hugs Leng for protecting Tundu.

Second row, from left to right: camera focus on sick people from Leng's point of view; Dr. Rachel and Leng Feng respectively hand out food supplies to the sick villagers.

Starting from the sequences of Leng's life in the local community (Figure 6; see also Figure 1.b), although he consistently appears surrounded by and merging with locals, he is the only one who is able to endure strong Chinese liquor, thus winning the drinking games. He causes the African women on the beach to cheer excitedly when he shows off his muscles, while the equally muscly half-naked African men do not trigger similar reactions. When he, Dr. Smith, and Pasha accidentally drive into a common grave in the village of Sankoojia and a group of villagers surrounds them, camera shots from the point of view of Leng morbidly show scabs and open wounds on the bodies of these people, signaling they have been left to themselves in this semi-quarantine zone by the helpless government. Leng and Dr. Smith are shown as they hand out food and water supplies to the people, who afterwards wave them off gratefully as they drive away. These images, which are very likely staged to underline the selflessness and good will of Leng Feng, actually evoke the idea that he is participating first-hand in the traditional circuits of aid, which conceptualize Africans as needy and sick people waiting to be rescued by the occasional rich savior ready to dispense temporary and aleatory aid. Even in the particularly emotional scene at the factory discussed above (see Figure 5), the camera frames

Leng Feng as towering over the community of workers, marking that he is not one of them, but rather likening him to a benevolent leader. This echoes what I hypothesized with regard to Figure 1.b about Leng single-handedly taking the lead of the local community.

Among the locals who are supposed to be Leng's friends, the only two whose names are known (and only because of the crowd chanting them) are the contestants of the drinking game, Harry and Patrick. The few African characters who are given names and a bit of characterization are Tundu, Pasha, and Nessa;²⁹ plus General Aotu, who recognizes the diplomatic importance of China and is killed by the mercenaries because of it. The rest are either violent rebels, sick people bearing visible signs of the virus, or factory workers, but none of them has any significant lines or is ever mentioned by name. In this light, it seems that these characters are once again instrumental, serving either to make Leng's individual qualities and values (virility, heroism, egalitarianism) emerge, or to underline China's crucial role on the global stage; or just as props for the setting (i.e. this worn-torn, disease-ridden "Africa") to look more convincing.

4.5 *Leng Feng and the Victory of the Chinese Model*

Finally, I wish to spend a few words more on Leng Feng (Figure 7).



Figure 7: Leng Feng

From left to right: Leng Feng salutes his Captain one last time as he is discharged; Leng Feng volunteers to evacuate the Chinese nationals at the factory; Leng Feng uses his arm to hoist a Chinese flag.

We have abundantly seen how Leng's way to relate to Africa and to African people sets him in stark contrast with other Chinese characters: Leng Feng is built as the blueprint of how a Chinese man should be and should behave in a foreign country, particularly in Africa.

Even more striking, however, is the contrast between Leng Feng and his evil Western³⁰ counterpart, Big Daddy (*laodie* 老爹). Big Daddy is portrayed as an unscrupulous, unreasonably violent, coarse-mouthed man who is exclusively moved by personal profit—or, even more, by

²⁹ Admittedly she does not do much beside thank and hug Leng (see Figure 6) and physically (almost comically) overcome a rebel to facilitate the escape of Pasha and Rachel.

³⁰ I further discuss Big Daddy's origins below.

his bloodthirst. He has no qualms killing innocents and he is convinced that Africa's present and future are marked by perennial war and instability: he defines gunshots as "the sound of the future" and when the mercenary Roach asks him why they are helping the rebels, he eloquently replies "welcome to Africa, son". He and the mercenaries are the real villains, while the Red Scarf rebels are only the peripheral enemy, as proved by the fact that while Leng Feng kills most of the mercenaries and Big Daddy, he technically does not defeat the rebel army. This could also be seen as an internalization of the principles of sovereignty and non-interference, two of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence that have informed the PRC's diplomacy (and rhetoric) vis-à-vis Africa and other Southern partners since the 1960s (see Alden and Large, 2011). Leng Feng's duty as a hero and as a former Chinese soldier is to evacuate the Chinese nationals; his emotional connection with the local community and with Tundu brings him to save a few civilians from the crossfire at the market and the African workers at the factory. However, it is not Leng's responsibility to stop the uprising or to intervene in the political affairs of the country.

Unlike Leng Feng, who is always on the battlefield, Big Daddy dirties his own hands only twice throughout the film. His unquestionably evil nature is manifested in the way he is repeatedly shown in the scarcely lit mercenary headquarters, monitoring and directing the attacks through in-ear microphones and cameras planted on drones, smoking his cigar completely unbothered by the violence he is provoking (Figure 8).



Figure 8: Big Daddy

From left to right: Big Daddy monitors the situation at the factory; Big Daddy gives orders to the mercenaries on the battlefield; Big Daddy smokes his cigar.

Towards the end of the film we are reminded of what the two characters stand for, as their final fight acquires meaning on a metalevel. On one side, there is a Caucasian man who went to Africa for cruel reasons, and who does not hesitate to pull the trigger on innocents; a man who is blinded by his own arrogance and superiority complex. On the other, there is a Chinese man who is moved by (universal) humanitarian and moral motives, who has established personal

relations with African people. The first is a synecdoche for the self-appointed civilized men who have done nothing but bring suffering to Africa, just like in Dr. Smith's story; while the second stands for a new model of humanitarian, just, positive engagement stemming from an emotional basis. The new model triumphs over the old, which is now reduced to "f*cking history".³¹ The symbolic victory of the Chinese model is significantly followed by the only moment when Leng Feng is visually connected to his motherland: when he uses his arm as a pole to hang a Chinese flag in order to convince the rebels to let him and the refugees pass, in the last scene of the film (see Figure 7). The superiority of China here is corroborated by the composition of this particular shot: Leng Feng is in the exact middle of the frame, in a slightly higher position compared to the other characters, his arm with the red flag held up in the sky, evoking the image of a brave leader guiding the people (potentially to battle) under the emblem of their motherland.

Conversely, the fact that the actual villains are a gang of Caucasian thugs is very telling of how "the West" is conceptualized in the film. Much like the confusion surrounding the geopolitical nature of "Africa", I believe something similar can be said for Europe and the USA, as the two regions are not clearly distinguished; or at least, both can be generally ascribed to the "enemies" or "villains" in the film. The mercenaries are said to be European, but no precise indications about their nationalities are given. Big Daddy, on the other hand, might be from the USA, considering his accent and that the actor, Frank Grillo, is American. My suspicion is intensified by the fact that Leng Feng, who admittedly is one of the least loquacious characters in the film, spends more than a few words to criticize US authorities during the car ride.³² He likens them to the pack of lions he drives by (Figure 1.e), an association which ties in reasonably well with Big Daddy's trademark, unmotivated violence, leading me to believe that Big Daddy is American. Thus, since he is the leader of a European group of mercenaries, I would posit that the film does not bother to conceptually separate "Europe" and the "USA" and that both are

³¹ During their final hand combat, when it seems that Big Daddy is winning, the man tells Leng that he should get used to the fact that people like himself are superior. Leng manages to turn the tables and kills him, giving his reply in a low voice to his ear: "that's f*cking history" (*na t*ma shi yiqian* 那他妈是以前). It is interesting to notice that, differently from Big Daddy, this is the only moment in the film where Leng uses swearwords, and he does it in a low voice, as if it was just for the villain to hear: unlike Big Daddy, he does not need to announce loudly that he is superior, but trusts that facts (i.e. the superiority of the Chinese model) are self-evident.

³² He implies they are inadequate towards their own citizens: they did not evacuate Dr. Smith despite her trying to contact them and fled the country as soon as the situation escalated.

villainized to some extent.

This notion seems to be confirmed by some editing choices: since the moment the mercenaries are introduced in the story, every sequence focused on Leng's progress with his mission is followed by a parallel one that shows what the villains are plotting. This contributes to reinforce the clear opposition between "good" and "evil", "the hero" and "the villains", China and "the West". I believe this deliberate choice has to do with the "exceptionalism" I brought up earlier in this chapter; in order to better elaborate on this point, and to wrap up this section, I want to discuss a final example. I have already mentioned the relevance of the sequence depicting the celebrations at the factory in that it contains criticism (by Chinese people to Chinese people) of stereotypes about Africa. The community of workers (including the previously criticized He and Zhuo), is shown to happily unite around a bonfire, dancing and drinking together; even manager Lin Zhixiong, earlier implied to be a "bad" person, has been granted redemption and is included in these joyous frames. This sequence, which shows a positive experience of connection between Chinese and Africans rendered through eye-level medium-long shots, is brought to an abrupt end when a drone, controlled by Big Daddy, appears in the sky. The brusque change in the camera focus to a high-angle capture of the celebrating community through the point of view of the drone (and of Big Daddy who is controlling it) intensifies both the brutality of the surprise attack, and the notion that to the mercenary these people are worthless existences to be crushed—as the villains proceed to do. Once again, we see how, just as explained in Dr. Smith's monologue, the uncalled-for arrival of (Western) invaders brings suffering to Africans; however, there is an additional element to unravel here. Strauss (2009) observes that since the Sixties, official accounts of the PRC leaderships on Sino-African relations typically construct an image of China in overt opposition to the West. These accounts imply that since the very beginning of Sino-African exchanges, which they date back to the famous expeditions to East Africa led by Zheng He in the 15th century, Chinese voyageurs approached Africa not as a territory to conquer, in fact their visits were temporary and moved by curiosity and interest in mutual trade. The arrival of European colonizers, who stayed as dominators to subjugate the peoples of Africa, interrupted the fruitful relations between China and Africa, which China has sought to re-establish and cultivate ever since. Although there is

no specific historical reference here, the way the sequence is constructed seems to echo the notion that fruitful and disinterested Sino-African engagements predated the disruptive invasion of violent Westerners. What is more, the film not only fabricates, but appears fairly confident in its own happy ending: that China ultimately triumphs.

CONCLUSION

One of the questions I sought to answer through my analysis was: *How do the representations of Africa and Sino-African relations in the film fit in broader Chinese discourses?*

All in all, I have shown how in several points the meanings in the film are an internalization or a re-elaboration of the broader, state-directed discourses on Sino-African relations. The film draws rather overtly from the rhetorical “exceptionalism” of China’s approach to Africa by villainizing Western characters, and hypothesizes a future (or even a present) where the Chinese model wins, replacing the violence and injustice that colonialism has historically generated. It is important to underline that this supposed victory happens only after Chinese nationals have been successfully educated to talk about and relate to Africa (and Africans) appropriately. The film seems to take its own role in this pedagogic project quite seriously.

The fact that an extremely successful commercial cultural product not only has Africa as its setting, but seems to adhere to the “mission” of other state-sanctioned Chinese media to offer positive representations of Africa and Sino-African relations, indicates that the PRC leadership was successful both in stimulating the public interest on the matter, and in tracing a trajectory for media content producers to follow. The execution, however, was not flawless, as became clear when I attempted to reply to my other research question: *How is Africa (and Sino-African relations) represented in Wolf Warrior 2?*

The analysis has revealed that the way Africa is represented in the film is conflicting. On the one hand, there are some attempts to build positive verbal narrations of the continent by celebrating Africa’s role in the development of the human species, and to rectify the negative, stereotypical views expressed by some of the characters. On the other, the visual imagery largely recycles Western-originated old-time tropes, namely that Africa is a dangerous, politically unstable, scientifically backwards territory whose communities are primitive and tribalistic. Moreover, there appears to be confusion regarding the geopolitical status of Africa, which is treated and referred to as a country rather than a continent. Likewise, the portrayal of Sino-African engagements is ambiguous: on the macrolevel, the two countries are implied to have been in a solid, friendly relationship for a period of time long enough for migrant

communities to have established and merged with locals. However, the fact that the ambassador, who embodies Chinese diplomatic institutions, expects something in return for the supposed assistance China has provided to the country, and the heavily insinuated superiority of China in terms of medical expertise and military prowess, suggest that this is not a completely unconditional friendship between equals. On the microlevel, the integration of Leng Feng in the local community and his emotional connection with African characters, in particular the child Tundu, together with the portrayal of forms of affection and intimacy in the community of Chinese and local workers, can be seen as attempts to show that genuine relations between Chinese and Africans at the individual level are possible and normal. Nevertheless, despite the frequent appearance of African characters on screen, very few of them have a well-defined personality or even a name, while the majority are still treated as props to fill the space of the *mise-en-scène*. Furthermore, Leng Feng is more of a temporary leader who is filling the authority gap in the local community, rather than a member of it. To sum up, the intention to propose novelty, as in “positive” representation, is discernible; however, the way it is carried out is flawed and not entirely convincing, especially towards the end, where these attempts are left in the background in favor of the self-gratifying celebration of China’s strength.

The social semiotics analysis has allowed me to deconstruct the meanings in the film and to assess how they relate to broader discourses of the PRC leadership on Sino-African relations. Granted, the method has its limitations: my interpretation, being influenced by my identity as a European female researcher with a background in Chinese Studies, is bound to be different from that of a Chinese or global audience. This methodology, moreover, overlooks the specificities of the production process, which would require a thorough production analysis reporting the views of the crew, the actors, the director, and so on. As I claimed at the very beginning of my dissertation, at present the best way to investigate Sino-African relations is to assume one’s work as a block of content to insert in a much bigger picture; a picture which becomes progressively clearer the more blocks are added. My contribution has been to look at representations and discourses in a contemporary film, a choice motivated by my belief that popular culture products play a crucial role in the process of consolidating meanings into hegemonic truths. Future research projects on Sino-African “mediated relationships” could

integrate audience reaction and production analysis in their exploration of the commercial products that will very likely keep appearing in the Chinese mediascape—with the hope that these will succeed in offering less and less flawed “positive” representations.

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APPENDIX
 PROTOCOL TABLES SAMPLES

Sequence Protocol Sample

No.	Image	Length	Location	Characters	Music	Description	Discourses
4		00:02:28-00:03:53	Cargo ship in the Indian Ocean, near Madagascar (on-screen: 非洲 印度洋 马达加斯加海域)	African pirates; the crew of the cargo ship (some Africans, some English-speaking Caucasian men)	heroic introductory music	African pirates attack the cargo ship "Bai mei yu", the crew awaits assistance from UN	Africa as dangerous
5		00:03:54-00:06:15	Cargo ship in the Indian Ocean, near Madagascar (Africa) (on-screen: 非洲 印度洋 马达加斯加海域)	Leng Feng, the pirates	heroic introductory music	Leng Feng dives into the water and confronts the pirates underwater	individual resilience and moral strength of the Chinese hero; tardiness of UN
12		00:11:50-00:12:35	Harbor of Shennatasawa Bay (Africa) (非洲 圣玛塔萨瓦港)	Leng Tundu	Feng; abruptly upbeat music ends	Tundu fake-points a gun to his back; they get on a truck together; Tundu (refers to him as "godfather" 干爹) tries to sell him porn DVDs, but he confiscates them	Moral correctness; value of educating the young; symbolic fatherhood of Chinese men to Africa children
13		00:12:36-00:14:34	Fishing Folk Bar	Leng Harry; Tundu	Feng; upbeat someone drums	Leng Feng and Harry have a drinking contest in front of a cheering crowd; Leng Feng wins. Patrick challenges Leng Feng to drink something heavy, Leng wins again. A bit of drunken chaos.	Sino-African relations (microlevel); drinking as masculine ritual

Shot Protocol Sample

No.	Image	Length	Camera	Content	Spoken text (Chinese)	Spoken text (English)
1		00:02:27- 00:03:12	ELS (bev); t (u); p (l)	Somali pirates attack the cargo ship “Baimeiyu” somewhere in the Indian Ocean, near Madagascar	(on screen) 非洲 印度洋马达加斯加海域 n/a	(on screen: Indian Ocean near Madagascar, Africa) Captain: “Attention, pirates alongside! Pirates alongside! Take cover. All crew below deck! I repeat, pirates alongside! Initiate emergency procedure! All crew below deck!”
2		00:11:16- 00:11:20	LS (cla)	Leng Feng leaves the harbor of Shennatasawa on a truck full of goods to sell	n/a	n/a
3		00:11:36- 00:11:59	LS (cla); MS (ots)	Leng Feng completes some (informal) business transactions	n/a (subtitles) Leng: “中国酒来了。 嘿……” Vendor: “别这样兄弟。好吧这次就算了。合作愉快! 下次见。”	Leng: “Chinese wine. Hey, hey...” Vendor: “Come on, man. Ok, this one is ok.” Leng: “Yeah.” Vendor: “Yeah! Nice one. See you next time!”
4		00:12:50 00:12:52	CU	Someone is playing the drums during the party at the “Fishing Folk Bar”	n/a	(people indistinctly cheering for Harry and Leng)